

STEP BY STEP — TO — THE — SUMMIT

A Comprehensive Commentary on
The Words of My Perfect Teacher

3

KHENPO SODARGYE

STEP BY STEP
— T O — T H E —
SUMMIT

A Comprehensive Commentary on
The Words of My Perfect Teacher

3

KHENPO SODARGYE

TRANSLATED BY
*The Wisdom and Compassion
Translation Group*



The Wisdom and Compassion Press
69 Rue Willowdale,
Sherbrooke, Quebec, J1M 0B6
CANADA

© 2026 by Khenpo Sodargye

Cover design: In-house Design Team
Interior design: In-house Design Team

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition
Published by The Wisdom and Compassion Press
Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada
Printed in the United States of America

Government of Canada Publication Data
ISBN 978-1-7386991-0-0

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Step by step to the summit : a comprehensive commentary on The words of my perfect teacher / Khenpo Sodargye ; translated by The Wisdom and Compassion Translation Group.

Names: Suodaji, Kanbu, 1962- author

Description: English translation of transcripts of oral teaching sessions delivered in Mandarin Chinese.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20250274752 | ISBN 9781738699124 (v. 3 ; softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: O-rgyan-'jigs-med-chos-kyi-dbang-po, Dpal-sprul, 1808-1887. Kun bzañ bla ma'i źal luñ. | LCSH: Rdzogs-chen. | LCGFT: Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BQ7662.4 .S86 2025 | DDC 294.3/420423—dc23



BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI



THE FIELD OF REFUGE



GURU RINPOCHE
PADMASAMBHAVA



PATRUL RINPOCHE

Homage to the fundamental teacher Buddha Shakyamuni:

With great compassion, you embraced this turbulent and
degenerate world,

And made five hundred mighty aspirations.

You are as exalted as the white lotus; whoever hears your name
shall never return to samsara—

Most compassionate teacher, to you I pay homage!

Homage to the omniscient Longchenpa:

At the neck of the treasury Gangri Thökar,¹

Is the blissful grove of perfect virtues.

Omniscient Longchen Rabjam,

The secret yogin with the essence of the twofold goal,²

To you, I prostrate.

Homage to the omniscient Mipham Rinpoche:

The wisdom of Manjushri, Lion of Speech, arose in your heart,

And you trained in the infinite aspirations of Samantabhadra,

Performing the enlightened actions of the buddhas and their
heirs:

Jampal Gyepé Dorje, to you I pray!

Homage to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche:

In the pure realm of the great sacred site, the Five-Peak Mountain,

The blessings of Manjushri's wisdom ripened in your mind—

Jigme Phuntsok, at your feet I pray!

Inspire me with your blessings: transmit the realization of the
wisdom-mind lineage!

In order to liberate all sentient beings from samsara, may we all
generate the supreme Bodhicitta!

¹ Gangri Thökar, literally “The White Skull Snow Mountain,” is a famous peak in Central Tibet, approximately twenty-five km south of Lhasa. It was here, in the hermitage of Orgyen Dzong, that Longchenpa taught and composed many of his most important writings. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

² The twofold goal: bringing benefit to oneself as well as to others.

CONTENTS

<i>Lesson 40</i>	1
2.1.3. THE DEFECTS OF SAMBARA	
2.1.3.1. The Sufferings of Samsara in General	
<i>Lesson 41</i>	18
2.1.3.2. The Particular Sufferings Experienced by the Beings of the Six Realms	
2.1.3.2.1. The Eighteen Hells	
2.1.3.2.1.1. The Eight Hot Hells	
2.1.3.2.1.1.1. The Reviving Hell	
2.1.3.2.1.1.2. The Black-Line Hell	
2.1.3.2.1.1.3. The Rounding-Up and Crushing Hell	
2.1.3.2.1.1.4. The Howling Hell	
2.1.3.2.1.1.5. The Great Howling Hell	
2.1.3.2.1.1.6. The Heating Hell	
2.1.3.2.1.1.7. The Intense Heating Hell	
2.1.3.2.1.1.8. The Hell of Ultimate Torment	
<i>Lesson 42</i>	33
2.1.3.2.1.2. The Neighboring Hells	
2.1.3.2.1.2.1. The Pit of Hot Embers	
2.1.3.2.1.2.2. The Swamp of Putrescent Corpses	
2.1.3.2.1.2.3. The Plain of Razors	
2.1.3.2.1.2.4. The Forest of Swords	
2.1.3.2.1.2.5. The Hill of Iron Śālmali Trees	
<i>Lesson 43</i>	49
2.1.3.2.1.3. The Eight Cold Hells	
2.1.3.2.1.4. The Ephemeral Hells	
<i>Lesson 44</i>	66
<i>Lesson 45</i>	83
2.1.3.2.2. The Pretas	
2.1.3.2.2.1. Pretas Who Live Collectively	
2.1.3.2.2.1.1. Pretas Suffering from External Obscurations	

2.1.3.2.2.1.2.	Pretas Suffering from Internal Obscurations	
<i>Lesson 46</i>		97
2.1.3.2.2.1.3.	Pretas Suffering from Specific Obscurations	
<i>Lesson 47</i>		111
2.1.3.2.2.2.	Pretas Who Move Through Space	
<i>Lesson 48</i>		126
2.1.3.2.3.	The Animals	
2.1.3.2.3.1.	Animals Living in the Depths	
2.1.3.2.3.2.	Animals that Live Scattered in Different Places	
<i>Lesson 49</i>		140
2.1.3.2.4.	The Human Realm	
2.1.3.2.4.1.	The Three Fundamental Types of Suffering	
2.1.3.2.4.1.1.	The Suffering of Change	
2.1.3.2.4.1.2.	The Suffering Upon Suffering	
2.1.3.2.4.1.3.	The Suffering of Everything Composite	
<i>Lesson 50</i>		154
2.1.3.2.4.2.	The Sufferings of Birth, Sickness, Old Age, and Death	
2.1.3.2.4.2.1.	The Suffering of Birth	
<i>Lesson 51</i>		169
2.1.3.2.4.2.2.	The Suffering of Old Age	
<i>Lesson 52</i>		186
2.1.3.2.4.2.3.	The Suffering of Sickness	
2.1.3.2.4.2.4.	The Suffering of Death	
<i>Lesson 53</i>		201
2.1.3.2.4.2.5.	The Fear of Meeting Hated Enemies	
<i>Lesson 54</i>		218
2.1.3.2.4.2.6.	The Fear of Losing Loved Ones	
<i>Lesson 55</i>		232
2.1.3.2.4.2.7.	The Suffering of Not Getting What One Wants	
2.1.3.2.4.2.8.	The Suffering of Encountering What One does Not Want	
<i>Lesson 56</i>		249
2.1.3.2.5.	The Asuras	
2.1.3.2.6.	The Gods	
<i>Lesson 57</i>		263

<i>Lesson 58</i>	280
<i>Lesson 59</i>	298
2.1.4. THE PRINCIPLE OF CAUSE AND EFFECT	
2.1.4.1. Negative Actions to be Abandoned	
2.1.4.1.1. Physical Actions to be Avoided	
2.1.4.1.1.1. Take Life	
<i>Lesson 60</i>	315
<i>Lesson 61</i>	330
2.1.4.1.1.2. Taking What is Not Given	
2.1.4.1.1.2.1. Taking by Force	
2.1.4.1.1.2.2. Taking by Stealth	
2.1.4.1.1.2.3. Taking by Trickery	
<i>About the Author</i>	345
<i>About the Translator</i>	346



Lesson 40

“Understanding that samsaric ... the main part and the conclusion.” [page 61–63]

Today we’ll begin our study of the third instruction—“the defects of samsara.”

2.1.3. THE DEFECTS OF SAMBARA

This common preliminary practice is also very important. I hope you will listen attentively to my teachings, diligently attend the tutoring sessions given by others, preview the text, and meditate accordingly.

On the surface, the preliminary practices, such as “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” “the impermanence of life,” and “the defects of samsara,” may seem straightforward in their literal meanings, but when you really put these into practice, you will find they are even more challenging than other advanced practices. For instance, when you practice channels, energies, and essences, visualize deities, and recite mantras, it is relatively easy to maintain concentration. However, when many of you first undertake the preliminary practices, you may struggle to get started, calm your mind, and remain in a state conducive to the practice. This is because the scope of preliminary practices is quite extensive, and their content is profound. Additionally, our habitual tendency to engage with authentic Dharma is often weak. Nevertheless, we must not give up halfway while practicing the preliminaries; otherwise, if these practices are not successfully completed, it will be very

difficult for most people—except for a few practitioners with sharp faculties—to achieve success in other practices.

That is why I have intentionally scheduled more teaching sessions for this text. Some may think, “It is too long. Quite unnecessary!” However, after careful consideration, I believe that if you invest more time in the common preliminary practices, it will enhance your practice of the uncommon preliminaries. Then, if you also commit yourselves to the uncommon preliminaries, you should not encounter any difficulties with future practices. Even if you do not pursue any further practices, as long as you succeed in the preliminaries, there will be nothing to regret.

Many beginning practitioners may not yet fully grasp the importance of practicing ngöndro. However, by following the guidance and practicing diligently throughout your life, you will undoubtedly come to appreciate its value in your later years. “It is because I have practiced the common and uncommon preliminaries so well that I am now a great practitioner. Had I started with the pinnacle of Dharma practices, I would not be the person I am today.” For all these reasons, I have decided to provide extensive teachings on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Before each chapter, Patrul Rinpoche would praise his guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, with a prayer:

Knowing fully that all things in samsara are empty of substance,

you pursue with great compassion the only goal of benefiting sentient beings.

Unattached to samsara or nirvana, you embrace the teachings of the Great Vehicle.

Peerless guru, at your feet I bow.

“*Knowing fully that all things in samsara are empty of substance*”: Patrul Rinpoche’s guru fully understood that everything in samsara is ultimately meaningless. What do “all things in samsara” entail? To worldly people, these things include defeating enemies, protecting family and friends, making money, building a career, and so forth. To spiritual practitioners, they involve actions such as meditating or performing recitations with the aim of being reborn in a higher realm. However, such activities cannot free us from samsara; therefore, they lack true meaning.

“You pursue with great compassion the only goal of benefiting sentient beings”: His guru strived solely for the benefit of all sentient beings, with Mahayana compassion. As reflected in the biography of Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, from his youth until his parinirvana, he dedicated his life to the benefit of others; he consistently prioritized activities that helped sentient beings, showing no concern for personal sacrifice or effort.

“Unattached to samsara or nirvana, you embrace the teachings of the Great Vehicle”: With wisdom, his guru remained unattached to samsara, and with compassion, he was not attached to nirvana. He practiced the six paramitas in accordance with the Great Vehicle.

“Peerless guru, at your feet I bow”: At the feet of his peerless guru, Patrul Rinpoche bows with deep respect, praying for his guru’s blessings so he can soon generate renunciation toward samsara and attain the fruition beyond life and death.

Choktrul Rinpoche, a disciple of Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, suggested that when practicing ngöndro, one must first recite this prayer, then close one’s eyes, put palms together, and pray earnestly:

May my root guru and all lineage masters, buddhas, and bodhisattvas grant me blessings, so I can soon generate the conviction that samsara is devoid of meaning and give rise to a genuine renunciation that sees through the illusions of the world.

After the prayer, one may proceed to meditation.

There is also a prayer to the guru at the beginning of Chapter Two—“The Impermanence of Life.” Therefore, when practicing each of the common preliminaries, you should first recite the corresponding prayer and then practice with focused intent. By doing so, you will receive extraordinary blessings.

Personally, I believe the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas are very important. Without sincere prayer, their blessings may not penetrate us, making it impossible to awaken the wisdom in our mindstream. Although buddhas and bodhisattvas impartially care for all beings with great compassion, it is still essential for us to have faith as the cause and condition to receive their blessings. Otherwise, boundless blessings will not enter our minds without reason. Thus, during our daily practice, we must pray to the guru, buddhas, and bodhisattvas.

