

ORIGINAL VOWS OF
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA
SUTRA

Chapter Eight

Commented by Khenpo Sodargye

2023 Edition

Dedicated to

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche in deep gratitude and love

May your compassion and wisdom illuminate everywhere
and enlighten every sentient being.

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Chapter Eight

The Praise of King Yama and His Retinue

Those who do good deeds and worship the images of Ksitigarbha or other buddhas and bodhisattvas will be greatly respected by all ghost kings. They will revere this kind of people just as they do for the buddhas of the past, present, and future.

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture Sixteen

(Continued)

August 17th, 2020

THE GATHERING OF KING YAMA AND MEASURELESS GHOST KINGS



Chapter Eight

The Praise of King Yama and His Retinue

At that time, from within the Iron Encircling Mountains, King Yama and measureless ghost kings all arrived at the Trayastrimsa

Heaven and came to where the Buddha was. They were Ghost King Evil Poison, Ghost King Many Evils, Ghost King Great Quarrels, Ghost King White Tiger, Ghost King Blood Tiger, Ghost King Red Tiger, Ghost King Disseminating Disasters, Ghost King Flying Body, Ghost King Lightning Flash, Ghost King Wolf Teeth, Ghost King Thousand Eyes, Ghost King Beast Devouring, Ghost King Rock Carrying, Ghost King Presiding Over Depletion, Ghost King Presiding Over Calamities, Ghost King Presiding Over Food, Ghost King Presiding Over Wealth, Ghost King Presiding Over Domestic Animals, Ghost King Presiding Over Fowls, Ghost King Presiding Over Beasts, Ghost King Presiding Over Goblins, Ghost King Presiding Over Birth, Ghost King Presiding Over Life, Ghost King Presiding Over Illnesses, Ghost King Presiding Over Danger, Ghost King Three Eyes, Ghost King Four Eyes, Ghost King Five Eyes, King Qi Lishi, King Daqi Lishi, King Qi Licha, King Daqi Licha, King A Nuozha, and King Da'a Nuozha.

There were great ghost kings such as these, each with hundreds of thousands of minor ghost kings. They all reside in Jambudvipa, and each of them has duties to carry out and preside over. Through the awesome spiritual penetration of the Buddha and the strength of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva,

these ghost kings and King Yama all came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven and stood to one side.

We continue with the eighth chapter of the sutra. We learn that the Lord of Death, also known as King Yama and numerous ghost kings also came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven. The text gives a long list of these ghost kings. Some commentaries provide a detailed introduction of every ghost king, but I am not sure if they are from valid Buddhist scriptures, or maybe there are different explanations. For this lecture, we will not introduce all of them one by one. We will just focus on a selected few.

Ghost King Rock Carrying always carries a rock on his back due to his karma and feeds on wild beasts. Ghost King Presiding Over Depletion exhausts quickly the property of a household or the money in your wallet. So if your money runs out very quickly, this ghost might be hiding in your wallet. Ghost King Presiding Over Calamities oversees all kinds of disasters such as car accidents. Ghost King Presiding Over Food often lives in the kitchen. Ghost King Presiding Over Birth is often seen in the gynecology and obstetrics departments.

Each of these ghost kings has hundreds of thousands of small ghost kings coming with them, and they all live in our world, Jambudvīpa. Each of them has their own administration and duties to perform.

They all came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven by the miraculous power of the Buddha and Ksitigarbha. The scene must be pretty fearsome with all these ghost kings present.

What we need to know is that there are many beings living together with us in this world who are invisible to our naked eyes, including but not limited to ghosts, maras, intermediate consciousnesses, rakshasas, and nonhumans. From this we can see that the Buddhist description of the world is very thorough and complete. It not only describes what we can see and perceive in this world, but it also introduces us to beings and things that are invisible to us, including past and future lives, heavens and hells, ghosts and spirits, and other beings in the six realms that we cannot see with our naked eyes or think of with our dualistic thoughts.

To some materialists, they deny the existence of ghosts and spirits because such beings are not mentioned in their science textbooks. Even when they are discussed in a classroom, they are taken as only existing in mythology or superstition. This is irrational. They are real creatures that exist around us and I do not think it is necessary to deny them. It is impossible to deny their existence and science cannot provide any valid evidence to prove the nonexistence of ghosts and spirits. Instead, many people have either seen them in person or heard others encountering them. We can sometimes get a sense of their existence in our nightmares. Ghosts and spirits

do live everywhere around us, and if we offer incense and recite mantras for them, they will be greatly benefited and may even be liberated.

Mr. Xie was a teacher at my school and he would often speak about the nonexistence of ghosts and spirits. Although I had not learned about Buddhist logic at that time, I always debated with him on this point as I firmly believed their existence. Because of this, Mr. Xie often criticized me by saying words like, “There must be something wrong with your thinking. If you keep thinking this way, you will have no future, no accomplishment!” Since he was the one who was teaching me, it would not be very polite for me to disagree with him publicly. When people hold different views toward something, it would be inevitable to have heated discussions. However, we should focus on the question itself and not attach it to people personally. I am not sure if Mr. Xie is still alive. Maybe he is listening to this lecture right now.

At that time, King Yama knelt on his knees, joined his palms, and said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, it is through the awesome spiritual penetration of the Buddha and the strength of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva that the ghost kings and I are now able to come to this great assembly in the Trayastrimsa Heaven. We can therefore gain wholesome benefits, too. Now, there is a little question that I dare to ask the World-Honored

One. O World-Honored One, with your kindness and compassion, please expound on it.”



King Yama said to the Buddha respectfully that they have come to this great Dharma assembly through the miraculous power of the Buddha and the blessing of Ksitigarbha. Normally, ghosts are occupied with their own affairs and are rarely able to attend such a Dharma teaching. This was indeed a rare and blessed opportunity. King Yama then proceeded to ask the Buddha to, with his kindness and compassion, answer a question he had.

Lecture Seventeen

August 18th, 2020

MANAGEMENT AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Before our lecture today, I would like to say a few words regarding the management of the Han sangha here at Larung Gar. For all khenpos and khenmos, when you are supervising the sangha, you should use both the standardized rules and humane considerations. That is, try to follow the rules while allowing sufficient flexibility that enables a humane consideration of specific cases. This is the principle to follow. It is applicable also to the administration of any organization.

Be Humble and Compassionate

In most western societies, everything is usually governed by laws and regulations. Because personal relations are highly valued in many eastern societies, there seems to be more flexibility in applying rules. In some cases, this could lead those in charge to overuse their power and make decisions arbitrarily through personal and subjective judgment. This is certainly not good.

However, an inflexible adherence to only rules and regulations without considering the specifics of a case is also flawed.

Recently, I saw a number of cases where some of our monastic supervisors had failed to deal with properly. Even though they said that they had followed the regulations, I really question whether the regulations were even reasonable. For example, there is a rule stipulating that anyone who comes back to the academy two months after the beginning of a new semester would be dropped from their original class and would have to re-enroll in another class as a new student. Then someone comes back after two months plus one day and the supervisor directly asks the student to re-enroll, without investigating any reason behind the absence. This is too rigid and inflexible. Of course, the supervisor is following the rule and the decision is not groundless. However, I think we can relax the requirement in such cases and have more consideration for the person involved because this is not a transgression of basic principles.

It is important for managers to have a sense of appropriateness and know when and to what extent regulations should be applied. Without rules, an organization will be in disorder. But to be bound entirely by rules, without leaving any room for adjustment on a case-by-case basis, would be oppressive and impractical. Therefore,

regulations should allow some flexibility, especially on small issues that do not violate our core principles.

I hope khenpos and khenmos would learn more about management in addition to giving Dharma teachings. When you manage other people, try not to be so rigid and inflexible with regulations. Try to consider all the factors and make reasonable allowances for individuals. If we had adhered rigidly to all the rules in the past, some of you would not have been able to stay here, not to mention becoming khenpos or khenmos. When you first arrived here, you were far from faultless. It was impossible to just command you to avoid every single small mistake.

My point is that we need to have compassion when managing others. Certainly, if a person crosses the red line or breaks the monastic precepts, that person should be expelled with no exceptions. In other cases, monastic supervisors should never casually expel someone from our academy based solely on their own decision. Everyone here, monastic or lay practitioner alike, lives not an easy life as each one has abandoned his secular life to spend all his time in Dharma study and practice. You should kindly remind someone of the rule if he violates it for the first time. If he breaks the rule over and over again, then probably he is not a fit for this monastic environment and you may consider letting him go.

Meanwhile, do not be arrogant when you are managing others. Some who are in charge sometimes behave like a high official, setting themselves above their subordinates. This is not the attitude of a great leader. A great leader is one who devotedly serves the masses. However, some Dharma practitioners, although they have been trained to follow the Mahayana path, still consider themselves superior to other people just because they may have a title or have been appointed as a manager or a group leader. Management of either the sangha or any group needs both wisdom and compassion. If a manager has both, the result will be satisfying.

Interpersonal Relationship

Life today, in both the East and West, relies on communication and cooperation. It is not like in the past when people could live more or less on their own, by farming or herding, without much association and exchange with others. Now, in any community such as schools, companies, monasteries, and so on, there is a division of labor that makes the whole group function properly. This division of labor has become indispensable. People take on different roles and responsibilities and have to work closely with each other to make progress on their projects. High interdependency requires leaders to be able to effectively manage not just their own teams but also possess good communication skills that are needed to coordinate and work effectively with their peer groups.

That is why it is important to select the right person for a management position, a decision that requires wisdom. Sometimes, people appoint others based on personal relationships, without considering their capability, expertise, and character. These decisions will inevitably lead to problems. For those who have been appointed to leadership positions, you need to know how to conduct yourselves properly and treat all you deal with in a professional and respectful manner.

We have all seen some people who are welcomed wherever they go and every group they associate with speaks highly of them. Whereas others seem to only bring trouble and disturbance, and leave a bad reputation wherever they go. This can happen in both lay and monastic groups where there have been individuals who had seemed to be qualified but actually turned out to be not only unfit but also bring many troubles for the group they stay.

Good leaders make everyone, their superiors, colleagues, and subordinates feel pleased and motivated. Even if they are in charge of hundreds or even thousands of people, each team member knows what he or she has to do and gets along well with each other. Their groups cooperate well with other teams. In contrast, ineffective managers deliver poor team performance because they often put themselves above others or are unable to lead and motivate even a small group of just several people. Poor performance could lead

the team members to complain and blame each other, making other groups even more reluctant to cooperate with the team.