Many scholars emphasize only the theoretical aspects of the Dharma and neglect the significance of faith. This is, without a doubt, a deficiency. Therefore, we should integrate theory with genuine practice, thereby incorporating the blessings of the lineage gurus into our minds. Once the blessings have truly merged into our minds, we will become mentally stronger—we will not develop erroneous views—and our practice will become efficient and effective.

2.1.3.1. The Sufferings of Samsara in General

As mentioned earlier, although we have obtained the precious human life with the freedoms and advantages, it will not last forever; ultimately, it will lead to death without a doubt.

Here, Patrul Rinpoche summarizes the content of the first two chapters. As discussed in Chapter One, now that we have this rare and valuable human existence, we must genuinely appreciate it and use it to diligently practice the Dharma. As discussed in Chapter Two, if we were to live for an extended period, it might have been acceptable to delay our practice. However, this human life is as impermanent and illusory as a bubble or a mirage, and it will inevitably end in death. Therefore, before we lose this precious human life, we must seize the opportunity to practice.

As you should know, if a person wants to transcend samsara, they must cut off attachment to this life and future lives. However, many people struggle to let go of fame, wealth, and status in this life. As Lama Tsongkhapa stated,¹ if we effectively practice “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages” and “the impermanence of life,” we can certainly uproot attachment to this life. If we wish to further uproot attachment to future lives, we must practice “the defects of samsara” and “the principle of cause and effect.”

Many people lack the intention to uproot their attachments to this life and future lives. Many practitioners I have met want to meditate effectively and study the Dharma thoroughly, but when asked about their underlying motivation, they often respond with aspirations for happiness in future lives, avoiding a lower

¹ “The freedoms and advantages are rare, and there’s no time to waste—
Reflect on this again and yet again, and dispel attachment to this life.
To dispel attachment to your future lives, contemplate repeatedly
The unfailing effects of karma and the sufferings of samsara.”

Lama Tsongkhapa’s *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, translated by Adam Pearcey, 2006, revised 2012.

rebirth, attaining heaven (similar to believers of other religions), or enjoying pleasures in the Pure Land.

What a pity! You are not a true practitioner if you never contemplate liberation from samsara but only seek happiness and health in this life or enjoyment in the celestial realms of future lives. Therefore, please prioritize liberation from samsara above all else.

During your practice, you should ask yourself, “Am I practicing ngöndro for this life or for a future life? If it is for future lives, is it for happiness in the upper realms or for ultimate liberation from samsara?” This is a crucial question.

We must pray for the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels so that we lose interest in happiness in the good realms and desire only to be freed from the firepit-like three worlds.

The Sutra of Explaining Karmas states that suffering in the three types of existence is as horrifying as poisons, wild beasts, and savages. The sutra asserts that there is nothing in samsara worth clinging to, so we must make every effort to free ourselves from it. While many can discuss “being freed from the three worlds” or “being liberated from the six realms,” it is essential to reflect carefully on what your true practice goal is.

As mentioned in the text, “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages” motivates us to practice, and “the impermanence of life” urges us to practice as soon as possible. So, what is the purpose of the next preliminary practice?

If, after death, we were to end like an extinguished lamp or dried-up water, there would be nothing more to say. However, death does not signify a complete end; rebirth is inevitable. With rebirth, one is bound to the cycle of birth and death.

Therefore, death is not “nothingness,” as proposed by atheists and materialists. If that were the case, then our efforts spent preparing for future lives would be entirely futile. In fact, death is not the ultimate end. We are destined to be reborn and remain in samsara, the unceasing cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Thus, we must understand “the defects of samsara.”

It is crucial to make an effort to cultivate conviction about rebirth; otherwise, many people will remain skeptical. Believing in rebirth may not be an issue for Tibetans, who have received such education since childhood. As some masters have

commented, Tibetans have always been vessels of Mahayana Buddhism, growing up in an environment saturated with Buddhism, which leads to little doubt about rebirth.

In contrast, other ethnic groups around the world differ from Tibetans. Due to the materialistic values they absorb from a young age, they regard rebirth as superstition. Even if they occasionally encounter the Dharma and begin to practice as they grow up, they remain skeptical about rebirth and are not fully convinced of the existence of the god realms and hells.

Regarding this issue, those who have not yet accepted the concept of rebirth must begin with theoretical analysis. They should not feel compelled to accept it blindly simply because “This was said by Buddha Shakyamuni, so I must accept it.” Instead, they should conduct a thorough and careful analysis, striving to accept it through rational exploration.

The concept of rebirth exists in major religions. For example, the *Rigveda*, the oldest canonical text of Hinduism, indicates that after a person dies, the soul will go somewhere. The *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*, the later scriptures of Hinduism, provide clearer and more in-depth discussions on rebirth.

In the West, ancient Greek philosophers also explored the idea of a “soul.” For instance, Plato believed that a person would be reborn based on the virtuous and vicious actions of their previous life.

Before Buddhism was introduced, ancient Chinese primarily adhered to Confucianism and Taoism. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, said:

If we do not understand life, how can we understand death?

He also stated:

Respect ghosts and gods, yet keep them at a distance.

It seems that Confucius acknowledged the existence of rebirth, gods, and ghosts, but he chose to avoid discussing them and maintained a respectful distance. Confucius neither confirmed their existence nor denied it. Some materialists also adopt this agnostic attitude toward rebirth.

From the personal experience of Wang Yangming (1472–1529), a renowned Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Ming dynasty, it seems that Confucianism acknowledges the continuity of lives.

When Wang Yangming was fifty years old, he visited the Jinshan Temple in Jiangsu Province and experienced a sense of déjà vu. He walked around the temple with a monk until they came to a closed and sealed retreat cabin. Feeling as though he had once lived in the cabin, Wang Yangming could not restrain his curiosity and implored the monk to open it.

The monk immediately refused, saying, “This cabin is where one of our old monks passed into parinirvana fifty years ago. His body is enshrined inside. According to his will, nobody is allowed to open the cabin. Please forgive me, but this cabin cannot be opened.”

However, Wang Yangming was determined to look inside, so he pleaded repeatedly, assuring the monk that he would only take a quick look. Eventually, the monk had no choice but to reluctantly open the retreat cabin and let him in.

Wang Yangming then entered the cabin. Sure enough, he saw a deceased old monk with a solemn expression sitting on a cushion. Strangely, the old monk bore a striking resemblance to Wang Yangming himself! When he looked up, he noticed a poem on the wall:

Fifty years later, here comes Wang Yangming.
The one who opens the door is the one who closed it;
After his soul departed, it returns again,
Then he begins to believe in the indestructible body of Chan.²

It turned out that Wang Yangming was the old monk in his previous life.

This is indeed what occurs in samsara. Some individuals are monks in this life but will be householders in the next, and vice versa. The number of our births in the six realms is countless.

Since Confucianism implies the continuity of lives, Confucians do not deny the existence of past and future lives.

Taoism advocates for immortality. Although I have not read its canonical texts on rebirth, I believe such Taoist scriptures do exist. There are many empirical examples of rebirth in Taoism. For instance, Taoism proposes that the Yuan Shen or

² According to Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, the old monk had a vision that Wang Yangming would come to see the body of his past life, which would lead him to develop faith in Chan Buddhism. Through the practice of meditation, the old monk achieved an indestructible body. As a result, his body remained remarkably well-preserved in the cabin even after fifty years.

Yuen Sun is a person's spiritual body, which can exist independently of the physical body. Here is a story about a Taoist master named Li Tieguai. The legend states that Li Tieguai was originally named Li Xuan, who, through practice, attained a state in which his Yuan Shen could freely leave his physical body.

One day, Li told his disciple Yangzi, "I am going to an appointment with the Grand Supreme Elderly Lord. My Yuan Shen will depart, but my physical body will remain here. Please take care of my body. If after seven days my Yuan Shen has not returned, then you may cremate my body. Please remember, it's seven days!"

Then Li sat cross-legged; his Yuan Shen left the body and floated away.

Yangzi followed his teacher's instructions and did not leave Li's body. On the sixth day, Yangzi's uncle arrived, telling him that his mother was seriously ill and wanted to see him one last time. Wailing bitterly, Yangzi pointed at Li's body and said, "My teacher's Yuan Shen is away, and he asked me to take good care of the body for seven days. Six days have passed. Who will watch over his body if I have to leave?" The uncle thought he was speaking nonsense, saying, "How can a person revive after being dead for six days?" He successfully persuaded Yangzi to cremate Li's body.

On the seventh day, Li bid farewell to the Grand Supreme Elderly Lord, who presented Li with a verse that said,

Practice Bigu³ but don't avoid grains;
The chariot is light, and the road is familiar.⁴
You wish to return to your old body,
But you unexpectedly come across a new one.

Li did not understand the secret meaning of the verse. After returning to his cave, he noticed that his physical body was missing. Surprised, he set out to search for it, only to realize that it had been cremated. Li's Yuan Shen had no physical body to inhabit.

Nearby, he found the corpse of a vagabond, so he instinctively placed his Yuan Shen into it. When he stood up and looked at his reflection in the river, he

³ Bigu (pinyin: bigū; Wade-Giles: pi-ku; lit. 'avoiding grains') is a Daoist fasting technique associated with achieving xian "transcendence; immortality."

⁴ This literal translation means that something is easy and familiar, often referring to a task that one has done many times before.

saw himself dressed in rags and using crutches. A handsome young man had been transformed into an unkempt “Li Tieguai” (lit. “Iron Crutch Li”).

In fact, Li’s experience is reminiscent of the practice of forceful projection⁵ in the Tibetan traditions. When Rangjung Dorje, the third Karmapa (the emanation of Avalokiteshvara), passed into parinirvana, he intended to use forceful projection to find a new physical body, allowing him to continue his unfinished Dharma activities. Upon discovering the corpse of a three-year-old boy who had just died, he immediately used forceful projection to transfer his mindstream into the recently deceased body, and then rolled his eyes.

Seeing this, the boy’s mother was horrified, saying, “It is a bad omen for a dead person to be looking at the living.” Then the mother blinded the boy by poking his eyes with a needle. The Karmapa believed that since he was blind, the boy would no longer be a human life endowed with the freedoms and advantages, making it difficult to benefit others. Therefore, he needed to adopt the method of reincarnation to be born again as a child of another family.

Thus, a person’s mindstream, or so-called soul, is continuous, and rebirth does exist. This is not a belief exclusive to Buddhism; other religions, such as Catholicism and Christianity, also acknowledge the continuity of life, advocating that when a person dies, they will go to either heaven or hell. However, these religions do not elaborate on the underlying mechanisms as clearly and thoroughly as Buddhism does. They lack comprehensive analysis on issues such as the causes of rebirth, the possibility of attaining liberation, and more.

Therefore, we Buddhists must understand the existence of past and future lives. Some intellectuals, in particular, may remain skeptical and develop various misconceptions if they do not resolve this issue.

If one has solid evidence and reasoning to prove the existence of rebirth, one must accept it. For example, since childhood, a British man could always recall scenes of Petra, a historic city in southern Jordan, which existed more than two thousand years ago. Later, using the memories of his past life, he was able to help archaeologists find many undiscovered sites.

This is truly remarkable, and there are many similar cases of past-life recollections. We must understand that people neither suddenly come into existence nor

⁵ Forceful projection is one of the Six Yogas of Naropa, with the other five being inner heat, illusory body, clear light, consciousness transference, and bardo yoga.

become nothingness after death. The reason many people think this way is that they have never studied the Dharma and do not comprehend the profound doctrines of Buddhism.

Some members of the sangha with higher education have told me that my teachings on Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro's *The Truth of Life* have greatly benefited them. This is particularly true for monastics who may feel reluctant to express doubts about rebirth in the presence of others. They may feel that, as monks or nuns, dressed in monastic robes and with shaven heads, they are expected to possess a deeper understanding of rebirth.

In fact, some practitioners still have doubts about rebirth, and it is not easy for them to attain accomplishment if they simply put the issue on the back burner. Nevertheless, cultivating conviction in the existence of rebirth is crucial for our Dharma practice. If you do have doubts, you should consult and discuss them with a learned Dharma peer or master so that you can eventually develop a complete understanding and true conviction.

Many people are completely ignorant about past and future lives. This is largely due to their lack of understanding of Buddhism; otherwise, they would see that the teachings on this topic are rich and abundant.

The so-called samsara is like a potter's wheel, a waterwheel in a stream, or a bee trapped in a jar, continuously revolving without end. *The Sutra on the Ocean-Like Concentration of the Visualization of the Buddha* uses the simile of a wheel of fire to describe samsara; *Introduction to the Middle Way* employs the simile of a watermill's wheel; *Dhammapada*, the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, and *The Sutra of Contemplation of the Mind Ground in the Buddha's Life* use the simile of a chariot's wheel; the *Sutra of the Collection of the Original Acts of the Buddha* uses the simile of a fly trapped in a bamboo tube.

When a bee is trapped inside a sealed jar, it can only fly around within that jar. Similarly, whether one is born into a higher realm or falls into a lower realm, they remain trapped within samsara. The upper part of the jar represents the celestial beings and humans of higher realms, while the lower space in the jar symbolizes the three lower realms. It is said in the *Treasury of Abhidharma* that sentient beings in the six realms continuously cycle through existence as a result of their virtuous and non-virtuous actions, which is what we call samsara.

Many practitioners never consider transcending samsara. They recite prayers

and meditate every day, yet they neither abide in emptiness nor engage in practice with bodhicitta. Such practice is tainted by conceptual thoughts. For this reason, the practitioner will wander repeatedly in samsara, sometimes happy and sometimes miserable.

The *Lotus Sutra* states:

Their desires are the cause whereby they fall into the three evil
paths,
Revolving wheel-like through the six realms of existence, and
undergoing every sort of suffering and pain.⁶

This is the nature of samsara. The reason it is called “samsara,” or “the cycle of conditioned existence, birth, and death,” is explained in Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland* with the simile of the wheel of a firebrand,⁷ which has no beginning, middle, or end. You will understand its cyclical nature when studying the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination.

Therefore, we must transcend samsara. It is just like this: even if a prisoner is well-fed and well-clothed, they are still in a prison, hoping for liberation one day. Similarly, although we have food and clothing and our living conditions are improving, life’s nature is still suffering, so each of us should aspire to attain liberation. Otherwise, we cannot be considered true practitioners.

Since beginningless time, we have been drifting in this cyclical existence. All beings, without exception, have been each other’s parents, friends, enemies, or ordinary individuals at some point.

The *Sutra of the Great Assembly* states:

There is not a single living being who has not been my parent.

The *Brahma’s Net Sutra* states:

All men have been my fathers, and all women have been my

⁶ Translated by Burton Watson.

⁷ “With these three pathways mutually causing each other
Without a beginning, a middle, or an end,
This wheel of cyclic existence
Turns like the wheel of a firebrand.”

Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion, 2007, page 98.

mothers.

There is substantial scriptural evidence from the Buddha's teachings. Schools of Tibetan Buddhism, such as Kadampa, Gelug, and Nyingma, all emphasize that all sentient beings have been our parents, and we should contemplate this in practices including meditating on the defects of samsara and cultivating bodhicitta. This is not merely something specific to Buddhism or simply a folk tale. Please ensure you develop a thorough understanding and conviction about rebirth.

In sutras such as *Jataka Stories of the Bodhisattva*, *Jataka Tales*, and the *Sutra of the Collection of the Six Perfections*, the Buddha states that he used to be a brahmin or a businessman in his causal stage. The Buddha is a truthful speaker who never lies. Since the Buddha has been reborn as beings with various identities in samsara, it follows that the same applies to us disciples. We may not know what we were in previous lives, but it is certain that samsara and rebirth exist.

If we imagine molding all the earth into small balls the size of jujube seeds and counting as we say, "This being's mother is this one, that being's mother is that one," even when we run out of the earth balls, the number of times each being has been a mother to one another would still not be exhausted. This is stated in the sutras. As Nagarjuna says in *Letter to a Friend*:

We would run out of earth trying to count our mothers
With balls of clay the size of juniper berries.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* also discusses something similar. If possible, you should make time to read some sutras of Mahayana Buddhism and learn more about the similes and content.

All sentient beings, from the beginningless past until now, have experienced rebirth in this manner without exception. During this time, countless heads and limbs have been severed due to greed and desire. If we were to gather all the limbs of those who have been reborn as small creatures like ants, they would surely surpass Mount Meru in height. *Samyukta Agama*, or *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, states:

The heap of bones one person leaves behind
With the passing of a single aeon
Would form a heap as high as a mountain,

So said the Great Sage.
This is declared to be as massive
As the tall Vepulla Mountain
Standing north of Vulture Peak
In the Magadhan mountain range.⁸

Beset by hunger and cold, with no food in their mouths and no clothing on their backs, the tears shed in anguish from the suffering of thirst and exposure, if collected before they dried up, would certainly far exceed all the waters of the oceans. Some female practitioners tend to cry easily, and many of them are aware that they have cried too much. If their tears were gathered together, they would at least fill up a bucket, if not a river or an ocean. Even the amount of molten copper and iron one has swallowed while in the hell realm would surpass the waters of the four great oceans combined.

Therefore, none of us has anything to be arrogant about. No matter how knowledgeable, wealthy, or highly ranked you may be, your arrogance will quickly diminish when you consider that you have experienced various forms of existence in previous lives. Even if you are a prominent political leader, if you do not believe in the law of karma and engage in harmful actions, you may find yourself reborn as a small insect in your next life, subject to being trampled by others.

It is essential to reflect deeply on these profound principles. On the surface, they may seem simple, but it is crucial for a practitioner to develop a thorough understanding of them. If you are truly convinced, then whenever you contemplate the sufferings of samsara, you will undoubtedly feel a sense of fear.

Aryadeva also says:

If childish people ever perceived
The suffering of cyclic existence,
At that moment both their mind
[And body] would completely fail.⁹

If ordinary people were to perceive the sufferings of birth and death in samsara

⁸ *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Samyutta Nikaya, Wisdom Publications, 2000.

⁹ Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

as a sublime being does, their minds and bodies would collapse upon witnessing these sufferings, as they cannot bear the truth.

However, many of us not only struggle with the concept of “throughout beginningless samsara until now,” but we also find it difficult to accept the simple idea that “after we die, we will experience either joy or pain in the next life as a result of our past actions.” Non-Buddhists can be excused for not believing this, but it is a great pity if Buddhists lack the right view and understanding.

Although this is the way things are, all beings still bound to samsara and unable to generate a fleeting desire to escape will inevitably suffer even more in the endless cycle of rebirth.

Even if one relies on the slight merits derived from virtuous actions to attain a body like that of Brahma or Indra, characterized by long life, abundant wealth, grandeur, and striking appearance, one ultimately cannot escape death. After death, one will still have to endure the tragic suffering of the lower realms. Thus, those who temporarily possess insignificant comforts like wealth, health, and happiness will, within a few years, months, or even just a few days, find themselves destitute and pitiable or, unwillingly, must experience the unbearable pain of the lower realms as the fruits of their good karma are exhausted.

If we deeply contemplate the unbearable sufferings in samsara, we will suddenly realize, “Oh, so the objects to which people cling so greedily are nothing more than this!” Temporary happiness and joy at present are akin to suddenly waking from a dream during a time of prosperity. What is the meaning in this happiness and joy? In *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, it states:

Those who in this present life
Have high and pleasing status, wealth untold,
But dying, they must suffer helpless poverty
And be the slaves of slaves.
Their wealth was but a dream and vanished when they woke.¹⁰

Even if we become billionaires or the most famous people in this life, once our five aggregates dissolve and we must leave this world, do we retain our wealth and fame? Of course not, as stated in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*:

¹⁰ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

Remember that your body, wealth, family, friends,
and experiences in this life will all be left behind
as you go forth alone with no one to accompany you.
It is time to seek a refuge and protector to be with you then.¹¹

When I am both physically and mentally relaxed, I often reflect on these truths repeatedly and remind myself, “Every day, I cling to so many things. However, when I die, only the virtuous deeds I have done will be of any assistance. Both good and bad karma will closely follow me.” The unceasing cycles of birth and death in samsara are truly terrifying! Many people go through life without contemplating the nature of samsara and instead indulge in meaningless distractions day after day. But if they truly reflect on it, it becomes clear that they are like yaks in a slaughterhouse, unaware of the imminent death and still clinging to temporary happiness within the pen. This clinging results in an indefinite delay of their liberation. As stated in the *Sutra of Contemplation of the Mind Ground in the Buddha’s Life*:

Sentient beings are trapped in the ocean of birth and death,
Cycling through the five realms¹² with no escape in sight.

Therefore, while we have this precious human life and have encountered the supreme Dharma of liberation, we should seize the opportunity firmly, like a blind man grasping an elephant’s tail. We should make a heartfelt aspiration: “From now on, I will pursue liberation wholeheartedly, so I will not get entrapped in samsara anymore. Otherwise, it would be too frightening!”

You should have such an aspiration. Those who seem happy and joyful at the moment due to a bit of good karma will, once that karma is exhausted, have no moment to linger. Even the kings of the gods, seated on their splendid thrones and indulging in sensual pleasures and boundless joys, will, at the end of their lifespan, in the blink of an eye, fall headfirst into hell and experience suffering on the blazing iron ground.

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

When celestial beings are about to exhaust their lifespan,

¹¹ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 253.

¹² When described as five realms instead of six realms, the god realm and demi-god realm constitute a single realm.

Great distress arises in their minds;
 The myriad sufferings endured by hell beings
 Are not even one-sixteenth of theirs.

Even the gods of the sun and moon,¹³ who can illuminate all four continents of the world, will eventually experience rebirth in a place so dark that one cannot see their own hand.

Beings who now inhabit the depths of the ocean or the heights of mountains must have once been celestial beings radiating brilliance in their previous lives. According to some of the Buddha's teachings, those who slander the Dharma, destroy Buddhist scriptures, and obstruct the teachings will be reborn in particularly dark and dreadful places in their next lives.

As you can see, the apparent happiness in samsara is unreliable and cannot be trusted.

We should all acknowledge that the six realms of samsara do exist. Although at the ultimate level nothing exists inherently, at the relative level everything exists without deception. Just as we cannot directly see Canada and America at this moment, it does not mean these two countries do not exist. Similarly, although we cannot directly see the realms of hungry ghosts, hells, heavens, form realms, and formless realms with our naked eyes, much evidence supports their existence.

The seemingly plausible pleasures of samsara are fundamentally unreliable. We must resolve to dedicate ourselves fully in this very life to escaping the vast ocean of suffering in samsara and attaining the ultimate, lasting bliss of perfect Buddhahood.

Many of you have been here for years, seemingly practicing the Dharma day and night, but have you ever asked yourself this question: "Am I truly pursuing liberation?" Some lay practitioners have been studying the Dharma for over twenty years, but have you checked whether it is for the purpose of liberation? This is a very important question, and everyone should reflect on it.

Of course, it is not enough to merely talk about these concepts; we must contemplate the corresponding teachings carefully. When practicing the defects of samsara, as suggested in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, we should

¹³ The sun and the moon are considered celestial beings, so they also have their times of downfall.

use the proper methods for the beginning, the main part, and the conclusion of the practice.

To summarize, we should understand: first, that the six realms in samsara do exist; second, that we must be liberated from these six realms. These are the two points I have addressed in today's teaching. If you have doubts about them, you should engage in discussion and debate during your hearing and contemplation.