Since management effectiveness can lead to great differences in outcome, everyone should reflect on, “Have I done well in my position? Have I built a good relationship with everyone I associate with?” To build a good relationship with others requires skills and those who do not have these skills can annoy everyone they work with, from their superiors to subordinates to peers. Although rare, such cases have happened here at Larung Gar. His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche established a rule that according to the root samaya of Vajrayana, any such fight or quarrel is to be reconciled before the next day. If this is not promptly resolved, expulsion could result and these individuals will no longer be allowed to receive tantric teachings or empowerments.

Although there is no great hostility among people here at Larung Gar, some are doing quite poorly at interpersonal relationships. Some individuals also like to find faults in others. No matter where they are, even in a very small group of a handful of people, they would cause mischief. I have often said that if people in a Dharma center like to gossip, this center must lack the real Buddhist study of hearing, contemplating, and practicing the Dharma. If a center focuses on Dharma study and practice, people there will always

revolve around Buddhadharma and the noble truths of the world, scorning all worthless chatter and gossip.

I feel that I have done well in managing and interacting with others. Whether at Larung Gar or elsewhere, there is no one with whom I have bad relationship. I respect and have worked with many groups of people, with or without religious beliefs. I have established good channels of communication with every department or group I have cooperated with.

As a Tibetan saying goes, “The excellence of the son should be commended by others, not his own father.” When a father speaks highly of his son, it is of no meaning. It is the praise from others that truly shows the son’s ability. The same holds true for our behaviors. Some Dharma practitioners believe they are good and easy-going people but have no idea how others think of them. They should figure this out and reevaluate themselves. It is always important to do self-evaluations, especially for Dharma practitioners and those in charge. Reflecting on yourself from time to time and ask, “How is my relationship with others? How well do I attend to my team leader and how well do I care for my subordinates?”

I want to stress this before the lecture but maybe I have already taken too much time. If there is time, I could have continued on the topic of interpersonal relationship and management for

a couple more hours. Anyway, I will stop here. It's enough for today. Everyone here is wearing a mask. I can only see your eyes and foreheads and I feel that you all look quite adorable. Do you agree?

Seek Liberation

While studying the Dharma every day, it is pivotal to aspire for liberation. Whenever we engage in virtuous deeds, the Dharma study or else, we should remind ourselves that “I am a seeker of liberation.” This is how Dromtonpa used to spur himself to be an authentic practitioner, a true renunciant. It is recorded in Chengawa Lodro Gyaltsen's *Open the Door to the Training of the Mind* that, Dromtonpa used to stay in a solitary place, trying to shun worldly people. Sometimes, he would abide secretly somewhere in the cypress forest and mutter to himself, “I am a seeker of liberation. I shall not bind myself to reputation and offerings.”

Even though we are not as accomplished as Dromtonpa, we are all following in the Buddha's footsteps in seeking liberation. Therefore, we should not be concerned with the eight worldly preoccupations, like reputation, wealth and so on, but rather see them as transient as fleeting clouds. To completely renounce those matters all at once may be difficult because we have a habitual attachment to them due to our past patterns of life. Nonetheless, keep in mind that

mundane success and prosperity are like plantain trees, devoid of any essence. The *Mahayana Compassionate Pundarika Sutra* says,

Meritorious rewards of humans or gods

Are akin to a swift whirlwind.

They will not last

Like moon reflection in the water.

Due to one's past merit and virtues, one can be born among humans or gods, enjoying all kinds of happiness and success. But such meritorious rewards are like a sudden gust of wind that will soon disappear. They appear but will not persist. They are devoid of any real essence, like the moon's reflection in the water. So think about it: What have I been pursuing every day? What benefit and merit has it brought me? Through such reflection, generate a resolve to seek the ultimate liberation.

EFFICACY STORY: A HUNTER SAVED BY KSITIGARBHA

During the Five Dynasties period of China, in the Jing State, there was a man who made a living by hunting and he was especially skilled in killing wild geese. Because he had such exceptional power and skills at hunting geese, he was widely known as the “Super Hunter of Geese”. When he was fifty-one, he got sick and died. Then his wife threw his corpse at a deserted place of tombs, letting it be devoured by wild beasts. After three days however, he came to life and returned home. Seeing him, his wife got terrified and thought it must be a crazy ghost. He told her not to be afraid and then related the following story to her:

“After I died, I was picked up by a flaming vehicle. As soon as I boarded it, I was engulfed in fierce fire. What an agony! Soon after, there came a monk. He poured water on the vehicle and the fire was extinguished. So I felt cool and released. Then I was sent to the front of King Yama. There, I saw hundreds of thousands of

birds and beasts, like pigs, sheep, geese, chickens, and so on and so forth. They collectively appealed to the King to impose severe punishment on me, 'It was him who deprived us of our lives!'

"King Yama replied, 'Considering your accusations, he must be an evil person. But his ancestor worshiped Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and by virtue of that, he is protected by Ksitigarbha. That is why when he was in the fire vehicle, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva came to protect him from suffering in the flame.' At that time, seeing those animals accuse me, I was so scared and started to pray to Ksitigarbha. As I prayed, all birds and beasts transformed into humans. Then King Yama released me and so I revived."

Thereafter, he left his home. Declaring himself to be "the servant for the Buddha," he wandered from place to place to exhort people to take refuge in Ksitigarbha.

We can see that the man in the story originally wasn't a Buddhist, not to mention being a devotee of Ksitigarbha. As a skillful hunter having no bounds in killing and hunting, he was still saved by Ksitigarbha only because his ancestor, though it was not clear how far the ancestor was from his generation, worshiped Ksitigarbha. Therefore, if one worships Ksitigarbha, all his offspring will be under Ksitigarbha's wing. If one is a Buddhist and sets a shrine at home where he or she worships Ksitigarbha, even if the younger

generations in the family, either his or her children or grandchildren, belittle or denigrate his or her belief and action, they will nonetheless receive the blessing of Ksitigarbha. This benefit may extend even to future offspring of the family, which is like how the whole family can benefit from its one member who undertakes a monastic life. As the saying goes, “If one gets ordained, by virtue of that, all one’s family members within the nine degrees of kinship to him or her will ascend to heaven.”

This time, by learning the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it is important to cultivate a strong confidence in the benefit of the Dharma practice. First of all, we will receive all benefits when practicing the Dharma by ourselves, as we have learned yesterday, “Good men and good women in the present and future should themselves cultivate virtue when they are healthy and hearing well. They will receive every part of the benefit.”

Secondly, we can also work for the benefit of others through the Dharma practice. As we have learned how the Brahman woman or the daughter Bright Eyes benefited their mothers, we know that if we recite noble sutras or build statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas with an altruistic intent for the sake of others, they will certainly be benefited. Regarding how much benefit they gain, whether just one-seventh of the whole or more, it depends on the degree of the doer’s altruistic intent and dedication. Last but not least,

such virtuous practice will bring favorable effects to our future generations, as well as those who have a connection with us, either good or bad.

Considering these benefits, we should all try to promote Buddhism to others. If you are incapable of giving Dharma teachings to a great number of people, you can at least endeavor to benefit those around you, including your family, friends, and people in your hometown. Except for the few individuals who are lucky to grow up in communities with temples and Buddhist belief, most of you probably live in an environment where even the name of the Three Jewels is not heard while bad customs and unvirtuous deeds such as killing prevail. Faced with such circumstances, you can try to erect a statue of Ksitigarbha or Buddha Shakyamuni or to print and circulate sutras in your hometown, so that the local people can come into contact with the noble beings or teachings and thereby gain benefit. You should generate such an altruistic aspiration. The blessing of the Three Jewels is inconceivable and the force of the karmic law is infallible. Likewise, the power of aspiration is unimaginable. With a pure and altruistic aspiration, you will get the opportunity to realize it.

QUESTION FROM KING YAMA

In the previous lecture we talked about King Yama as the representative of ghosts and spirits, who came to the Buddha and told him that they felt very fortunate to be able to attend the Dharma gathering. Meanwhile, he harbored some doubt and wanted to take the opportunity to ask the Buddha his questions and hear the Buddha's answer.

The Buddha told King Yama, "Ask whatever you wish. I will explain it for you."

The Buddha can answer any question of anyone without any difficulty. The *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* says,

*Even oceans of questions
From all hosts of beings,
Can be satisfactorily resolved
In one speech without any fear.
This is indeed inconceivable.*

Whatever sharp questions are raised, the Buddha can resolve them all in one speech in a satisfactory way. The Buddha has no fear or difficulty in answering them. This is indeed incredible. The Buddha has four types of unhindered knowledge, which enable him to provide perfect answers to whatever questions. Actually, not only the Buddha, eminent monks and great masters are also able to answer any question with ease because they have gained a deep realization of the Dharma.

When I just came to Larung Gar, the teaching of His Holiness used to start at a quarter past one o'clock in the afternoon. At that time, there were not too many people, about one or two hundred. After the teaching, His Holiness would usually allow us to ask him questions. He requested questions to be raised all at once, so many khenpos would stand up and speak their questions at the same time. Nonetheless, every time His Holiness would give clear and excellent answers to all questions one by one. That scene was amazing, so I was very fond of the Q&A session.

Later on, I was invited to give a talk at a university and I wanted to emulate His Holiness's manner of answering questions. So after the talk, I let the audience raise questions in close succession, and sometimes there would be four questions at a time. I tried to keep in mind all questions and then gave respective answers one by one. In most cases, I did well but there were still a few instances where

I had missed certain points. From this experience, I could clearly feel the inconceivable wisdom of His Holiness.

As a matter of fact, raising questions during studies is necessary. Some Chinese teachers, either Dharma teachers or worldly teachers, dislike other people asking them questions, feeling that this is deliberately making things difficult for them. It is wrong to think this way. If you can answer, just answer it. If you cannot, just say it honestly. There is no shame. You may refuse it by saying “I am not in the position to answer this question”, “it is not necessary to answer it now”, or simply “I don’t want to answer this question.”

In China, most parents care most about their children’s exam scores, and students who always raise a variety of questions are not welcomed by many teachers. Jews are quite the opposite. For them, exam score is not a cause for concern. Jewish parents usually ask their children, “Have you got a good question for your classmate today? Did you ask your teacher any questions today?” At school, the teacher’s favorites are students who can ask particularly sharp questions.

In reality, wisdom arises from debates and questions. In Sakya Pandita’s *Treasury of Good Advice*, it says,

*Until the learned are thoroughly questioned,
Their depth cannot be assessed.*

*Until a drum is beaten by drumsticks,
Its distinction from other drums is unknown.*

Until a drum is beaten by drumsticks, it cannot be known whether it differs from a common wooden milk cask or things of the like. Likewise, if you do not ask questions to the learned nor discuss with them, then you will not delve into the depth of their knowledge. Therefore, debates and questions are necessary because they are the best test of wisdom.