If you do not have doubts and truly believe that “samsara exists and there is no pleasure in it, so I must attain liberation,” practicing with this mindset holds great power—it will quickly sever your attachment to both this life and future lives. Otherwise, if we cling to wealth and fame in this life or to a better rebirth in the next, any Dharma practice we undertake will yield no success. Therefore, I hope you will diligently apply these teachings in practice so that true renunciation will soon arise in your mind.



Lesson 41

“These eight hells lie one above the other ... it is always essential to give rise to bodhicitta.” [page 63–66]

There are a total of six chapters in Part One—the common preliminaries—of the text. We are now covering Chapter Three on the Defects of Samsara. We have completed the general introduction; now let’s proceed to the detailed explanations:

2.1.3.2. The Particular Sufferings Experienced by the Beings of the Six Realms

2.1.3.2.1. The Eighteen Hells

There are various descriptions of hell in the sutras and shastras. For example, the *Treatise on the Foundation for Yoga Practitioners* in the fourth volume lists eight hot hells, each surrounded by sixteen smaller hells, totaling 136 hells.

The *Dirghagama* also states that each of the eight hot hells is connected to sixteen smaller hells, including the hell of black sand, the hell of wolves, the hell of pus and blood, and others. The *Ekottaragama Sutra* and the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* also enumerate eight hot hells, but the names and corresponding sufferings vary significantly.

The descriptions of most hells are quite similar across texts of Tibetan Buddhism, but the accounts of journeys to hell by some revered masters of Chinese

Buddhism differ in terms of names and associated sufferings. Regarding this discrepancy, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche stated:

Actually, hells are projections of beings' minds. Since beings' minds vary greatly, hells differ correspondingly. Therefore, the classification of hells is not limited to just the eight hot and eight cold ones.

Thus, it is important to understand that different descriptions of hell in various scriptures correspond to the karmic consequences of different beings. Here, we are simply providing a general overview of the sufferings in hell.

2.1.3.2.1.1. The Eight Hot Hells

What are the characteristics of the eight hot hells? According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and the *Treatise on the Foundation for Yoga Practitioners*, these eight hells are stacked vertically, like the floors of a building, beginning with the Reviving Hell at the top and descending to the Hell of Ultimate Torment at the very bottom. In each hell, the ground and surrounding area resemble the scorching white-hot iron of a blacksmith's forge—there is absolutely no safe place to step. Everywhere is an unbearably hot expanse of blazing flames.

[Unlike on earth, where the ground does not burn even at very high temperatures, there is no comfortable place to stay in the hells.]

Regarding hells, I hope you will first acknowledge that the Buddha's vajra words are free from deception. Otherwise, it may be difficult for you to believe in the lifespans of hell beings and the extent of their suffering. Ordinary people often have doubts about things we cannot directly see or experience. In such cases, we must rely on scriptural authority, trusting that the vajra words of the Buddha and the sublime masters are absolutely reliable.

Even though our spiritual wisdom has not matured enough for us to directly perceive hells, or we cannot physically visit hell to experience the suffering, or even if we experienced hells in previous lives but do not remember them in this life, we should still have conviction that the teachings on hells are completely credible. Having such faith and trust is very important.

Take a kindergarten child, for example. When his teacher describes how dreadful a prison is, due to his lack of life experience, the child may think it is just

a folk tale. He may not be able to comprehend that people who break the law can be sentenced to death or life imprisonment.

[Recently, a person told me that he once broke the law and was imprisoned. According to him, the prison was foul-smelling—more than thirty prisoners were crammed into one cell, and their waste was left beside them for days. They were not fed for three or four days, making the situation extremely unbearable.

A few days later, they were taken outside and beaten one by one. Although they were badly injured, they felt somewhat relieved because they could at least breathe fresh air outside. The prison cell was stifling, with only a small opening in the door for ventilation and light. Consequently, everyone wanted to occupy the spot closest to the door, leading to brutal fights among cellmates over that coveted position, creating a horrifying scene.

Additionally, a man in his seventies once recounted the excruciating suffering he endured in prison during the 1950s.]

When a child grows up, he breaks the law and is imprisoned. Then, he realizes, “Oh, so what my teacher told me is true!”

In the same way, we are currently quite narrow-minded, making it difficult for us to fully grasp the suffering in hell as described in the sutras or taught by eminent masters. We also find the duration of suffering for hell beings to be unfathomable. However, accounts of hell are absolutely true, and once a person truly experiences hell, it will be too late to regret their actions.

Therefore, by meditating on the sufferings of samsara, we should develop a sense of horror toward hell. We will then vow never to commit negative actions, as it would be dreadful to end up in hell. Such a determination must arise through practice.

Many people pursue Dharma solely for the sake of health, wealth, or promotions. Few study Dharma to avoid rebirth in hell. Especially some Buddhists pay lip service to the existence of hell, but are they truly afraid of it? This may require careful reflection.

Practitioners and eminent masters of the older generation were so fearful of falling into hell that they contemplated it day and night. As some of you senior Dharma fellows may recall, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often mentioned that he sometimes struggled to fall asleep at night out of fear of the possibility of ending up in hell.

Many of us are not like this. We often lose sleep over trivial matters such as food or accommodation, rarely out of fear of descending into lower realms. This indicates that while we may talk about believing in the law of karma, we have not yet fully developed unwavering conviction. Therefore, we still need to make sincere efforts in this regard.

2.1.3.2.1.1.1. The Reviving Hell

Here, on the glowing metal ground covered with burning embers, countless beings, as numerous as snowflakes in a blizzard, are drawn together by the force of their karma. Their causal actions, driven by hatred, produce results equal in status to their causes. This makes them perceive one another as sworn enemies, igniting a relentless conflict among them.

These hell beings do not require an arsenal of weapons, nor do they need a truck to deliver them. As mentioned in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, they can manifest weapons in their hands simply by thinking about them, brought forth by the power of their karma.¹⁴

Wielding inconceivable weapons—a phantom armory forged by their karma—they battle until none are left alive. It would be acceptable if they perished after their death; however, the reality is not so simple.

At that moment, a voice from the sky commands, “Revive!” Instantly, they return to life and resume fighting, enduring cycles of suffering as they repeatedly die and are revived.

It is stated in some sutras that beings in hell undergo “ten thousand births and ten thousand deaths within a single day and night.” In comparison, we humans are incredibly fortunate as we do not have to endure this harrowing cycle within twenty-four hours. When a person commits suicide out of great pain, the pain is temporarily alleviated upon death.¹⁵ However, due to their karmic force, beings

¹⁴ The hellish instruments to torture living beings—
Who invented them for such intent?
Who has forged this burning iron ground;
Whence have all these demon-women sprung?
All are but the offspring of the sinful mind,
This the mighty Sage has said.

Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, page 102.

¹⁵ From a Buddhist perspective, committing suicide does not eliminate suffering. Instead,

in hell are immediately revived after death and continue to experience unending suffering.

What causes such outcomes? Primarily, it is due to negative actions such as breaking vows and killing. Additionally, according to the *Sutra of Individual Liberation*, if minor offenses of misdeeds are not properly repented, they will ultimately lead to rebirth in the Reviving Hell.

How long do they remain in that realm? In the god realm of the Four Great Kings, fifty human years are equivalent to a single day. Thirty of these days make a month, and twelve months constitute a year. Five hundred such years equal one day in the Reviving Hell, where twelve months, each consisting of thirty days, comprise a year. They endure suffering there for five hundred of those years. If measured by human time, that amounts to 1.62 trillion years.

Such a long duration is beyond our imagination. While it may be difficult for some to accept, we must believe it; otherwise, as Chagme Rinpoche states in *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*:

When told of virtue's good, the harms of evil,
And sufferings and lifespans in the hells,
To think that they are not true but are just tales
Is graver karma than the heinous acts,
So I confess inevitable bad karmas.¹⁶

Thus, if we consider the suffering and lifespans in the hells to be falsehoods, we must sincerely confess this fault.

2.1.3.2.1.1.2. The Black-Line Hell

Here, Yama's henchmen lay their victims on a ground of burning metal like so many firebrands. They mark the victims' bodies with black lines—four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on—serving as guides for cutting them apart with burning saws. Once the bodies are severed into pieces, they miraculously become whole again, only to be hacked apart and chopped up repeatedly.

it results in being reborn as a preta, who then experiences the agony of suicide repeatedly. Rather than achieving rebirth in a higher realm, individuals who take their own lives will continue to descend into even lower realms. Therefore, suicide is considered an extremely ignorant action.

¹⁶ Translated by Khenpo David Karma Choephel.

If a human body is cut in half at the waist, it cannot immediately become whole again. However, sentient beings possess unimaginable karmic forces. For instance, when an earthworm is split in two, one-half—the one with the brain—typically grows into a complete worm. Beings in the Black-Line Hell have similar experiences due to their karma.

What leads to rebirth in the Black-Line Hell? The *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara* states that harming and deceiving parents, family, friends, and followers results in rebirth in the Black-Line Hell. Upon closer examination, we may realize that we have committed many such negative actions that could lead to rebirth in this hell. If we fail to confess now, we can only imagine what awaits us after death. Therefore, we should ensure that we confess our misdeeds whenever we have the opportunity.

In terms of their lifespan in that realm, one day for the gods in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three is equivalent to a hundred human years, while a thousand years in that heaven equates to just one day in the Black-Line Hell. Measured by this scale, beings in this hell endure a lifespan of a thousand years. If measured in human time, it would amount to over twelve trillion years.

Beings in this hell take an extraordinarily long time to fully exhaust their karmas if no deliverance is performed for them. However, if someone performs deliverance for them, they may quickly attain liberation. In her *Journey to Hells*, Dakini Lingza Chökyi noted that when she visited the hells and recited the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, some beings experienced less suffering, some left the hells, and some were even reborn directly into the Land of Great Bliss.

She also observed that when someone offered deliverance services for the deceased—for example, when children requested the sangha to recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara for their departed parents—even if the deceased continued to suffer in hell, their karmic effects would immediately be reduced. As a result, they may regain a human rebirth or even attain direct rebirth in the Pure Land. There are various possible outcomes.

Therefore, when our parents, family, and friends pass away, we should, whenever possible, provide the names of the deceased to the sangha and request recitation services for them.

Of course, how much you offer for the service is entirely up to you. Someone tried to bargain with the sangha members at a monastery, saying, “I am paying

you 1,000 yuan, so can you recite the mantra one million times? Maybe you could give me a discount?” Others even remarked, “So-and-so temple charges less for one hundred million repetitions of the mani mantra. I will send my money there instead.” They adopt a “business” mindset, but it is important to note that cheaper does not necessarily equate to better service.

In fact, as long as you wish to request a recitation service for the deceased, after receiving guidance on which prayers or rituals to recite through divination or analysis, you may offer a donation to the sangha as you see fit, as long as there is no sense of stinginess. This will suffice. Alternatively, if possible, you may invite the sangha to perform deliverance for all beings in the six realms, especially those in hell, hoping they can soon experience less suffering. Holding such an aspiration in mind will make your Dharma activity more effective and help you accumulate more merit.

Compared to the sufferings experienced by beings in hell, those faced by us humans are truly insignificant. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted a teaching from Mipham Rinpoche, stating:

If a spark were to fall on you, you would feel unimaginable pain.
How, then, could you endure being placed on scorching metal and
engulfed in the intense flames of hell in the future?

Sometimes we feel miserable if we do not eat all day or when the weather is too hot. But compared to hell, the human world is almost a paradise.

A person recently complained to me, “I suffer so much! I feel like I am living in hell. It would be better if I died and fell into hell sooner!” Such a statement indicates he does not believe in the law of karma at all. In fact, no matter how tortured we feel in this human world, the pain experienced by humans is absolutely not a fraction of the smallest pain in the hell realm.

Letter to a Friend says,

For one whole day on Earth three hundred darts might strike
you hard and cause you grievous pain, but that could never
match a fraction of the smallest pain in hell.¹⁷

¹⁷ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

If you believe in cause and effect, you should understand that although samsara is full of suffering and there is little happiness in the human realm, compared to hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals, humans experience more joy and less suffering.

This afternoon, while I was reading, my body was in great pain. Later, I reminded myself that the pain of sickness I felt was nothing compared to the suffering that hell beings endure. At this very moment, millions of hell beings are experiencing excruciating torment. Therefore, we should always dedicate our merit to all these beings, regardless of whether we are in pain or joy.

2.1.3.2.1.1.3. The Rounding-Up and Crushing Hell

In this hell, countless beings are cast into iron mortars as vast as the entire valley. The henchmen of Yama, the Lord of Death, wield massive hammers of red-hot metal as colossal as Mount Meru, swinging them before mercilessly crushing their victims. All beings weep and wail as they die in unimaginable agony, experiencing the pain of their breath dissipating and an overwhelming state of terror. Yet, as soon as the hammers are lifted, they are revived, only to endure the same horrifying torment repeatedly. In this hell, beings endure constant suffering day and night, with no time for meals or breaks. There is nothing I can do if you do not believe this. But if you do believe it, you should ask yourself, “Do I want to be such a being in hell in my future life?”

At times, the mountains surrounding the valley transform into the heads of stags, deer, goats, rams, and other animals that the hell beings had killed in their previous lives. The heads of these animals clash violently, their horns emitting flames, while the countless hell beings drawn there by their karma are crushed to death in the chaos. Yet, as the mountains pull apart, the beings are revived—only to be crushed again in an endless cycle.

What causes rebirth in the Rounding-Up and Crushing Hell? The *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara* states that those who kill pigs, sheep, rabbits, and other animals will be reborn in this hell. Therefore, we must be mindful of our body, speech, and mind and refrain from misdeeds.

There is a story in the *Vinaya* about a bhikkhu who could remember his past lives. He recalled suffering in hells for the past five hundred lifetimes. Whenever he remembered scenes from his past, he would be so terrified that all his pores bled, dyeing his monastic robes red.

In response, the Buddha exempted him and other bhikkhus like him from wearing single-colored robes. The bhikkhu could then wear multicolored monastic robes. He also had to bathe several times a day; otherwise, his body and clothes would be covered in blood, preventing him from living normally. Later, this bhikkhu practiced diligently and eventually attained arhathood.

If we remembered the sufferings we experienced in hells or directly witnessed them through clairvoyance, we would not waste our days. We would not intentionally commit misdeeds such as killing while fully aware of the consequences. It is because of our ignorance—not understanding rebirth and not believing in the law of karma—that we engage in many terrible wrongdoings without realizing it.

If a person grows up in a Buddhist culture, such as Tibetan or Bhutanese, they will at least believe in the law of karma. In contrast, if a person grows up in an atheist culture, they may easily develop misconceptions about the existence of hells, viewing them as mere folktales or fabricated stories.

Therefore, when you hold such a misconception, you might ask yourself, “Should I trust my own fabricated thoughts? Hells do exist, as taught by the Buddha—the ultimate truth-teller—and are validated by countless eminent masters. So why rely on the views of an ordinary person like myself, who is mired in ignorance?” It is better to be self-critical and self-reflective in this manner.

Two hundred human years equal one day for the gods of the Heaven Without Fighting. Two thousand years for those gods correspond to one day in the Rounding-Up and Crushing Hell, where the hell beings live for two thousand years. If measured in human time, this would amount to approximately 103 trillion years.

2.1.3.2.1.1.4. The Howling Hell

Beings in this hell endure torment as they are trapped inside buildings of blazing, red-hot metal with no way out. Their screams and cries echo with despair, as they feel there is no hope of escape.

What causes rebirth in the Howling Hell? According to the *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara*, engaging in negative actions, speech, and thoughts—particularly sowing discord to openly or secretly separate others—results in being reborn in this hell.

It is, in fact, very easy to commit such misdeeds, so we must sincerely confess.

Otherwise, when considering the causes of rebirth in hell, we may feel hopeless, as most of us have committed far too many misdeeds. Therefore, to avoid rebirth in hell, we must make great efforts to confess as much as possible before our deaths.

Four hundred human years correspond to one day in the Joyous Realm where the gods reside. Four thousand years in that god realm equal one day in the Howling Hell, where beings live for four thousand years. If measured in human time, this would amount to about eighty-three quintillion years.

2.1.3.2.1.1.5. The Great Howling Hell

A massive legion of Yama's henchmen, armed and menacing, forces countless victims into blazing metal enclosures with double walls. They mercilessly strike them with hammers and other weapons. The inner and outer doors are sealed with molten metal, and the hell beings scream in agony, realizing that even if they manage to escape through the first door, the second will remain an insurmountable barrier.

[The metal sheds have double walls in this hell, which differs somewhat from the buildings in the Howling Hell. Modern prisons might follow a similar rationale by placing individuals who commit more serious crimes in more horrific cells.]

Indeed, some individuals have relevant experiences that prove the true existence of hell. For example, Srana frequently visited hell through his clairvoyance, while the "Daughter" of Vallabha, despite lacking clairvoyance, witnessed scenes of hell while alive due to his karmic influences. Those with special karma can indeed see or feel the hells.

Here is a story from *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*:

A brahmin was defeated by a monk named Bhadraruci ("Friendly Affection") in a debate. Enraged, he began to slander Mahayana Buddhism and belittle past sublime masters. Before he finished speaking, the ground cracked open, and he fell alive into the crevice. The very site remains to this day.

There is a similar story in the *Dharma History* by *Shechen Gyaltsab*:

A Geshe living near Lhasa, due to the karmas of his previous lives, greatly slandered the Great Perfection of Nyingma and smashed statues of Padmasambhava. Later, this Geshe also fell alive into hell.

According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, there are indeed hells beneath the

ground of Jambudvīpa, starting with the Reviving Hells and extending downward to the Hell of Ultimate Torment. When beings commit extremely severe negative actions, they can fall directly into a hell. As recorded in the sutras, when certain Indian tirthikas with erroneous views committed great misdeeds, the ground split open, and they fell into the hells. Many such occurrences have taken place.

Many people today are skeptical about what is written in the sutras. It is only when there is scientific evidence or a witness's testimony that they begin to believe, even slightly. In fact, evidence-based belief is not the only approach, as the sutras do not state that everyone can see the hells.

Recently, a lay practitioner, whom I believe has attained spiritual realization, told me, "We can all feel the sufferings of humans and animals mentioned in Buddhist scriptures. Even though we cannot directly see the sufferings of hungry ghosts and hell beings, they must exist because the Buddha said so. The Buddha described the sufferings in the human realm with such accuracy and provided detailed explanations of birth, old age, sickness, and death that even today, scientists and medical experts may not surpass the Buddha in the precision of their descriptions."

An eminent master once said, "Science may not clearly distinguish between valid and invalid cognition, nor may it truly study the subcategories of mental states such as greed, anger, and more."

Indeed, the Buddha accurately described the sufferings of humans with great depth. Thus, his descriptions of the sufferings of hell beings must also be accurate. Therefore, it is better for people to dispel their doubts about the existence of hells and become aware of the horrors within them. This awareness will motivate them to confess, purify their past misdeeds, and become true practitioners in the second half of their lives.

I have heard that many Dharma practitioners have recently vowed to become true practitioners, and I believe their commitment is very necessary. After receiving teachings, we should apply them to transform our lives. Ordinary individuals must have committed misdeeds that could lead to rebirth in hell, and if we don't confess now, when will we?

So, what leads to rebirth in the Great Howling Hell? The *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara* states that stealing goods belonging to the Three Jewels of the

Buddha, the Dharma, and the sangha can result in rebirth in this hell. Therefore, we must handle those belongings appropriately in our daily lives.

Eight hundred human years equals one day in the Paradise of Joyful Magic. Eight thousand years in this god realm correspond to one day in the Great Howling Hell. The hell beings live for eight thousand years. If measured in human time, that would be approximately 663 quintillion years.

2.1.3.2.1.1.6. The Heating Hell

In this hell realm, countless beings endure torment as they are boiled in enormous iron cauldrons, each as vast as the entire cosmos of a billion worlds, filled with molten bronze. Whenever they rise to the surface, some workers seize them with iron hooks and strike their heads with hammers, occasionally rendering them unconscious. For these beings, their only sense of relief—what they perceive as happiness—comes during these brief moments of unconsciousness when the pain subsides. Otherwise, they endure relentless and excruciating suffering. If a human is beaten until they faint, they will feel immense pain upon regaining consciousness, whereas a being in hell perceives the same situation as a rare moment of happiness.

Then, what causes rebirth in the Heating Hell? The *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara* states that those who set fire to mountains, forests, houses, grasslands, and even living beings will be reborn in this hell.

Sixteen hundred human years correspond to one day in the god realm known as the Emanations of Others. Sixteen thousand years in this god realm equal one day in the Heating Hell, where the hell beings endure for sixteen thousand of those years. If measured in human time, this would amount to approximately 5,308 quintillion years.

2.1.3.2.1.1.7. The Intense Heating Hell

The beings in this hell are confined within burning metal houses, where Yama's henchmen torment them by impaling red-hot iron tridents through their heels and anuses, with the prongs piercing their shoulders and emerging from the tops of their heads. Simultaneously, their bodies are enveloped in searing sheets of metal. The agony they endure is unimaginable!

What causes rebirth in the Intense Heating Hell? The *Sutra of the Six Realms*

of *Samsara* states: Those who slander others without cause or out of resentment will fall into this hell.

Beings in this hell have a lifespan of half an intermediate kalpa, a duration that is beyond measurement in human years.

2.1.3.2.1.1.8. The Hell of Ultimate Torment

This colossal structure of searing metal is encircled by the sixteen neighboring hells. Within it, Yama's henchmen hurl countless beings into the heart of a mountain made of molten iron, glowing like burning embers. Using bellows crafted from tiger and leopard skin, they intensify the flames until the victims' bodies and the fire become completely indistinguishable.

[In ancient times, Tibetans used bellows to stoke fires. I am not sure whether "bellows" are also mentioned in sutras or shastras. Here, Patrul Rinpoche describes the situation in this hell, likely by comparing it to Tibetans making fires. As Gendün Chöphel said, all phenomena in hell are subject to the beings' own karma. For example, if a being was Chinese before being reborn in hell, Yama's henchmen may threaten and scare them in Chinese; if the being belonged to a specific ethnic group, then communication will be in the language of that group; if the being was an animal, then communication will take on an animal form.

The same concept applies to the appearances of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Since Buddha Shakyamuni was born in India, the adornments of his sambhogakaya form reflect the attire of an Indian king. Had the Buddha been born as a Chinese or a Tibetan, the adornments would have been in the local attire. Therefore, Yama's henchmen, as well as buddhas and bodhisattvas, have different appearances in front of different beings.]

The suffering of these hell beings is immense. Beyond their cries of anguish, there is no sign of tangible bodies. They yearn endlessly to escape, but freedom remains out of reach. Occasionally, a brief opening in the fire gives them hope of escape, but they are struck down by workers wielding spears, clubs, hammers, and other weapons. They must endure all the torments of the seven preceding hells, including having molten bronze poured into their mouths.

As stated in Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*:

Of all the forms of happiness there are,

The Lord is bliss where craving's fully spent.
 So too, of all the misery there is,
 The pain in Torment Unsurpassed is worst.¹⁸

It is called the Hell of Ultimate Torment because no suffering elsewhere could surpass its severity. There are also other explanations. First, it refers to the fact that the excruciating pain never ends, and the beings in this hell continuously experience it without interruption. Second, those who have committed the corresponding misdeeds will fall directly into this hell, without passing through an intermediate stage.

The lifespan of beings in this hell spans an entire intermediate kalpa.

It is the hell designated for those who have committed the five crimes with immediate retribution,¹⁹ as well as for tantric practitioners who harbor negative views toward the Vajra Master.²⁰ No other actions can lead to rebirth here.