While we encourage questions, we should not go to another extreme. When asking questions, try to come up with something clear and thought-provoking. Some people are always itching to raise questions but usually cannot ask anything constructive. Or even worse, they cannot bring about a clear question regarding the given topic and just want to say something unrelated. That is pointless. Also, there are some speakers who overestimate their own ability and knowledge so they just leave other people to ask whatever questions. At the end, they may not understand the question, let alone give the answers. This would also be unfortunate.

At that time, King Yama reverently gazed at and made obeisance to the World-Honored One, turned to behold Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, and then said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I see that Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva uses hundreds of thousands

of skillful means in the six realms of existence to guide wrongdoing suffering beings across [to liberation], and he does so indefatigably. This great Bodhisattva has deeds of such inconceivable supernatural power. Yet, the multitudes of beings—after they gain release from the ripened effects of wrongdoing, before long they again fall into the lower realms. World-Honored One, since Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has such inconceivable spiritual power, why do living beings not dwell relying on the virtuous path and attain eternal liberation? O World-Honored One, please explain this for me.”



When Master Chin Kung was teaching this part, he said because Ksitigarbha was King Yama's teacher, he greeted him before replying to the Buddha. This makes sense. King Yama governs the nether world, the world for beings in the bardo state, and Ksitigarbha is the lord and guide there, so he could be the teacher of the King. Such an intriguing plot!

King Yama said to the Buddha that he saw Ksitigarbha shuttle back and forth in the six realms, especially in hell, to rescue suffering beings. We have talked about many stories that Ksitigarbha came to the nether world to save beings. For eons of time, Ksitigarbha has been working for the benefit and liberation of beings with all kinds of skillful means. However obstinate those beings are, he has always been persevering, never feeling downcast, despaired, or even a moment of tiredness and weariness. This is the inconceivable spirit of the great bodhisattvas and their most admirable quality.

Many Dharma practitioners who volunteer for enlightenment activities for the benefit of others, however, feel weary after serving the community for just a year or two. In the beginning, they are filled with enthusiasm. As time passes, the initial high spirits wear out and some of them may even begin to have conflicts with others and give up in the end. For Mahayana practitioners who have taken the bodhisattva vow, no matter what difficulties we encounter in the process of benefiting beings and propagating the Dharma, we

should never get weary, timid, or hesitant, but need to keep going steadfastly and follow the example of Ksitigarbha. In benefiting beings, Ksitigarbha is always a “workaholic” with a zeal that is not measured in years or thousands of years, but in countless eons. This kind of spirit is worthy for everyone, either Buddhist or non-Buddhist, to learn from.

Although countless beings have been released from their karmic retributions for the moment, many of them fall back into the lower realms again before long. Being ridden with grave negative habitual tendency, sentient beings alternate between good and evil. One moment their positive habitual tendency arises and they do good, but the next moment their evil karma appears and they do bad. They are like elephants who often bathe in the mud, shuttling between the mud and the dry land. This is a sad reality for many sentient beings.

No matter how incredible the power that Ksitigarbha possesses and how vast the aspirations Ksitigarbha has made to tirelessly save sentient beings, many sentient beings still fall back into the lower realms after Ksitigarbha has rescued them from the retributions of their wrongdoing. Why can they not be placed forever in the state of happiness without regression? Why does Ksitigarbha have to work so hard to rescue them over and over again? Would it not be nice if Ksitigarbha can rescue them all at once, and establish them

on a virtuous path once and for all? King Yama felt puzzled and pleaded with the Buddha to explain this to him.

Many of us may also have the same question, but this is like asking, “Would it not be good to close the prisons forever after all the inmates are released? Why are there more and more inmates?” However, it is not that simple. Sentient beings’ karmic tendency is complicated and long-lasting. For example, we see many repeat offenders who have to be sent back to prisons repeatedly because each time after release, they commit new crimes. Similarly, for many drug addicts, no matter how hard they try to quit, it is very likely that they will pick up the habit again. Unfortunately, humans can often be weak and unable to persist on the path for good.

THE OBSTINATE AND CONFUSED PERSON

The Buddha told King Yama, “Living beings of Jambudvipa have obstinate dispositions, difficult to regulate and difficult to tame. This great Bodhisattva rescues such beings everywhere throughout hundreds of thousands of kalpas, causing them to attain liberation early. For people who undergo the ripened effects of wrongdoing, even those who have fallen into the very low realms, the Bodhisattva uses the power of skillful means to extract their fundamental karmic conditions and lead them to realize the events of their previous lives. However, because beings of Jambudvipa have heavy habits of forming evil, no sooner have they left [the lower realms] they go back in [again]. This necessitates the Bodhisattva to work hard throughout many kalpas in guiding them across to liberation.

The Buddha told King Yama that it is not as simple as he imagined. Unlike beings of Uttarakuru or other worlds, beings of Jambudvipa

are particularly stubborn and difficult to tame. They are good at doing evil and difficult to be guided toward goodness. I cannot agree more with this based on my personal experiences. Some people can be really intractable and even if the Buddha were to appear in front of them, they would still refuse to change, let alone be tamed by others.

Therefore, in hundreds of thousands of eons, Ksitigarbha has manifested in various embodiments in every realm to rescue sentient beings one by one. He works hard in the hope that these beings can obtain liberation quickly. For those who are undergoing retributions in the worst destinies, for example, as hell beings or hungry ghosts, Ksitigarbha applies a variety of expedient methods to remove or eliminate their root karmic obscurations, and then leads them to recall the events of their past lives.

While here it is translated as “heavy habits of forming evil”, the original Chinese means “severe fetters and heavy habits of evil”. “Fetter” is another name for mental affliction, the definition and category of which is clearly explained in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*. Briefly speaking, there are three or nine fetters of major mental afflictions, which can be further divided into more. “Heavy habits of evil” can refer to the ten non-virtuous actions. Beings of Jambudvīpa are so fettered by afflictive emotions and evil karma, even if Ksitigarbha applies various skillful means to rescue them from

the lower realms, helping them extract their karmic obscurations, they keep falling back over and over again, causing Ksitigarbha to have to work continuously for many eons to continuously rescue and release them.

In the same manner, our virtuous masters have utilized all kinds of methods to guide us toward virtue, to let us confess our misdeeds, to make us realize the nature of mind, and so on and so forth. They have imparted to us all what we should know, but because we are heavily loaded with negative karma from previous lives, we are overwhelmed by our mental afflictions again and again. As a result, we are still trapped in the mire of samsara, going back and forth between higher and lower realms and have not attained liberation.

Most ordinary beings have such unstable dispositions. Sometimes, through the blessing of buddhas and bodhisattvas, we feel good in every aspect: our mood is good, the weather is nice, the food tastes delicious, and it would seem that liberation is not far from us, especially when we hear teachings of emptiness or the luminous and empty nature of mind, we would feel that all our problems and afflictions are gone. “Watch the empty space of the vast sky, it has no birth nor death. So is everything and my mind. Wow, how wonderful!” However, after just a very short time, when we have to go out and interact with the world, afflictions strike and

even the weather seems dismal. Then, we sadly find out that “the empty and vast sky is obscured by dark clouds, and there are even horrible thunders and lightning.”

Therefore, beings of this world have brought many troubles to the great bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, making him work throughout many eons to guide and tame them. One day they would listen to the teaching and behave well, but the next day they get rebellious. That is how we are before our spiritual teachers. Sometimes we are progressing well with our study and practice under their guidance. But, due to the shackles of negative karmic force, we would also do a lot of things that would displease our lineage masters. That is why we are still ordinary people undergoing various sufferings and waiting for their help.

There was a great master named Gyalwa Yang Gonpa. He said that the negative habitual tendencies of sentient beings are like a rolled-up piece of paper. Even when we unroll it, it will automatically roll up again if we let go. It means that because our habitual tendencies are so strong, they can easily make a comeback. For example, many people came to get ordained here at Larung Gar. In the beginning, they were so determined to seek liberation and constantly reminded themselves, “I am a seeker of liberation. I shall not bind myself to reputation and offerings.” However, after a while, their old propensities re-emerge. For instance, their inclination

toward their past occupations, the attachment to families and friends, or the habit of fighting with others, all of these negative habitual tendencies could strengthen and return.

So, it is a hard task to liberate sentient beings. It is always easy to say but much more difficult to do. Being a Dharma teacher is also challenging, especially for a teacher who not only has to give Dharma teachings but also supervise the study and practice of a class of students. Some Dharma teachers remain cool and unperturbed by any behavior of their students. They are focused on their teachings and may seem indifferent about the supervision of their students, as if they do not mind if the students can get liberated or not. On the contrary, some Dharma teachers are very sensitive. They are exhilarated when someone in their class does well in his study. But when this person performs poorly and makes trouble later, they would start to worry and be saddened. They are easily affected by the performance of their students. It is really not an easy task to guide and benefit beings.

“Suppose there was a person who lost his way home and, by mistake, entered a dangerous path, in which there were many yaksas, tigers, wolves, lions, lizards, snakes, vipers, and scorpions. Such a confused person on that dangerous path would be harmed within a short time. A virtuous friend who was knowledgeable of many great skills and good at stopping and keeping

out the injurious and poisonous, including yaksas and other evil fierce beings, would suddenly come upon the confused man about to walk further on that dangerous path and say to him, 'Hey! Fellow! Why are you entering this road? What special means do you have to restrain injurious and poisonous beings?'



“Upon hearing these words suddenly, the confused traveler would come to realize that he was on a dangerous path and would immediately turn back, seeking to leave that road. That virtuous friend would then take him by the hand, lead him off the dangerous path so that he would avoid the evils and poisons, and help him reach the good path so that he would gain peace and happiness. Then the virtuous friend would say to him, ‘Well!

Confused one! From now on, do not walk on that path again. Those who enter it will have difficulty getting out, and moreover, they will suffer harm to their lives.'

"The confused traveler would feel the seriousness [of the dangers on that path], too. As they were about to part, the virtuous friend would further say, 'If you see relatives, friends, as well as other travelers, be they men or women, tell them that, on that dangerous path there are many poisons and evils which will cause people to lose their lives. Do not allow them to [unwittingly] bring about their own deaths.'



The Buddha uses an analogy to describe how beings of Jambudvīpa fall again and again into the lower realms. According to scriptures, those ferocious spirits or animals on the dangerous path mentioned in the text represent beings' poisonous mental afflictions: yakshas represent wrong views, tigers arrogance, wolves greed, lions ignorance, and lizards, snakes, vipers, and scorpions symbolize hatred. These spirits or animals all have obvious features in the negative emotions they represent.