According to the *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara*, those who kill their parent or a teacher will be reborn in the Hell of Ultimate Torments. Other Buddhist scriptures state that misdeeds such as breaking the root samayas, holding grudges, and initiating conflicts against vajra brothers and sisters, if not purified, are serious offenses akin to crimes with immediate retribution.

It is very rare for a Buddhist to kill a parent or an arhat in this life. However, it is possible for a Buddhist to break the root samaya by engaging in other severe negative actions. For example, someone who has taken the tantric path may receive empowerment and Vajrayana teachings from one guru today and another guru on a different day, but in the end, this person slanders the vajra gurus. Such an action is utterly appalling.

In some cases, the issue arises from the “guru,” who may not be qualified to

¹⁸ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kanguyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

¹⁹ Five crimes with immediate retribution (Skt. pañcānantarīya; Tib. མཚན་མས་མེད་པ་ལྔ་, tsammpenga, Wyl. mtshams med pa lnga):

- 1) killing one's father
- 2) killing one's mother
- 3) killing an arhat
- 4) maliciously drawing blood from the body of a tathagata
- 5) creating a schism in the sangha (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

²⁰ According to Khenpo Sodargye's teachings, the term “Vajra Master” specifically refers to a teacher who has bestowed upon us one or more of the following three acts of kindness: empowerment, pith instructions, and tantra transmission.

give tantra transmissions and empowerments but does so to achieve personal goals through deception.

At times, however, the problem lies with the disciple. For instance, if the qualified teacher does not publicly praise him, or if he cannot accept the teacher's behavior due to his own deep-rooted misconceptions, the disciple may begin to slander the guru carelessly. Such a disciple not only develops incorrect views but also influences others to form negative opinions about the teacher. As a result, unless he confesses sincerely, he will undoubtedly fall into the Hell of Ultimate Torment in the next life.

Therefore, it is quite easy to commit wrongdoings. If an individual does not confess them properly, the Hell of Ultimate Torment is not far away.

Recently, we studied the chapter on the impermanence of life; we never know if we will die in one hundred years, fifty years, or even tomorrow. We are living a happy life today in the realm of humans, but whether we might fall into the Hell of Ultimate Torment in a day or a month to experience infinite pains is hard to say.

Therefore, we must always remain mindful and vigilant, doing our best to avoid misdeeds such as slandering and deceiving others while engaging in wholesome actions as much as possible. Meanwhile, for the rest of this life, we should diligently recite the Vajrasattva mantra and confess all our misdeeds—whether we remember them or not—in the presence of Vajrasattva and other buddhas or bodhisattvas whom we visualize. Otherwise, we can easily fall into hell if the seeds of our negative karma are not destroyed.

Therefore, when meditating on the “defects of samsara,” we must have complete conviction in the corresponding teachings. With this conviction, we will establish a solid foundation through preliminary practices, making it more promising as we proceed to the practice of tantric pith instructions. Otherwise, even if we claim to have attained realization of the Great Perfection, if we have not purified the negative karma stored in our *alaya*, the all-ground consciousness, then at the moment of death, we may directly fall into the hell realm without even having the time to apply the pith instructions of the Great Perfection for liberation. Isn't that self-defeating? Therefore, each of us must be very careful about this issue.



Lesson 42

“Around the Hell of Ultimate Torment, ... with the methods for the beginning, the main part and the conclusion.”
[page 66–68]

We are currently studying the specific sufferings experienced by beings in hell. We have examined the eight hot hells, and today we will proceed to the neighboring hells.

2.1.3.2.1.2. The Neighboring Hells²¹

The neighboring hells, in Tibetan, refer to the subsidiary hells surrounding the Hell of Ultimate Torment. In some texts of Chinese Buddhism, they are translated as “Youzeng Hells,” which literally means “the Hells of Wandering and Increasing.” This indicates that when beings emerge from the Hell of Ultimate Torment or the Eight Hot Hells, they will wander here and endure further torment.

Surrounding the Hell of Ultimate Torment, each of the four cardinal directions features a ditch filled with burning embers, a marsh of decaying corpses, a plain covered with sharp weapons, and a forest of trees with razor-sharp leaves. Each direction—north, south, east, and west—contains one of these, totaling sixteen in all. In the intermediate directions—southeast, southwest, northwest, and northeast—there is an iron hill of śālmali trees.

The Sutra on the Ocean-Like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha lists many kinds of neighboring Hells, such as eighteen cold hells, eighteen Dark Hells,

²¹ Skt. pratyekanakara

eighteen Minor Hot Hells, eighteen Hells of Chariots of Fire, fifty billion Hells of Forests of Swords, fifty billion Hells of Bronze Śālmali Trees, fifty billion Hells of Iron Machines, and more.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught us *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, he said:

The eighteen hells covered in the text are merely a general categorization. In fact, hell beings possess different cognitions and past actions, leading to varied consequences. Consequently, there must be an infinite number of distinct scenes in the hells. It's akin to how the laws governing individuals differ across countries and regions, resulting in varying situations within prisons.

However, the description of hells here primarily draws from the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma, Dirghagama*, and *Vinaya*, which provide the converging categorizations of the hells in Tibetan Buddhism.

We have already studied the suffering in the Hell of Ultimate Torment. Additionally, there exists a hell called the Vajra Hell in Vajrayana, where the suffering and lifespan of beings far exceed those in the Hell of Ultimate Torment. Those who are reborn there are samaya breakers.

It is good that many people today pursue tantric teachings, but many do not take the time to understand the samayas they must uphold after receiving empowerment. When it comes to having a meal, there is little to worry about as long as you eat and drink enough. However, entering the tantric path is not as straightforward or casual as having a meal. You must first examine the vajra guru before receiving their teachings and empowerment; then, once you embark on the tantric path, you must uphold tantric vows such as the twenty-five essential samaya vows, the eight branch downfalls, and the five root vows as taught in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. A tantric practitioner must uphold these samaya vows; otherwise, it can lead to severe consequences.

To be honest, when I hear some Sutrayana masters dissuade people from studying Vajrayana, I find that their arguments are not wrong from this perspective. It is similar to a monastic who has taken the precepts for bhikkhus or bhikkhunis without learning them, as they may unknowingly break those precepts. In the same way, an inexperienced tantric practitioner who does not study the samaya vows is likely to do the same. As a result, receiving empowerment and samaya vows—the

cause that is intended to swiftly bring realization to the practitioner—can instead become the cause that swiftly leads them to hell.

Therefore, tantric practitioners must first learn the samaya vows, as a breach of samaya vows will inevitably lead to rebirth in Vajra Hell. The *Tantra of Knowing Samayas* explains the severity of suffering in Vajra Hell:

Those who have broken the root samaya vows,
If not diligently applying means of purification,
Will fall into Vajra Hell;
The sufferings of all ordinary hells combined
Are less than one ten-thousandth of those in Vajra Hell.

It also states in the *Commentary on the Guhyagarbha Tantra*:

Even if this material world is completely destroyed, the suffering of beings in Vajra Hell will not cease. In an instant, they will be reborn in the Vajra Hell of other worlds and will continue to endure suffering.

Among all the samayas, two vows are the most important. First, you must be in harmony with your vajra brothers and sisters—those with whom you received empowerment—and refrain from slandering, hating, or fighting with them. Second, venerate your root guru or vajra guru. If you have received tantric teachings and empowerment from them, but later begin to slander them for any reason, this is considered a breach of samaya vows.

Some people today behave terribly. After receiving empowerment, they announce that they should not have done so, and from then on, they treat the guru as if they were an enemy. It is important to understand that the guru-disciple relationship is not the same as a regular mundane interpersonal connection, where someone can choose to ignore their partner today and engage with them again tomorrow, or marry their partner today and divorce them tomorrow, only to remarry a few days later and divorce once more. Such vacillation does not apply in the context of Dharma. A disciple should not act capriciously toward their guru; they cannot leave, slander, and abandon their guru at will. Otherwise, these actions will plant seeds in the all-ground consciousness that will cause great harm in this life and in many lives yet to come. Therefore, we must remain aware of this.

2.1.3.2.1.2.1. The Pit of Hot Embers

When beings have nearly exhausted the effects of their actions associated with the Hell of Ultimate Torment and finally escape it, they spot what appears to be a shaded trench in the distance. Delighted, they leap toward it, only to discover that it is a pit filled with blazing hot embers that sear their flesh and bones as they sink into it.

Then, what causes rebirth in the neighboring hell of the pit of hot embers? The *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara* states:

Following the path of renunciation,
Yet not upholding precepts,
Will lead to rebirth in the pit of hot embers,
Where flesh and bones are burned.

Lay practitioners and monastics who choose to follow the path and take the corresponding vows, but fail to uphold the precepts, will be reborn in this hell where their flesh and bones are consumed by fire.

Additionally, the *Abhidharma Treatise on the Establishment of Worlds as Spoken by the Buddha*²² states that those who throw living beings into a fire pit, hot sand, or embers, or who breach monastic vows will suffer in this hell.

Therefore, we should reflect on whether we have committed any actions that could lead to rebirth in the pit of hot embers. If the “cause” has been created, then the “effect” will inevitably follow. Thus, we must purify our negative actions before our deaths; otherwise, these actions will, sooner or later, bring us suffering. It is akin to how a person who is poisoned will certainly die if they do not receive detoxification.

2.1.3.2.1.2.2. The Swamp of Putrescent Corpses

Then, they come upon a river, and after being tormented in a brazier for an entire kalpa, their overwhelming thirst fills them with hope at the sight of water. Desperate for relief, they hurry to quench their thirst, only to discover that no water exists. Instead, the river is filled with decaying corpses—human, horse, and dog—all rotting and infested with insects, exuding an unimaginable stench. They

²² Skt. Lokasthānābhīdharma śāstra

sink into the foul sludge until even their heads are submerged, while worms with iron beaks feast on their flesh.

Then, what causes rebirth in the neighboring hell of the swamp of putrescent corpses? *The Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara* states:

Hypocrisy and wrong livelihood
Will lead to rebirth in the swamp of putrescent corpses,
Where one is devoured by maggots and worms.

If a person acts hypocritically by falsely portraying themselves as a practitioner, deceives others to obtain offerings from the faithful, and engages in wrong livelihood, they will fall into the hell of the swamp of putrescent corpses after death.

Additionally, the *Abhidharma Treatise on the Establishment of Worlds as Spoken by the Buddha* mentions that those who throw living beings into filthy places such as dung pits, consume other living beings, or allow creatures like centipedes to bite other beings will suffer in this hell.

Many urban dwellers gather in restaurants and happily consume living insects, fish, shrimp, and other animals. They may enjoy great culinary experiences in this life, but a few decades later, they may be reborn as the very animals that they once consumed. Such reciprocal retribution is inevitable. Sadly, they have committed many misdeeds without ever realizing it. Instead, they believe they possess money and power, living what they perceive to be a very happy life.

Two days ago, I went to Hongyuan County²³ for a life release. The Tibetan herdsmen there are relatively wealthy, yet they kill animals in horrific ways. Influenced by materialistic values, many young Tibetans pay little attention to the law of karma and instead prioritize actions that help them accumulate wealth. They feel that they need money to live a good life, which includes purchasing items such as motorcycles, cars, and houses. However, they acquire this money by killing many animals.

Currently, the killing of animals is a serious issue in the Tibetan region, and it is even worse in cities in the Han region of China. The negative actions that many wealthy individuals commit in just one day can trap them in hell for countless

²³ Gakog (Hongyuan) County (Tibetan: གཤམ་རྫོང་། or གཤམ་རྫོང་།) is a county in northern Sichuan Province, China. It falls under the administration of the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. A river called Ka Chu/Gaqu (ཀའ་ཆུ་) flows through the area, and “kog” means “valley” or “region,” thus referring to the area of the Ga River.

years. If these negative actions are not purified, the only thing awaiting them after this life is hell.