The knowledgeable friend told the formerly lost person not to travel on the dangerous path again because it would be very difficult to escape and he would most likely lose his life if he goes on that path again. The life here may imply our wisdom life, i.e., the spiritual continuum of seeking enlightenment. The lost person was certainly very appreciative and moved because if he had not met the virtuous friend, he would have been in great danger. As they were about to part, the friend exhorted him that if he sees other friends, relatives, passers-by, be they men or women, he should make it clear to them that this path is very dangerous and even threatens their lives, and that they shall not risk death by entering that path.

Here the virtuous friend refers to Kṣitigarbha. But from a broader sense, he stands for all virtuous teachers. When I was translating this section, it resonated with me deeply. I felt from the bottom of

my heart that each of us is really a lost and confused traveler. If we have not encountered virtuous spiritual teachers who show us the path to liberation, we will continue to wander in samsara and will inevitably be trapped into the dens of various dangerous animals or spirits for endless time.

At the beginning, we encounter virtuous teachers, who point out to us that we are walking along the wrong path, which will absolutely lead us into the terrifying abyss of samsara. We then realize that our way of life is wrong and dangerous. Then they kindly guide us onto the path to liberation and remind us to not return to the wrong path thereafter. In addition, they also urge us to share this message with all others we meet so that they will not risk their lives on the wrong and dangerous path.

Eventually, our spiritual teachers will leave us because they cannot remain in the world forever. When their lives end, they would leave us with their final teaching and their heartfelt exhortations engendered from their life-long experience of spiritual practice, urging us to conduct ourselves meticulously according to the karmic law. Out of compassion toward all beings, they would also exhort us to take the responsibility of helping others not go astray because samsara is too dangerous and horrendous. There are so many beastlike afflictions awaiting to devour beings that once a

being is captured by them, he or she will suffer for numerous eons before having a chance of release.

When I was reading this the other day, I cannot help but think of the kindness and compassion of those great masters in the past. In olden days, it was very hard for the masters to leave the remote Tibetan mountains to propagate the Dharma. Transportation was very poor and those masters were often not in good health. However, in order to make virtuous connections with beings outside, they exerted themselves tirelessly, undertaking all kinds of hardship. Now, whenever I go out of the Larung Gar valley through the expressway or airplanes, I would think of the past masters' great endeavors to benefit beings. Regrettably, they are no longer with us.

As in the story of the confused traveler, virtuous teachers can appear out of the blue in our life journey and rescue us. But however unwilling we may be, one day they will depart, leaving us with heartfelt instructions. As the Venerable Longchenpa said in the *Treasury of Pith Instruction*, and quoted in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*,

*You would like to study Dharma with your wonderful teacher
Forever, but you are certain to part.*

You would like to be with your good spiritual friends

Forever, but you are certain to separate.

When I was translating this part in Chengdu, I had a strong emotion and I could not stop thinking of my gurus, and in particular, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Nothing is greater than the kindness of the guru in this world. If I had not met my guru, I would still be exactly like this lost traveler, thinking arrogantly that I was choosing the right path. As a student at a traditional teacher-training school, I would have continued my training as a professional teacher, believing that it was the most important thing in life and never found the path to liberation in this short life.

I followed His Holiness for 19 years and throughout those years, I worked hard and tried my best to please him and live up to his expectations. On several occasions, my endeavor might have failed to bring about a satisfactory result which perhaps was on account of my karma from previous lives.

Before encountering His Holiness, I was fortunate to meet Khenpo Tepas who kindly introduced me to His Holiness and also encouraged me to get ordained and come to Larung Gar. I clearly remember that when I was 23, on the thirteenth day of the first month of the Tibetan calendar, in the spring of 1985, I received the teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* from Khenpo Tepas.

That was the first time in my life that I received the teachings of liberation. After a month or so, I came to Larung Gar for the first time and received from His Holiness the empowerments and transmissions of the complete works of Lerab Lingpa. These are the teachings that embarked me on the path to liberation in this life, entirely different from any of the courses that I attended in traditional schools, which have nothing whatsoever to do with liberation.

People indeed gain knowledge at school. But whatever major they are in, be it fashion design, physics, chemistry, astronomy, geography, biology, or the like, what they learn is only worldly knowledge that are not directly related to the liberation from samsara. That is why some lay Buddhists have tears welling up in their eyes when reflecting what would have happened if they had not encountered the path to liberation in this lifetime. Their lives would be filled with afflictions. Many of you probably have the same experience and feel fortunate to have encountered a virtuous master who can show you the way to liberation because whatever other paths you choose in this world, you would nonetheless be submerged in samsara for a time that sees no end.

I am not denying the kindness of our worldly teachers. But only spiritual Dharma teachers can genuinely show us the way to liberation. If we do not encounter them, we will be forever hopelessly

trapped in samsara. As a result of that, I cannot stress more the value and kindness of our spiritual teachers.

“In the same way, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, replete with great kindness and compassion, rescues wrongdoing suffering beings and enables them to be reborn among humans and devas, so that they experience wonderful happiness. These wrongdoing beings would come to know the suffering of the [bad] karmic paths. After they obtain release, they would never go [on those paths] again. They are like the confused traveler who by mistake entered the dangerous path but who, having met a virtuous friend who led him out, would never enter it again. Whenever he would come upon others, he would advise them not to enter that path, saying that because he was confused, [he took that path before, but now that] he has gained release, he would not enter that path again.

“If he should walk on it again, he would still be confused and mistaken, unaware that it is the dangerous path he had fallen into before. He may then lose his life. This is like falling into the lower realms. By virtue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s power of skillful means, beings obtain release and gain rebirth among humans and devas, but shortly thereafter, they go back [to doing evil and fall] into [the lower realms] again. If they form heavy

karma, interminably long they will remain in the hells without a time of release.”



Thanks to the great compassion of Ksitigarbha, some beings who are liberated from suffering will never fall back into it again. These are beings with sharp faculties and we can see such cases around us. Even if they always went astray and had committed many misdeeds in the past, their keen faculties and accumulation of sufficient merit from previous lives allow them to see their errors. After being guided by virtuous masters and as long as they apply mindfulness and introspective awareness, they can avoid committing the same mistakes and become excellent in the three trainings of discipline, meditation, and wisdom to benefit themselves. In addition, they

would also benefit others by warning them not to fall into the dangerous path of samsara. They would share with others on how they had also wrongly taken that path before and that now they have gained release, they would never take that path again.

There are other beings who after being released from the dangerous path return again and again onto the same route, without even being aware that it is where they had lost their way and was caught by danger before. They do not possess the smallest amount of mindfulness and introspective awareness and are putting their lives at risk. They are those who “when the wound has healed, forget the pain.” Although by the power of Ksitigarbha’s skillful means, they have been released and taken rebirth in the human and god realm, they would fall down to the lower realms again afterward. If their negative karma were too grave, such as those incurred by the five crimes with immediate retribution or violation of samayas, they would fall into hell without liberation. This would indeed be a terrible outcome.

These are beings with inferior faculties. This means beings who are ridden with heavily negative karma such that even if they have been instructed by spiritual teachers on the path to virtue and liberation, they cannot adjust their habits and stop engaging in misdeeds. As a result, they always regress and fall back into the lower realms. As we have mentioned before, for habitual offenders,

even if they are released, many of them cannot avoid repeating crimes and will probably be sent back to jail.

This explains why some people continue to fall back into the lower realms. While it would be good if all sentient beings can be liberated once and for all, their karma plays a decisive role in their liberation. Therefore, try as much as possible to repent and purify our negative karma whenever afflictive emotions arise. By doing this and with the incredible blessing of Ksitigarbha, no hindrance will there be that are too great for our liberation.

THE PROMISE OF GHOST KING EVIL POISON

At that time, Ghost King Evil Poison joined his palms in respect and said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, we measureless number of ghost kings benefit or harm people in Jambudvīpa, and we each do so differently. However, the ripened effects of karma cause our retinue and us to travel in the world [doing] much of the unwholesome and little of the wholesome. When we pass people’s homes, cities, villages, manors, or houses where there are men or women who cultivate wholesome deeds as minute as hair fibers, who but hang a banner or a canopy or present a little incense or a few flowers to make offering in veneration to the images of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, or who recite the sacred sutras or burn incense as an offering to even a sentence or a verse in them, all of us ghost kings respect and revere such people, just as we do for the Buddhas of the past, present, and future. We command the smaller ghosts, each of whom has great power, as well as the earth spirits to protect

them and not allow evil events, untoward happenings, virulent diseases, untoward serious illnesses, as well as unwelcome phenomena to come near these houses and places, much less enter the doors.”



There are countless ghost kings in this world and some bring benefits to people, like Ghost King Presiding Over Food, Ghost King Presiding Over Wealth, and so on, while others mainly bring people harm. Different ghosts have different specialties and powers, but because of the ripened effects of their karma, most of them engage mainly in destructive deeds when they travel in the world.

The fact is ghosts are everywhere in this world. Some practitioners say that there is no ghost at Larung Gar. This would be untrue according to the teaching here. I believe that there must be ghosts here and also in other holy places blessed by Padmasambhava. Due to the blessing of enlightened masters, the number of ghosts is probably fewer in these holy places. As you stay at your wooden cabin here at Larung Gar, there will be ghosts around you, and they may manifest themselves at night after you turn off the light. (Khenpo laughing...)

I am good at making up ghost stories. When I was at school, my fellow students always asked me to tell ghost stories. I was really good at it and whenever I told a story they would feel so afraid that they dared not to return home. Then I would continue. We loved doing these funny things at school.

Those who do good deeds and worship the images of Ksitigarbha or other buddhas and bodhisattvas will be greatly respected by all ghost kings. They will revere this kind of people just as they do for the buddhas of the past, present, and future. Knowing this, we should engage in all kinds of virtuous deeds such as reciting sutras, hanging prayer flags, and making offerings of incense or flowers to buddhas. Even if we cultivate wholesome deeds as minute as a hair fiber, obstacles and misfortunes will not appear.

Furthermore, the ghost kings will instruct all their subordinate ghosts to safeguard us. Each of these minor ghosts has great power and supervises a specific aspect or area of the world, including earth deities, water deities, tree deities, kitchen gods, and so on. Whenever we see anyone practice virtue, even if it is as simple as chanting the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, making offerings to the teachings of Ksitigarbha, even just one stanza, be aware that the ghost kings will summon their many subordinate ghosts and spirits to protect this person. They will prevent all kinds of unwelcome events, from accidents that cause tragic and violent death to severe and unexpected illnesses, from coming near this person's residence, much less entering the door.

Troubles and misfortune are caused by various factors, one of which is the influence of ghosts and spirits. Therefore, if we lack protection from Dharma protectors or protective spirits, we could be frequently harassed by different nonhuman spirits. That being the case, it would be helpful for us if we carry with us at all times sacred objects that possess blessings. Yesterday, I saw a Tibetan child, who was carrying many pouches with miscellaneous blessed holy items. I joked with him, "This is a tsampa bag, this is a ghee bag, and this is a milk dregs bag." People who have no spiritual faith may think it idiotic to carry these items for protection. Nonetheless, it is important to have spiritual beliefs and seek the blessing of holy

objects for peace and happiness, especially when we are faced with all sorts of catastrophes like fires, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, or pandemics around the world.