However, many people remain unaware of this. What they typically worry about is, “What will I do when I get old? Will I have health insurance and a pension?” Some Buddhists share similar concerns. When I engage in conversations with them, it seems they are not preoccupied with the possibility of being reborn in a lower realm. Their primary focus is solely on the present life.

In fact, for a true practitioner, it is acceptable to live with whatever this life brings, for this life is just a few short decades. After all, no matter how magnificent a house or how luxurious a car may be, they will not accompany you forever. Once you leave this world, the only thing that will follow you is your karma.

Therefore, many esteemed masters and practitioners of the past attached great importance to the next life. I am currently reading the biographies of two disciples of Jigme Lingpa: Jigme Gocha and Jigme Gaylwai Nyugu. Both were remarkable practitioners who had a profound fear of bad rebirth and negative karmic consequences; aside from these concerns, they seemed to care about nothing else. In contrast, many practitioners today, including monastics with fame and wealth, appear indifferent to what will happen in their next lives. They primarily discuss mundane matters such as money and status, which clearly indicates that they are not true practitioners.

Through the study of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I hope that more Dharma friends will develop a sincere renunciation toward worldly life and cultivate a genuine fear of being reborn in the hells. By doing so, you will surely pay attention to the law of karma, understanding what to do and what not to do. Otherwise, if you fear nothing, your practice will become merely a formality.

Many practitioners seek the high teachings and often pursue the most profound pith instructions. However, if we have not practiced ngöndro well, especially the common preliminaries we are currently studying, no matter how supreme the teaching is, it will be of little use to us.

If the high teachings were beneficial to everyone, I would not hesitate to share them with all of you. Although I may not be a good practitioner myself, I have received many teachings from my great guru, so I should be able to teach you the text. As long as it can genuinely benefit everyone, as a Mahayanist, I am very willing to offer you many tantric teachings and empowerments, even if it means I may have

to fall into hell myself. [Well, I am not very familiar with bestowing empowerments, but it is not too difficult. It will take me a day or two to get everything set.]

But will this be good for you? Based on my experience studying and practicing the Dharma over the years, I have come to realize that pursuing the higher teachings without a foundation in ngöndro is akin to building a castle in the air. For each of you, the most beneficial thing is to establish a solid foundation, particularly in understanding the rarity of human life, the impermanence of life, the law of karma, and the defects of samsara. Only in this way will your practice remain on track.

Some seasoned practitioners I know are so fearful of suffering in the lower realms that they often reflect, “Will I fall into a lower realm?” In contrast, today’s practitioners seem less preoccupied with this question, which is misguided. Although I may not have practiced well, I do fear being reborn in hell. Sometimes, when I read about certain mantras that can prevent a negative rebirth, I feel a great sense of relief and immediately begin to recite the mantra.

Recently, I reviewed my old notes and came across a mantra. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche mentioned that reciting this mantra could prevent us from being reborn in the lower realms. I was so pleased that I recited it for quite some time. I did this because I believe that in this life and in my previous lives, I must have committed numerous misdeeds that could lead to rebirth in hell. However, now I can avoid a negative rebirth through the recitation of the Buddha’s names and mantras, as well as by engaging in Dharma practice. This is the most reliable way to ensure a good rebirth, so I must practice diligently.

Through studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I hope you will be inspired to practice and not pursue transient fame and wealth that hold no true value in the long run. Meanwhile, you must understand that future lives constitute an extremely long journey, which may be filled with suffering and misery. Therefore, you must seek liberation from cyclic rebirths through practice.

Recently, a volunteer staff member complained, “I had such a terrible experience working in this department. I cannot stand it anymore! What torture! How sad!”

Well, you are well-fed and clothed there. How painful could it be when you compare yourself to beings in hell? The real suffering is in the hells. Nowadays, when some people encounter even a minor setback in relationships or positions, they feel it is the end of the world. This is truly unnecessary. However painful your

experience may be in the human realm, it is still bearable. In contrast, the suffering in hell is extremely excruciating, and hell beings have no choice but to endure their suffering due to the effects of their ripened karma. Therefore, we must ensure that we understand this.

2.1.3.2.1.2.3. The Plain of Razors

As they escape the swamp filled with decaying corpses, they are overjoyed at the sight of a lush green plain in the distance. However, upon reaching it, they discover the ground is covered with sharp, burning-hot metal blades resembling grass. With every step they take, the blades pierce their feet. Though their wounds heal as soon as they lift their feet, the torment begins anew with each step forward, causing unrelenting agony.

Treatise on the Foundation for Yoga Practitioners describes the immense suffering that beings endure in this hell. For example, when they step on the ground, their feet are severely pierced, but when they lift their legs, their feet heal immediately, leaving no trace of a wound. However, when they step on the ground again, they experience the same pain once more.

So, what causes rebirth in the plain of razors? The *Sutra of Verses on the Six Destinies* states:

If a person speaks of the wrong path,
Destroys the right Dharma and commits misdeeds,
He will have to walk on a path full of slender blades,
And be forced to step back and forth on it.

In other words, if a person promotes harmful teachings, undermines authentic teachings, and commits misdeeds, then after his death, the path he treads will be lined with slender blades. Driven by the force of his actions, he will be compelled to walk back and forth on it.

There is significant scriptural evidence in the Chinese version of the Tripitaka, and I hope that Han Chinese Dharma masters, scholars, and practitioners will continue to read and study these Buddhist scriptures. Historically, many renowned translators were Indian, including Bodhiruci, Kumarajiva, Paramartha, Dharmadeva, Danapala, and Dharmaraksa. Aside from a few Chinese translators such as Xuan Zang, most translators came to China from India to translate sutras.

However, the situation has changed. Many Indians come to China for business today, and it is rare to find an Indian master who comes to China to teach the Dharma or exchange spiritual perspectives.

In the 1980s, Osho Rajneesh, or Osho, from India became very popular. Some Indians even regarded him, alongside the Buddha, Gandhi, Nehru, and others, as one of the ten public figures who transformed India. Later, Osho traveled to America, where he was initially well received due to his spiritual teachings, which integrated various religious traditions, including Confucianism and Buddhism, and advocated for a more open attitude. It was said that he gained over three hundred thousand followers in just a few years.

However, his extreme views on sexual liberation and his public opposition to marriage disrupted harmony in many families, and he also accumulated wealth through various means. Eventually, Osho was imprisoned and deported by the US government, leading to a complete tarnishing of his reputation in the West.

I have also examined some of his views. For example, he asserted that Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha only led people astray, claiming that his was the only true and reliable religion in the world.

From his statements, it seems that his religion was no different from certain cults. Osho died in India in 1990, and some claimed his death was due to poisoning in America.

Historically, both Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism originated in India.

In addition to Buddha Shakyamuni, the Six Ornaments,²⁴ the Two Supreme Ones²⁵ and thousands of sublime Buddhist masters from India have made contributions to the world that are unparalleled by any other thoughts, philosophies, or spiritual traditions.

Among all the people listening to this teaching now, I believe many of you intellectuals have already studied various kinds of knowledge. However, after encountering the wisdom of Buddha Shakyamuni, many cannot help but

²⁴ The Six Ornaments are Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga, and Dharmakirti.

²⁵ There are two ways to recognize the Two Supreme Ones. The first refers to Gunaprabha and Shakyaprabha. According to another tradition, the second refers to Nagarjuna, the founder of the tradition of Profound View, and Asanga, the founder of the tradition of Vast Conduct.

be convinced by the Dharma and eventually accept and respect the teachings accordingly. This is an undeniable fact.

Therefore, we Buddhists should be grateful to India. In particular, the Chinese version of the Tripitaka was primarily translated by Indians who first came to China to study the language and then engaged in translation. What great kindness they have shown us!

Recently, I noticed that a Rinpoche gathered translators primarily from India and other Western countries with the aim of translating the Tripitaka into English within twenty-five years. What a great aspiration!

During the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's trip to India, we had the opportunity to communicate with Indians, and it seemed they were quite familiar with Brahmanism and Hinduism. Some Indian scholars often organized seminars or symposia to exchange ideas with Tibetan Buddhist scholars. However, very few Indians today actively propagate the Buddhadharma elsewhere, including in China, America, or other countries. Thus, different figures emerge during different eras.

In comparison, today it is eminent Tibetan masters who spread the Dharma to the West, including countries in Europe, North America, South America, and beyond. It is not solely because I am Tibetan that I greatly admire other Tibetan masters. Many Tibetan masters have, through their teachings and various means, helped countless Westerners realize the supreme value of the Dharma, while previously they knew almost nothing about the Buddha's teachings.

Dharma students listening to this teaching should make an effort to study the Tripitaka. In particular, it is important to familiarize yourself with the defects of samsara and the principle of cause and effect. There are many profound teachings on these topics in the Tripitaka, all originating from the Buddha. If you can memorize some of these teachings and consistently remind yourself of the actions that lead to various rebirths, you will be more mindful of your conduct, which will naturally foster self-discipline.

2.1.3.2.1.2.4. The Forest of Swords

Once they escape from the plain of razors, they are overjoyed to spot a beautiful forest and eagerly rush toward it. However, upon arrival, they find no such forest. Instead, it is a dense thicket where the trees have metal branches sprouting sharp

swords instead of leaves. As the wind blows, the swords slice their bodies into pieces. Each time they regenerate, they are torn apart again in an endless cycle.

[Recently, I watched a documentary titled “Forest China.” It introduces forests in regions such as Yunnan and Xinjiang, China, and states that various fruits available in the marketplace originate from those forests. The script is very well written. In the human realm, people can rest and enjoy themselves in the forest. In contrast, the forest in the hell realm is filled with suffering.]

The Treatise on the Foundation for Yoga Practitioners also describes the torment in the hell of the forest of swords. When the beings in hell attempt to sit down to rest, a karmic wind begins to blow, transforming the leaves and branches of the trees into sharp blades that fall, slicing their bodies into pieces. What excruciating pain these beings endure!

What causes rebirth in this hell? The *Sutra of the Six Realms of Samsara* states:

Conspiring against others leads to rebirth in the hell of the forest
of swords.

If a person plots against someone with malicious intent, this action will result in their rebirth in the hell of the forest of swords. The *Abhidharma Treatise on the Establishment of Worlds* also notes that those who enjoy fighting and harming others with swords and other weapons will fall into this hell after death.

Many people are drawn to weapons and carry them. However, the situation is better in mainland China, where state law prohibits individuals from carrying knives or guns. The conditions in the Tibetan area are not as favorable, likely due to the influence of karmic actions. Not long ago, a man in my hometown, who had no particular animosity toward another man, killed him with a knife. Those who kill others with weapons will inevitably fall into the hell of the forest of swords and endure the experience of being chopped up repeatedly and indefinitely. How terrible!

2.1.3.2.1.2.5. The Hill of Iron Śālmali Trees

This is the place where monks and nuns who have broken their vows of chastity, along with those who engage in sexual misconduct, are reborn. The karmic consequences of their actions bring them to the foot of a fearsome hill covered

with iron śālmali trees. They hear their former lovers calling out to them from the summit.

As described in the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, the former lovers are beautifully dressed and gaze at each other with loving eyes. They call out their names in soft, sweet voices, saying, “For the sake of our past love, I came here to see you. Now that you see me too, why not come closer and give me a hug?”

Upon hearing this, the hell beings succumb to their habitual tendencies and feel compelled to climb the hill, potentially at the cost of their lives. Some hell beings are clearly aware of the hill’s dangers, while others may not be.

As they eagerly climb to join their former lovers, the downward-pointing leaves of the iron trees tear into their flesh. Upon reaching the top, they encounter ravens, vultures, and similar creatures that gouge out their eyes to feast on the fat. Then, they hear their former lovers calling to them from the foot of the hill. Descending once more, the leaves now point upward, repeatedly piercing their chests. When they reach the ground, grotesque metallic men and women embrace them, biting off their heads and chewing until their brains ooze from the corners of their mouths. Such are the agonizing torments endured in this hell.

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* clearly describes the torments of this hell and concludes:

What causes these burning torments? It is lust.