The Buddha praised the ghost kings, “Excellent, excellent! All you ghost kings and Yama are able to support and protect good men and good women in this way. I will tell Brahma and Sakra to protect all of you as well.”

After the two groups, one being the group of Yama represented by King Yama and the other the group of ghosts led by Ghost King Evil Poison, have spoken, the Buddha praised them and acknowledged that it is meritorious for them to safeguard people who practice virtue. The Buddha promised to let the heavenly gods, like Brahma, Indra, and the four heavenly kings, protect them and their retinues, because after all, they are under the jurisdiction of those gods.

With this command, all the heavenly gods will now protect those who practice virtue as well. In order to protect ourselves as well as other sentient beings, therefore, we need to practice virtue, and especially sincerely embrace the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. It would be great if you can always carry with you a copy of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Previously I had requested that everyone carry at all times a copy of the *Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom*, the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*

is not a requirement because I do not want you to be overloaded with scriptures. However, a word to the wise, it can bring you immense benefit and blessing if you carry with you scriptures like the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* or *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*. Fear no more as you will be protected by multitudes of ghosts and will be taken under the wings of the heavenly kings and gods.

Lecture Eighteen

August 21st, 2020

HEARTFELT ADVICES FOR PRACTITIONERS AT LARUNG GAR

Before today's teaching, I would like to say a few words. Anyone at Larung Gar, whether a monastic or a lay practitioner, should know the importance of learning and contemplating the Dharma, and the necessity of its corresponding meditation and practice. So firstly, I hope you will attend Dharma lectures every day for as long as you stay here, either my lectures or those offered by other khenpos and khenmos. Except for a few of you who spend much of your time serving the sangha or engaging in specific Dharma activities, all the rest of you should cherish the favorable condition you have to hear the Dharma teachings. Instead of wasting any time, you should have the discipline to exert yourself in Dharma study and practice. This is of great benefits to you. However, if you indulge in your usual bad habits such as sleeping, engaging in idleness, or other meaningless entertainment, you will miss a great opportunity to experience the nourishing nectar of the Dharma. Without the Dharma as an antidote, your bad habits will become

more and more fixated as you grow accustomed to them. As it was mentioned in the previous lecture, habitual tendencies are like a rolled-up piece of paper which will automatically roll back even after we unfold it. Therefore, please pay great attention to Dharma lectures.

Secondly, I hope all of you will try your best to properly manage your time and treasure every minute you have. Life is precious and short. While you are here, you are supposed to spend all your time learning and practicing the Dharma. We should cherish our own time and also respect other people's time. Modern technology has made getting in touch with each other very easy and we can make a call or send a text message anytime. But we should only contact others when it is necessary. Frequent texting or calling can be a disturbance to others. Everyone should learn and practice the Dharma at their own pace and work on the Dharma activities that would benefit others. However, when you cannot control your idleness and start to intrude into other's time of study and contemplation by engaging them in other activities, such as inviting them to dinner or just gossiping with them, please know that their time is indeed their precious life. They would want to use their time on meaningful activities instead of being distracted by trivial things. Historically, great masters would never waste their time for even a minute. They spent their time only on meaningful

activities, learning, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma, or engaging in Dharma activities for the wellbeing of sentient beings.

For those practitioners who have taken on the responsibility for certain Dharma projects, I hope you can give your full energy and attention to your projects during working time and try your best to study and practice the Dharma outside of your work schedules because it is impossible to do both at the same time. After work, you should try your best to use the time for your own study and practice. As I have always emphasized, learning the Dharma, practicing the Dharma, and benefiting sentient beings are the three things that are of vital importance for each Mahayana practitioner.

EFFICACY STORY: KSITIGARBHA SAVES THOSE WHO HAVE NO FAITH IN HIM

There are a great number of stories in the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*, all of which show the evidence of the inconceivable blessing of Ksitigarbha. The one that I would like to share with you today happened in the Tang Dynasty. At that time, there was a lady, Ms. Li, who was sincerely devoted to Buddhism and enshrined a twenty-inch-high wood carved Ksitigarbha statue in her house. Ms. Li had a maid who was about fifty years old. This maid held strong wrong views and had no faith in Buddhism at all. One day, when Ms. Li was out, the maid took this chance to throw out the Ksitigarbha statue and dumped it in the fields. When Ms. Li came home, she discovered that the statue was gone but did not know it was thrown away by the maid. She kept crying and looked for the statue everywhere. Then she saw a beam of light in the fields and following it, she found the statue and happily brought it back.

The next day, the maid fainted while she was out in the fields for a whole day. When she regained consciousness, she burst out crying and recounted her experience in the bardo. After her death, two Yama guards on horseback escorted her to King Yama. It was a horrifying scene and the King scolded her saying that since she held strong wrong views and did not respect the Ksitigarbha statue, and furthermore, she dumped the Ksitigarbha statue in the fields, she would be sentenced to spend time in the great hell for such a serious offense. When King Yama was about to punish her, a monk appeared. As soon as the King saw the monk, he came down quickly from his throne and asked the monk respectfully, “Dear teacher, what has made you come over?” The monk said, “This maid was from my patron’s home. Although she disliked me and discarded my statue, she was the maid of my patron after all, so I need to save her from suffering. Would you please kindly extend her lifespan and send her back to the human world?” King Yama then said, “My teacher, I will definitely follow your instruction.”

Hearing their conversation, the maid felt great remorse and started to confess her misdeeds. The voice of “Namo Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva” arose spontaneously from her. Through her devoted chanting, numerous offenders who were shackled in the hall of King Yama were unshackled automatically and they all got liberated from the lower realms. The maid was then brought back

to the human world by Ksitigarbha and resurrected. Hearing her experience, Ms. Li generated even stronger devotion to Ksitigarbha and paid continuous homage and made offerings to this statue. All the people in her county were also touched by the maid's story and gave rise to great faith in Ksitigarbha.

From this story, we can see the incredible blessing of Ksitigarbha. Even those who damage his holy images out of wrong views could be saved by Ksitigarbha. He would not take revenge like ordinary people usually do, but rather benefit them with his great compassion and power. As long as the image of Ksitigarbha is enshrined at one's home, not only Ksitigarbha's believers, but their family members who have no faith in him would also gain benefit. Great bodhisattvas benefit sentient beings with no exception, and even those who do harm to them will be blessed. As Shantideva said in his *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*I go for refuge to those springs of happiness
Who bring their very enemies to perfect bliss.*

People who have strong conceptual thought may not easily believe or may hold doubt in such efficacy stories. I believe most Han Chinese people would have faith in the Ksitigarbha practice as in their history and in their culture, many stories on Ksitigarbha's blessing can be found throughout the various dynasties, including

the Tang Dynasty, the Song Dynasty, and the period of the Five Dynasties. These stories have been instrumental in helping Han Chinese develop faith in Ksitigarbha.

When we study a scripture or follow a Dharma practice, we should learn about the devotion people in the past had to them. If we look back in history, we could see the devotion and reverence that people in the past had in building holy statues, making wall paintings, or copying sutras by hand. As a result, they gained remarkable experiences and accomplishments in their Dharma practice. Moreover, they recorded these experiences meticulously to benefit future generations. It was not convenient in ancient times to collect and record information, but still a great number of precious stories were documented. This is a good example for us modern people to emulate and such spiritual wealth is truly invaluable. This is the reason why in every lecture, I will share with you an efficacy story of Ksitigarbha's image that was recorded by the monk Changjin in the Song Dynasty.

If we compare people today to those from the past, it is clear that regardless of whether we are from the East or the West, most of us are more concerned with material possessions than spiritual attainment and thus we would not have much spiritual wealth to pass on to future generations. I think this may be one of the biggest differences between us and people of the past. A reason for

this could be that with the constant information overload that we experience in this high-tech world, we are often distracted from paying enough attention to our spiritual development. As Dharma practitioners in this modern age, we need to make a strong effort to shield ourselves from any meaningless distractions.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE AT THE TIME OF BIRTH?

Now we continue with the *Ksitigarbha sutra*. The eighth chapter is mainly about the conversations between Buddha Shakyamuni and King Yama and two ghost kings. In the previous lecture, we discussed the conversation between Buddha Shakyamuni and Ghost King Evil Poison. Normally, ghosts and demons can be very scary, even their names sound terrifying, but in fact some of them are very kind and benevolent. As we learned from this sutra, as long as a person has done even the smallest of good deeds, the Ghost King Evil Poison will protect and support this person. The Buddha was very happy with the ghost and requested Brahma and Sakra to also offer protection to him. Now we will introduce another ghost king, the Ghost King Presiding Over Life. I hope you will remember all these teachings.

Benefit the Newborn and the Mother

As these words were spoken, in the assembly there was a ghost king named Presiding Over Life who said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, in accordance with conditions of karma I preside over a human’s lifespan in Jambudvīpa; I am in charge of both the time of birth and the time of death. As in my original vows, I wish very much to benefit living beings, but they do not realize my intention. They therefore go through birth and death in distress. Why is this?



Ghost King Presiding Over Life is filled with kindness toward beings of Jambudvīpa and he is responsible for their lifespans, in

charge of the time of birth and the time of death, two of the most crucial moments for every person. Given the numbers of births and deaths, he is constantly busy and has a great retinue to assist him. Nowadays, deaths could come from sickness, wars, conflicts, man-made accidents, or natural disasters.

Human beings in this world are quite fortunate because Ghost King Presiding Over Life has made original vows to benefit people of Jambudvipa. Sadly, however, most people fail to realize his kind intention and commit a multitude of non-virtuous deeds that consequently cause them to go through birth and death in distress. They are unable to enjoy any peace when dying or giving birth to a baby. People often say that if one commits too many non-virtuous deeds, he or she could not be saved by the power of ghosts, Dharma protectors, or even the monastic sangha. Without any merit accumulated through performing virtuous deeds, one would indeed have to experience suffering instead of being saved by others. In the following text, Ghost King Presiding Over Life described what kinds of virtuous deeds need to be done at the time of birth and death.

“When people of Jambudvipa have just borne children, whether boys or girls, or when they are about to give birth, good deeds should be done to increase the benefits of the household. Then naturally the local earth spirits will be immeasurably joyful and

will protect the mother and child so that they obtain great peace and happiness. [...]



The ghost king says, doing virtuous deeds at the time when a child is about to be born or has just been born brings benefits to the entire family, especially the mother and child. The local earth spirits will be pleased and joyfully protect the family. Similar statements can be found in quite a few other sutras. Some sutras say that if others perform virtuous deeds for the child at the time of birth, for instance, making buddha statues, hanging prayer banners, or releasing captive lives, the child's lifespan will be prolonged and he or she will enjoy longevity.

A book of Buddhist anecdotes compiled by Master Baochang in the Liang Dynasty, *Exceptional Stories in Sutras and Vinaya Texts*, records a miraculous story about a young novice monk who was eight years old and living with an elder arhat. One day, with his miraculous power, the arhat realized that the little monk would die after seven days. The arhat was afraid that his parents would be too sad with his death and even blame the arhat himself for not taking good care of their son. So he asked the young monk to go home to visit his parents. On the way home, the young monk encountered torrential rain and he saw that an ant nest would be washed away by rapids. He thought to himself, "As a Buddhist, I should extend my loving-kindness to all beings and save those who are in danger." So he changed the direction of the water with piles of mud and prevented it from entering the ant nest. Then he went home and stayed with his parents for a few days. As he came back on the eighth day, the arhat was surprised that nothing bad happened to him and that his lifespan had been extended to 80 years. Again with his miraculous power, the arhat found out that his early death was avoided due to the merit of saving all the ants from being drowned. He told everything to the young monk. Deeply touched by the infallible law of karma, the young monk practiced the Dharma diligently and attained arhathood in that very life.

It is always a great merit if we can save beings who are dying or struggling for life. At Larung Gar, whenever there is heavy rain, earthworms would come out from the soil and are often stranded on the roads after the rain has stopped. Monks and nuns will pick them up carefully and move them back to the soil so that they would not be accidentally stepped on by pedestrians or are dehydrated up by the sun. Saving life is true virtue no matter how tiny the life seems to be.

It is often a tradition in many cultures to celebrate the birth of a child with a banquet in which many animals would be slaughtered for the meals. In China, it is customary to cook one chicken a day during the mother's first month after giving birth to boost her energy. As a result, a great number of animals such as chickens, cows, and goats are slaughtered on behalf of the mother and child shortly after a baby is born. The family members think that what they are doing is good for the mother and child but unfortunately their actions would have the opposite effect. Such deeds of killing actually would decrease the lifespan of the mother and child. In many cultures, similar special feasts are also held to remember the deceased. The fact is that these deeds would only increase the negative karma for the deceased and lead to terrible consequences.

Ghost King Presiding Over Life feels very sad for sentient beings' misdeeds as he truly wants to help them live a happy and peaceful life. Yet, he finds it difficult to do so because they are inclined to create negative karma due to their ignorance. Even the ghost king feels powerless to save these poor people. We sometimes see people consume animal products for health reasons. We can only sigh because such negative actions of killing certainly would not extend their lifespan, but rather cause unexpected diseases or even death to them.

The ghost king urges people to perform virtuous deeds for newborns because it brings auspiciousness to the whole household. As it is said, virtues and harmony bring auspiciousness while non-virtues and disharmony bring inauspiciousness. Non-virtuous deeds such as killing create negative karma that will only lead to inauspicious and painful consequences. Conversely, virtuous deeds and kindness bring auspiciousness, peace, and happiness. So doing virtues and accumulating merit at the time of one's birth is of great importance.

"[...] After the birth, be careful—do not kill or harm [beings] in order to offer fresh meat to the mother, nor gather relatives to drink alcohol, eat meat, sing, and play instruments, for these acts can keep the mother and child from peace and happiness. [...]"



The ghost king lists a few things that should be avoided after the birth of a child, because all these negative acts can keep the mother and child from peace and happiness. Particularly, killing should be avoided by all means because it causes suffering to both the killer and those being killed. In the Chinese Tripitaka, there is a text named *The Condensed Sutra of Causes and Effects*, which is actually a treatise written in verse format expounding causes and their respective effects. It was composed by Bodhisattva Great Courage and translated by Samghavarman in the Liu Song Dynasty. This treatise says,

*For those who desire longevity
Not killing sentient beings is the fundamental discipline.
Those wise should know the practice of
Loving-kindness and compassion and avoid killing.*

For those who desire longevity, a key principle is to not kill or harm any sentient being. In *The Mahasamnipata Sutra*, it is said that all sentient beings cherish their lives the same way we human beings do. Therefore, it is absolutely impossible to gain happiness from killing because it destroys others' happiness. If we want to bring peace and happiness to the mother and child, we should avoid all those negative acts listed by the ghost king, including killing, eating meat, and drinking alcohol. If we cannot refrain from all of these acts, we should at least not kill living creatures to offer fresh meat to the mother and the guests. Frozen meat could be an option. Even though it would still cause negative karma, it would be less than fresh meat.

I had written a booklet, *The Merit of Life Releasing*, in which I cited a few points from Master Lianchi's *On Stopping Killing*. In his essay, Master Lianchi exhorted people to stop killing from seven aspects. I cannot agree more with him that whether it be birthdays or the celebration of a child's birth, banquets or weddings, entertaining guests, or seeking spiritual aid, killing should never be allowed because it is a misdeed. Our own happiness should not be built

upon the suffering of other sentient beings, particularly when that means a loss of life. As a consequence, anyone who commits killing will definitely suffer from its karmic retribution of being killed by others.

Suffering Is the Blessing from Guru

Many of you may have committed a lot of negative karma before you embarked on the Dharma path or before you became a monastic. Among those negativities, some you may remember while others, you may not. Under the influence of your cultural tradition and family education, it is not surprising that in this present life, you have accumulated a large amount of negative karma. If you cannot purify all these negativities while you are still alive, it is hard to say whether you will have other opportunities to purify them in the future. If you are unable to do so, this negative karma could drive you to the lower realms.

Some Buddhists may think that their negative karma has been completely purified shortly after they started to follow Buddhism and they become arrogant just because they are now Buddhists. Some may think that there is no need to worry about negative karma because according to what is taught in Madhyamika or in the Great Perfection, all illusory appearances, including negative karma, do not exist in the primordial wisdom mind. However, the

truth is that as long as one still lives in this phenomenal world and is affected by all kinds of appearances, one does not transcend the conventional phenomena and is still tightly bound by karma. The infallible and irrefutable law of cause and effect still functions on him and he will have to experience the consequences of all his negative actions.

Therefore, it is necessary for us to constantly reflect on our own life, and see what kind of negativity still remains and needs to be purified. For instance, although we are vegetarians, we have been following Buddhism and doing virtuous deeds all day long, we have actually accumulated a great deal of negative karmic seeds in our alaya consciousness, many of which were from our previous lives and are still taking effect in this life. Although we don't remember them, they do exist and will mature into effects when the proper conditions are met, even after countless eons. We would never know which karmic seed will ripen first and what resultant consequence awaits us.

Some Buddhists complain that even though they have learned Buddhism and conducted virtuous actions diligently, they still encounter many unhappy difficulties such as poor health. They then start to doubt whether doing virtuous deeds would really bring good results. They think that all their experiences only result from their deeds in this present life. This shows their ignorance

of how much negative karma they have accumulated since the beginningless time. Indeed, there are innumerable karmic seeds hibernating in our alaya consciousness that would not just disappear on their own. If we do not clear them away by applying the practice of confession and purification, they will for sure ripen into effects in this or future lives.

It is therefore quite necessary to contemplate on the law of cause and effect frequently in our daily life. Personally, I often think of my negative karma when I encounter difficulties. For instance, I have been in poor health for many years. Whenever I do not feel good, I would just remind myself of my negative karma from my previous lifetimes. Although I have not committed any killing in this life, I must have killed or harmed sentient beings in my previous lives so now I have to undergo the retribution of being sick. I am not just saying these words theoretically, I truly believe this deep down and I would never complain about my misfortune in my health or that the Three Jewels have failed to bless me.

In biographies of some of the great masters in the past, such as Gotsangpa Gonpa Dorje, they regarded all their experiences as the blessing from their guru. It is easy for us ordinary practitioners to attribute happy experiences to the blessing from our guru. However, these great masters also regarded every painful experience as a special blessing from their guru. When we are stricken with bad

experiences, would we think of them as the blessing from our guru and the Three Jewels and show our gratitude? We should contemplate this question.

The fact is that there are good reasons for us to accept that suffering is the blessing from our guru. On the one hand, suffering causes us to generate a sincere and non-deceptive mind of renunciation toward this phenomenal world; on the other hand, the experience of suffering helps us exhaust our negative karma which will otherwise cause us to fall into hell. Since these temporary sufferings we experience in this life have such great value, they must be the blessing from our guru.

What Makes Childbirth Difficult?

“[...] Why? During the difficult time of childbirth, there are countless evil ghosts, goblins, and sprites who want to consume the foul blood. I command the local earth spirits of that household early on to protect the mother and child so that they are peaceful and happy, thereby gaining benefits. When people in such households see that the mother and child are peaceful and happy, they should cultivate merit in thanks to the earth spirits. If instead of doing so, they kill, harm, and gather relatives [for feasting], their violations will bring misfortune to themselves, and the mother and child will also be harmed.

Why do the aforementioned acts keep the mother and child from obtaining peace and happiness? The process of delivering a child is already painful and risky for the mother and child and as Guru Rinpoche said, both the mother and child are risking death during this process. Thanks to modern medical advances, the situation is much safer nowadays. But still, uncountable evil ghosts, goblins, and spirits are attracted by the blood during birth and are gathered around the mother and child. In order to keep the mother and child in peace and happiness, Ghost King Presiding Over Life has requested the local earth spirits to protect them from being harmed by those evil ghosts. In return, family members should perform virtuous deeds to acknowledge these local earth spirits by offering butter lamps, drawing holy images, and reciting sutras and mantras. However, if the family members are ignorant and conduct evil acts, not only would they themselves but also the mother and child would receive retributions and misfortune. The mother and child could be affected by extended illness or even death.

Many sutras state that it would be of great benefit to the mother and child if the mother or other family members recite sutras such as the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*, or the name or mantra of Avalokiteshvara when a child is born. In Tibetan culture, family members will usually take the mother and child to a monastery as

soon as they recover from delivery. They will perform all kinds of virtuous deeds in the monastery to accumulate merit for the mother and child. Also, they will request the monastics to shower and bless the baby, and to recite sutras or confer a longevity empowerment to the baby. These acts are in line with Buddhist teaching and bring harmony to local ghosts and spirits. Such virtuous deeds create favorable conditions for oneself and others to gain happiness and peace.

This is a practical teaching that is applicable in our daily life and addresses our concerns for safety, health, peace, freedom from illness, and so on. We know that childbirth is an occasion for joy in every family, however, due to many people's ignorance, especially their ignorance of the karmic law, they often act in ways that are contrary to what they are seeking. It is indeed unfortunate. With our understanding of the teaching on karma and what are beneficial and what are harmful, we should encourage our relatives and friends to perform virtuous deeds and to refrain from non-virtuous deeds. While some may listen to us and some may not, there is no need for despair. We must remain patient and be kind to them and continue to advise them to perform virtuous things. Significant changes may not happen immediately.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE AT THE TIME OF DEATH?

“Moreover, for people of Jambudvīpa who are on the verge of death, regardless of whether they [have done] good or evil, I wish to keep these dying ones from falling into the lower realms; but how much more [can I do so] when they have cultivated roots of goodness and have increased my ability [to help]! [...]

Ghost King Presiding Over Life is indeed a kind and warm-hearted ghost. He does not want even those who have created evil or done no good to fall into the lower realms, let alone those who have cultivated the roots of goodness. As long as people have performed virtuous deeds, it would increase his ability to help these sentient beings. As mentioned earlier, performing virtuous deeds brings auspiciousness and increases positive energy. If all of us engage in virtuous deeds, the power of kind ghosts and spirits will be enhanced. Whereas if we do non-virtuous deeds and create negative karma, the power of evil ghosts and spirits

who harm sentient beings would also be increased. Ghost King Presiding Over Life says that his power would be enhanced by people's virtuous deeds, and as mentioned in the following text, he hopes sentient beings will follow his words and refrain from non-virtues.

Moreover, people's own inner strength and power will be increased by their virtuous practice. In the Chinese Tripitaka, there is a sutra named *The Buddha Speaks of Fearlessness Sutra* translated by Dharmaraksa in the Western Jin Dynasty. It says,

*I abandon all evils
And practice all virtues.
For this reason,
I have no fear in my life.*

If we abandon non-virtuous deeds and cultivate only virtues, we will not suffer from any fear, whether in our day-to-day life or at the time of birth or death. On the contrary, if we always commit unwholesome actions and seldom practice virtue, we could be afflicted with mental illnesses such as depression, phobia, or various unknown physical illnesses. Since it is very difficult to be completely freed from these diseases, even if we feel better sometimes, we may still be entangled by emotional afflictions or

by evil ghosts, spirits, and demons and be prevented from acting in accordance with our good intentions.

What Happens at the Time of Death?

“[...] When a practitioner of good deeds is about to depart this life, there too are hundreds of thousands of ghosts and spirits of the lower realms who disguise themselves as his parents or other relatives in an attempt to lead him into the lower realms. How much more is this the case for those who have done evil!



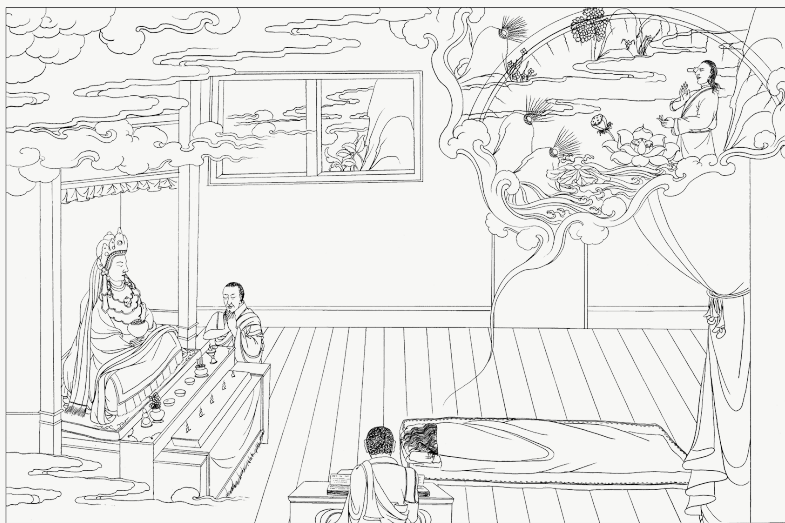
It is said in tantras, especially in the teachings of bardo, that people would be confronted with a complex situation at the time of death. At that critical moment, a large number of evil ghosts and spirits

would come forward to disturb the dying person. If the dying person has strong attachment to his parents, relatives, or friends, such attachment would cause him to see these ghosts and spirits exactly as the people to whom he is most attached. He would see these people greeting and welcoming him but actually they are ghosts and spirits in disguise who are trying to lead him to the lower realms. That is the situation for those who have engaged in virtuous deeds. Without any protection, they could be misled and lose their opportunity to take birth in the pure land. How much worst would it be for those who have done non-virtuous deeds and held wrong views and what horrible fate would await them?

In general, people who have done a great deal of virtuous deeds would not be easily influenced by such appearances at the time of death. However, people with negative karma and wrong views could be misled at that time. Therefore, it is critical for us to accumulate virtues when we are alive, and we need to diligently contemplate the impermanence of death and to cultivate confidence in the guru and Three Jewels. If we sincerely pray to them and rely on their power, we can be saved from such situation. If we are about to fall into the lower realms in our bardo state, our guru would come and call us with the secret names we have received from his empowerment. If we have deep faith in him, we would naturally follow his instruction and take birth in the pure land or

directly attain liberation. Therefore, for the sake of our next life, it is crucial for us to develop confidence and devotion to our guru.

“World-Honored One, when such a man or woman of Jambudvīpa is on the verge of death, his consciousness is confused and dim, he is unable to distinguish between good and evil, and his eyes and ears are unable to see and hear. His relatives should then make great offerings, recite the sacred sutras, and recite the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Such wholesome conditions can cause the departed one to keep away from the lower realms, and the demons, ghosts, and spirits will all withdraw and disperse.



It is also stated in the teachings on bardo that when one is dying, one will first go through the process of dissolution. There are many stages in the process of dissolution, but to make it easy to understand, it can be divided into three stages. The first stage is the dissolution of the five sense faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Next is the dissolution of the four great elements. After that, one will experience the phases of clarity, increase, and attainment. During the attainment phase, one's red and white elements would meet at the heart. The consciousness would enter into them, whereby a state without any thought is experienced and then one would faint away into a state of utter darkness. After he wakes up, he has reached the bardo state and as stated in tantras, he has gained greater clarity than in life. He would be many times cleverer and his memory would be many times better than while he was alive, and he can see and hear at much greater distances.

Death and after-death experiences can be a relatively long process and each sentient being would experience them differently due to their individual karma. Here in the text, *Ghost King Presiding Over Life* mainly stresses the situation that people in the bardo state are confused and dim, and unable to distinguish between good and evil. So he suggests when one is on the verge of death, his relatives practice virtuous deeds such as making great offerings,

reciting sacred sutras such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* and *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, and reciting the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas for him. Han Buddhism has maintained the tradition of chanting Amitabha Buddha for the deceased. By doing so, all evil ghosts and spirits will withdraw and the dying one will not fall into the three lower realms. This is of great importance.

Some people don't pay much attention to these practices when their family members die. This is a great pity. When one departs this life, everything he has owned will be left behind. No matter if it is a lavish house or a luxury car, a tiny needle, or a short thread, one cannot take anything to his next life. At that time, what one needs most is merit. Thus it is quite necessary to perform virtues on behalf of the dying or the departed one to accumulate merit for them.

Tibetan people have a great tradition in creating wholesome conditions for people who are dying. When someone is about to die, his family members will invite monastics to their home to recite *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* for forty-nine days. They do not wait until the person is dead to perform virtuous deeds such as making offerings to monastics or requesting monastics to recite sutras. When someone has little hope of survival, his family

would immediately invite monastics to recite sutras and mantras. This Tibetan custom can be of great benefit to the dying.

In the *Sutra on Impermanence* translated by Yijing in the Tang Dynasty, the actions that should be taken when someone is dying are described. I feel that this is a really important sutra for everyone to study when you have the opportunity. The sutra says that when someone is on the verge of death and he wants to avoid falling into the lower realms, he should have the opportunity to see the image of buddhas and bodhisattvas, to take refuge and confess his misdeeds, to recite the buddhas' names and observe precepts, and to generate bodhicitta. It also expounds on how the belongings of the deceased should be distributed to generate the most benefit. In the end of the sutra, it says, "For the deceased, read the *Sutra on Impermanence*. A filial son should stop grieving and wailing lamentations." The sutra suggests that the family should recite the *Sutra on Impermanence* and they should also control their grief. This clear scriptural reference supports the concept that one should not cry at someone's death to avoid disturbing the dead on the path to taking rebirth in the pure land.

There are folk customs that are well-grounded in the Dharma while others are not. The first category are those that have solid scriptural references or are derived from spiritual realization or life experience of great masters. For example, it is customary among

Tibetan Buddhists that one should not make prostration to his guru when he is about to leave for another place because it can be taken to mean that the disciple would not be able to meet the guru again in the future. I have read the biography of a previous master saying that he prostrated to his guru when he departed, and then unfortunately he never saw his guru again. There are also some sayings or views without reliable basis. For example, some Buddhists claim that one should not do *sur offering* at home, or else ghosts and spirits will come to one's home and cause danger. But indeed, ghosts and spirits do have their own power to come and go freely. Your *sur offering* to them would bring them benefit and not any harm to yourself.

Another related sutra we studied previously, *The Noble Mahayana Sutra: The Wisdom of the Hour of Death*, also has supreme teaching on how to view the mind at the moment of death. In the sutra the Buddha says, "As for the wisdom of the hour of death, you should cultivate the perception of insubstantiality, since all phenomena are naturally pure. You should cultivate the perception of great compassion since all phenomena are contained within bodhicitta. You should cultivate the perception of referencelessness since all phenomena are naturally luminous. You should cultivate the perception of utter non-attachment since all things are

impermanent. You should cultivate the perception of not searching for buddhahood elsewhere, since the mind is wisdom when realized.”

What Is the Most Beneficial upon Death?

“World-Honored One, all living beings who are nearing the time of death, if they are able to hear a Buddha’s name, a Bodhisattva’s name, or a sentence or a verse from the Mahayana sutras, I observe that such people—excepting those with [any of] the five great violations of killing and harming that lead to incessant torments—those who have small unwholesome karma, which would otherwise cause them to fall into the lower realms, will obtain release quickly.”

The ghost king mentioned several ways through which beings at the time of death can be protected from falling into the lower realms and obtain liberation. If on the verge of death, beings of any kind have an opportunity to hear the name of a buddha, for example, Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Ratnasikhi, Buddha Shakyamuni, or the name of a bodhisattva, such as Ksitigarbha, Avalokiteshvara, or Mahasthamaprapta, then these beings will be liberated from the negative karma that would have otherwise caused them to fall into the lower realms, as long as they have not committed the five crimes of immediate retribution. The same is for anyone

who is able to hear a verse or a sentence of a Mahayana sutra, for example a sentence from the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* or a teaching from the *Diamond Sutra*, such as “All compounded phenomena are like a dream, a magical illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like dew or a flash of lightning. Thus should you contemplate them.”

This says that it is necessary and helpful for us to recite the name of buddhas and bodhisattvas for sentient beings when they are on the verge of death. At the end of 2018, I was staying in the Han region and I got a severe case of the flu. After several days, I had to go to see a doctor. Since there was no major hospital around, I could only go to a local clinic early one morning. There were many people at the clinic and I had to wait in a queue for a long time. When it was my turn, someone suddenly shouted, “Emergency, come help me!” The doctor stood up immediately and ran to the patient who needed emergency care. I then went to another queue and waited for another hour or more. When it was finally my turn again, another emergency appeared and the patient was in a critical condition. I eventually realized that I would not be able to see a doctor that day. Even more sadly, I noticed that the two individuals who needed emergency rescue had died and their bodies were lying nearby. So I just went over and recited prayers for them. One of the families seemed to have a little spiritual faith and was grateful for my chanting. The other family, however, looked at

me with loathing. Either way, I kept on chanting for a while and then went home without getting to see a doctor.

We should always recite sutras or the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas when a human being or any other sentient being is dying and try our best to guide them across. It does not matter whether we are invited or not. Even if we could only recite one name, one sentence, or one verse from the Mahayana sutras, it would generate great merit for the dying. In the *Mahayana Vaipulya Sutra of Treasure Light of Dharani*, it says,

*If the dying one recites the name of a buddha
Or generates love and respect toward the image of a buddha,
Then the buddha will save him to the buddha land,
Where all buddhas will teach the Dharma to him.*

Reciting the names of buddhas or bodhisattvas and chanting the Mahayana sutras can generate inconceivable benefit for the dying. In the *Brief Records of Efficacy of the Three Jewels*, there is a story of a person who was saved from the retribution of the Avici Hell by hearing only one term from a Mahayana sutra.

In the city of Yangzhou, there was a lay Buddhist who did not accept the view taught in the *Nirvana Sutra* that buddha nature is permanent. He doubted the teaching in the sutra which says

that one would not fall into the lower realms but rather take rebirth in the celestial realm by just hearing the term “permanence” regarding buddha nature. He believed that it was already extremely difficult to be freed from the lower realms by hearing a complete sutra, let alone by just hearing a single term. When this person died, his chest remained warm so his family did not bury him. Seven days later, he was resurrected and told his experience to his family. He went to the place of King Yama and King Yama told him that because he slandered the profound Mahayana sutra, he would take his retribution in the Avici Hell. Then he thought about the law of cause and effect and said to King Yama, “If I have to fall into the Avici Hell because I have slandered the Mahayana sutra, then I should be freed from it because I have heard the term ‘permanence’.” At that time, rays of light suddenly appeared in the vast expanse, and from the light there was a voice saying,

*Whether one believes it or not,
As long as one hears the term “permanence,”
One will not fall into the lower realms
But rather take rebirth in the pure land of Akshobhya Buddha.*

Hearing this verse, King Yama gladly released him and when he was resurrected, he tearfully shared his experience. From then on, he generated great faith in Mahayana and practiced the Dharma

diligently. After he died, he was reborn in the pure land of Akshobhya Buddha.

In the *Uttaratantra Shastra*, terms such as tathagatagarbha, buddha nature, or teachings such as “buddha nature is untainted” are often mentioned. Upon hearing either a term or a sentence, although they are short, one will nonetheless gain great benefit of liberation. The same for “Namo Buddhaya,” which has great power to benefit those who hear or recite it. Just like the aforementioned lay Buddhist, we may wonder how is it possible to gain great merit by just hearing a few words? In fact, whether a term or a sentence is of great benefit or not has nothing to do with its length. Like medicine pills, some of them are very small but by taking them, patients will recover from serious illness. Likewise, the name of a buddha or a bodhisattva, or a term or a sentence from the Mahayana sutras could have great power and blessing.

If we see any sentient being nearing death, we should recite sutras or the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas for them. We should try our best to help them because it can be particularly important for anyone, Buddhists or non-Buddhists alike. We encourage Dharma practitioners to recite prayers for those who are dying so that they can obtain a good rebirth. It takes very little time to recite prayers or sutras such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Amitabha Sutra*, or the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, and yet the power generated by doing so can

greatly benefit their future lives, may be even saving them from the lower realms for numerous eons. This is truly meaningful to the deceased and his family.

In order to truly benefit the dead through the chanting of prayers, we need first to develop a strong conviction on such practice ourselves. As a Buddhist, it is indispensable to cultivate a devoted faith in Buddhist teachings. Faith is the mother that gives birth to all kinds of merit. Without faith, academic research or dualistic thinking alone will never help us understand or accept many teachings, for example, the relationships between one thing and another, or how one practice could bring a specific result. Faith plays a vital role on the path to liberation. Without it, liberation becomes impossible to attain.

GENUINE IDENTITY OF GHOST KING PRESIDING OVER LIFE

The Buddha told Ghost King Presiding Over Life, “Because of your great kindness, you are able to make such great vows and protect all beings amid their births and deaths. In the future when men and women reach their time of birth and death, do not retreat from your vows; be sure to cause all of them to be liberated and gain eternal peace and happiness.”

The ghost king said to the Buddha, “Please do not be concerned. Until the end of my present form, in every thought I will support and protect living beings of Jambudvipa so that they gain peace and happiness both at the time of birth and the time of death. I only wish that at the time of birth and death, these living beings will believe and accept my words, so that they will all be liberated and gain great benefits.”



The Buddha praised this ghost king for his great vows to protect sentient beings at the time of birth and death. Although he appears in the form of a ghost, he is actually a great bodhisattva. Just as it is very important to have a capable and trustworthy official appointed to a critical position, Ghost King Presiding Over Life will greatly benefit beings of Jambudvipa because of his incredible kindness and compassion as he takes charge of their crucial moments of birth and death.

The Buddha knows that his work is not easy because sentient beings in this world are stubborn and difficult to convert. No matter how kindly they are treated, not only will they not repay the kindness of others, they often cause more trouble. That is why

the Buddha consoled the ghost king and exhorted him never to retreat from his great vows in any situation. The Buddha asked him to continue to support and protect sentient beings at the time of their birth and death so that they will be liberated and gain peace and happiness.

We have already seen that the Buddha had requested Universally Vast to use myriads of skillful means to encourage people not to retreat from the Ksitigarbha practice. Here the Buddha earnestly reminded Ghost King Presiding Over Life not to retreat from his great vows. Indeed, it is of great importance that a practitioner maintains his devotion and exercises his diligence in Dharma practice and keeps it from fading. Many of us may have made great aspirations when we embarked on our spiritual path. But when we encounter obstacles from time to time, our aspirations can easily wear off and we may regress either from our volunteer jobs or from the long-term Dharma activities of benefiting sentient beings. As ordinary practitioners, our ability is limited and our mental states are not as stable as buddhas and bodhisattvas. We can be easily influenced by the external world that causes us to waver from our original intentions. If at that moment, we are reminded by buddhas and bodhisattvas, we will not retreat from our initial aspirations.

Since most of us do not have the merit to warrant a direct reminder by buddhas and bodhisattvas, I encourage you to listen to Dharma teachings on a regular basis and stay with Dharma teachers and virtuous spiritual friends because they can help remind you of what you need to do. The Buddha's reminder to the ghost king here is in fact an indirect reminder to us to try our best not to retreat from our Mahayana vows and not to lose passion in our Dharma activities. As long as we can benefit others, even though what we can do may be quite small and trivial, it is still meaningful and worthy of our perseverance.

Ghost King Presiding Over Life assures the Buddha that he will support and protect sentient beings his whole life. The phrase "until the end of one's present form" is mentioned a lot in the pratimoksha vows, which means one's whole life with the present physical body. The ghost king asked the Buddha not to be concerned as he has the firmest commitment that as long as sentient beings believe and accept his words, abandoning non-virtuous deeds and cultivating virtuous deeds at the time of their birth and death, all of them will be liberated and gain peace and happiness. His sincerest wish for all beings in this world is for them to accept and follow his words. Many of the Buddha's followers, including ghosts, spirits, or human beings who have also vowed to help sentient beings

also assured the Buddha that they would endeavor to accomplish everything that the Buddha had asked them to do.



At that time the Buddha said to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “This great ghost king, Presiding Over Life, has passed through hundreds of thousands of lives as a great ghost king, supporting and protecting living beings amid their births and deaths. It is only because of this Great Being’s compassionate vows that he manifests in the form of a great ghost. In reality, he is not a ghost. After one hundred and seventy kalpas, he will become a Buddha named Signless Tathagata, his kalpa will be called Peace and Happiness, and his world will be named Pure Dwelling. The lifespan of that Buddha will be incalculable kalpas.

“Ksitigarbha, so inconceivable are the matters about this great ghost king. The devas and humans whom he guides across, too, are immeasurable.”

At the end of the conversation, the Buddha revealed the true identity of the great ghost king Presiding Over Life. He is indeed a great bodhisattva and because of his great kindness, compassion, and aspiration, he appears as a ghost king for hundreds of thousands of lives to save living beings amid their births and deaths. Likewise, some Dharma protectors manifest in the forms of ghosts and spirits, or even demons. But in reality, they are not these kinds of sentient beings. We are usually afraid of ghosts and spirits as they look ferocious. Yet, some of them are indeed more compassionate than us human beings. As human beings, we may not pay attention to others’ births and deaths, but this great ghost king has been making great efforts on the two critical moments of living beings. Because of his great compassion and power, he has guided across immeasurable sentient beings.

In this lecture we have covered the Ghost King Presiding Over Life in depth. In addition to this ghost king, there are many other ghost kings mentioned in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* who have also vowed to protect and benefit sentient beings. The sutra also mentions a great number of spirits, such as earth spirits, mountain spirits, and tree spirits, most of whom are very kind and possess bodhicitta.

Because they all harbor good intentions to benefit others, there is no need to fear them.

Many people are afraid of ghosts and spirits and fear that they may be around them. On a certain level, we can say that ghosts and spirits are indeed the manifestations of the mind. As long as you realize their empty nature, they will not be able to harm you. But if you truly believe the world is full of ghosts and spirits and perceive whoever you encounter as demons or ghosts, or bad guys and vicious persons, your world will become a place full of hostile enemies. Ultimately, all phenomena are pure by nature and are none other than the display of our primordial wisdom. If one achieves a high-level of practice with profound realization, one would perceive all phenomena as buddhas, bodhisattvas and pure lands. We should endeavor to achieve such a state of realization.

Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute
in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great masters,
to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma,
and to the welfare of all sentient beings.

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