As we can see, our minds can be quite vicious. Without guarding our minds with mindfulness and vigilance, we will fall into hell countless times and experience excruciating torments. Thus, the Buddha reminds us:

One must know that this mind cannot be trusted.

Some monastics and lay practitioners have relinquished everything to devote themselves to the one-pointed practice of the Dharma in this short lifetime. Such a choice is commendable.

However, due to the influence of their karmic forces, some individuals may not begin or complete their practice well. There was once a person who took her ordination after three or four years of contemplation. Yet, just a few days after her ordination, she broke her vows and disrobed due to the emergence of unfavorable conditions.

Therefore, the consequences of sentient beings' karma can be truly dreadful. Some people genuinely wish to engage in positive actions, but due to their heavy karmic debts, they are unable to do so. Instead, they commit negative actions, leading to rebirth in hell.

Thus, those who believe in the law of cause and effect must carefully reflect on these teachings and pay attention to what to pursue and what to avoid, upholding their precepts with mindfulness and vigilance. Many people experience strong lust today, which often results in sexual misconduct and leads to disharmony in numerous families. These actions not only bring suffering in this life but also contribute to rebirth in the hell of iron śālmali trees. Therefore, we must remain vigilant.

It is important that practitioners are fully aware of all the details of the sufferings in the eight hot hells, the sixteen neighboring and supplementary hells, and the hills of iron śālmali trees. Afterward, retreat to a secluded place to contemplate. In fact, this is what we practitioners are meant to do when practicing the Dharma: reflect and meditate on what we have learned in a quiet place.

Recently, someone asked, "Could you please give me instructions for meditation?"

I replied, "The common preliminaries we are studying serve as the instructions for meditation."

The person responded, "Oh, those are not sufficient. I want you to teach me a better instruction!"

I said, "No matter which realm we find ourselves in, there is no instruction better than this that I can offer. This is the most supreme meditation instruction!"

Therefore, we should put the teachings into real practice. It is not enough to simply understand the meaning of the teachings. The accounts in the history of Buddhism typically categorize transmission into different types, such as reading transmission, explanatory transmission, instructional transmission, and more. Specifically, just having the explanatory transmission is not enough; one must also have the instructional transmission. And just having the instructional transmission is not enough; one needs to apply that transmission in real practice.

Let's return to the text. After understanding the torments in hells, how should you meditate accordingly?

Close your eyes and visualize yourself living in the hell realms. When the terror and pain you experience feel as overwhelming as if you were truly there, bring the following thought to mind: “I am overwhelmed with terror simply by imagining such torment, even though I am not actually experiencing it. Right now, countless beings are enduring this unimaginable agony, and every single one of them has been my parent in a past life. There is no guarantee that my parents, loved ones, or friends from this life will not end up in those realms after death. Such rebirths are primarily the result of actions driven by hatred, and I have committed countless acts rooted in hatred—not only in this life but throughout my past lives. It is almost certain that I will eventually be reborn in those hells myself.”

Milarepa once said:

The primary cause of being reborn in the lower realms is hatred,
So one must practice patience, even at the cost of one’s own life.

Therefore, we should not willfully become angry and lose our temper. Some Dharma practitioners have not lost their temper even once in a dozen years, which is commendable. Others may lose their temper once a year, once a month, or once a day. There are those who become angry every hour! They constantly quarrel with various people, which leads to rebirth in the hells.

Then, you continue to think, “Right now, I possess a human life endowed with all the freedoms and advantages. I have encountered a qualified teacher and received profound teachings that offer the opportunity to attain Buddhahood. Therefore, I must wholeheartedly commit to Dharma practice to ensure that I will never be reborn in the lower realms.” This sense of resolve is something we should all cultivate.

This teaching does not need detailed explanation. As long as you have motivation and intellectual capacity, you will understand its deep meaning after reading the text repeatedly. If you feel indifferent toward Patrul Rinpoche’s vajra words, then you would believe even less in the words from an ordinary person like me.

Reflect repeatedly on the suffering experienced in the hell realms. With deep regret, confess your past misdeeds and make a firm commitment that, no matter what, you will never again engage in actions that lead to rebirth in such realms.

Filled with compassion for those currently trapped there, pray fervently for their immediate liberation from the lower realms.

As Patrul Rinpoche says, our parents, loved ones, and friends from previous lives are currently suffering in hell. Why? Because most of them have hardly performed any virtuous deeds. Just look at our parents, loved ones, and friends in this life, and we'll see that they have not engaged in any positive actions that would allow them to be reborn as humans, let alone enter the Land of Great Bliss. Therefore, it is almost certain they will be reborn in the lower realms after death. To save all beings in hell from the excruciating torments they are enduring, let us recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara together:

Om mani padme hum.....

*I hereby dedicate this, and all merit accrued throughout
the three times,*

To the welfare of all infinite beings.

May each and every one of them

Swiftly achieve the state of the noble Avalokiteshvara.

It is important to put the teachings into practice. Each meditative instruction²⁶ should be practiced using the three supreme methods. This emphasis is also found in Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang's *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*. I will not expand on this in today's teaching due to time constraints.

Whenever we hear about the torments in hell, we should put it into practice by visualizing the unbearable suffering we will experience if we are reborn in the hell realm. Then, we should assess whether we have already committed the misdeeds that can lead to rebirth in hell. If the answer is yes, the consequences of those actions will manifest if we do not purify them. Therefore, we must make a concerted effort to confess our negative actions.

Indeed, confession is crucial. The *Dirghagama* states:

What are the two actions that cause rebirth in the lower realms?

One is breaking vows, and the other is abandoning right views.

²⁶ This refers to the instructions in *The Meaning Instructions on Three Virtues of Relaxation in the Natural State of the Mind*, or Longchen Nyingtik Ngöndro. You may consult: <https://khenposodargye.org/meditations/longchen-nyingtik/>

If we break precepts after entering the Dharma door or abandon right views, such as the law of cause and effect, we will certainly fall into the lower realms if we do not confess properly. Therefore, Buddhists must believe in the law of cause and effect. We must not, due to the presence of karmic effects or the influence of external circumstances, commit grave misdeeds.

To remain steadfast in any situation, we must first practice with great diligence. For example, by studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, our minds are transformed accordingly. This is very important.



Lesson 43

“In all these hells, the environment is entirely composed of... horses and cattle belonging to the deceased.” [page 68–70]

We have already studied the sufferings in the eight hot hells and the Neighboring Hells. Today, we’ll proceed to the eight cold hells.

The purpose of discussing the sufferings in these hells is to help all of you understand that in places invisible to our naked eyes, many beings endure excruciating torment. Once we recognize the sufferings of the hell realms, we will undoubtedly feel fear. If we reflect on the misdeeds we have committed in the past, we’ll realize that none of us can be certain we will not be reborn in the hells and experience suffering after our deaths.

Therefore, we should consider whether we have committed wrongdoings that may lead us to fall into the hell realms. If such a possibility exists, we must confess as soon as possible, for we cannot know when death will come.

Each of us should contemplate this. As many eminent masters have said, attaining a human life is rare, and it is a blessing to have met a qualified guru and received supreme pith instructions, thanks to the merit accumulated from our past lives over many kalpas. Thus, it is truly unfortunate if someone does not practice diligently now; they will enter the bardo state empty-handed, lacking sufficient accumulated merit at the time of death. As a result, they could be swept away by the winds of karma into the three lower realms. The excruciating pain experienced by beings in hell, as well as by hungry ghosts and animals, is beyond our imagination. Considering the numerous misdeeds we have committed and the limited

good deeds we have performed, none of us can be certain that we will escape the consequences of a bad rebirth.

At present, many people do not follow Buddhist teachings, and even among Buddhists, very few, including monastics, often reflect on the sufferings of samsara and are genuinely concerned about falling into the lower realms after death. You may look around and assess how many Buddhists are genuine practitioners. You might then reflect on your life before entering the Dharma and consider whether you have meditated on the sufferings of samsara since embarking on this path, whether such meditations are worthwhile, and whether you should engage in them.

We are not animals who are content as long as our basic needs are met. As human beings, we need to contemplate more deeply. In particular, we must understand that we will be driven by our karma and move on to the next life. Just as in this life, we will also fear suffering and seek happiness in the next life. If we do not engage in Dharma practice to protect ourselves in this life, it is certain that our next life will be filled with prolonged and unbearable suffering. Therefore, Dharma practice is indeed very important, and to practice effectively, we must first grasp the fundamental Buddhist teachings.

Many non-Buddhists do not believe in the existence of hells. Despite the compelling evidence, they choose to ignore or refute it without any valid reasoning. This is not wise at all.

Some Buddhists who genuinely believe in the existence of hells tend to assume they will not face a bad rebirth. They view the concept of hells as a means to scare others away from wrongdoing, believing it has nothing to do with themselves. In fact, this kind of thinking is even more troubling.

In fact, regardless of who a person is, he must have planted countless seeds of negative actions in his all-ground consciousness in this life and in previous lives. Once the effects of these negative actions ripen, he has no choice but to experience the resulting torments.

Therefore, whenever possible, it is essential to purify our negative actions by chanting the hundred-syllable mantra, the mantra of Vajrasattva, among others. At the same time, we should strive to avoid any actions that could lead to a lower rebirth.

Of course, given our deeply ingrained habitual tendencies and the ripening effects of karma, no ordinary person can guarantee that he will not commit

misdeeds in the future. However, from now on, we should at least strive to be more mindful and less reckless than before. We need to be aware of the law of karma; otherwise, if we commit misdeeds, we will have to face the consequences ourselves.

Regarding the torments in the cold hells that I describe below, I hope you will not be like some scholars or archaeologists who focus solely on the literal meaning without engaging in deeper examination. As practitioners, we should reflect on ourselves in the following ways:

“Have I ever committed misdeeds? If so, will I fall into the hell realm in my next life? If so, can I endure the torments? When I am in the human realm, I feel particularly distressed when temperatures reach 40–50 degrees Celsius in summer; I find it unbearable to stay outside for even a short time in winter, and I feel extremely cold if I do not dress warmly when the weather turns slightly cooler. The torments in hell are infinitely worse than this. If I am reborn in a hell, what can I do? Although I am alive at this moment, I may die at any time. Then, I could be driven by the effects of my karma and fall directly into a hot or cold hell. How excruciating that torment will be!”

If you experience dreadful fear of hell during your meditation, it indicates that you have some understanding of the suffering inherent in samsara. Conversely, if you remain indifferent after hearing about the great qualities of the Land of Great Bliss and the excruciating torments of hell, it suggests that something may be amiss in your practice.

2.1.3.2.1.3. The Eight Cold Hells

According to many shastras, the cold hells are located beneath Jambudvīpa. As stated in *The Commentary of the Treatise on the Foundation for Yoga Practitioners*, 32,000 yojanas²⁷ below the ground is the first cold hell (the Hell of Blisters), and every two thousand yojanas downward lies another cold hell. However, according to the *Abhidharma-kosa samaya-pradipika*, the cold hells are not located underground but in an extremely dark realm beyond the iron mountains that surround the four continents. Thus, there is no consensus on this matter in the shastras.

Regarding the number of cold hells, the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of*

²⁷ A yojana is a measure of distance that was used in ancient India, Thailand, and Myanmar. A yojana is approximately 12–15 km.

Dharma and the *Treasury of Abhidharma* list eight, whereas the *Dirghagama* and the *Abhidharma Treatise on the Establishment of Worlds* list ten. While there is no agreement concerning the location, names, and number of cold hells, it is certain that those who have committed the corresponding misdeeds will inevitably fall into the specific cold hell. Therefore, we must first understand the torments in the cold hells and then reflect on and meditate upon them repeatedly.

1) The hell of blisters

In all the cold hells, the environment consists entirely of snow-covered mountains and icy glaciers, perpetually swept by blizzards. The beings, completely exposed and unclothed, suffer intensely from the freezing cold. Specifically, in the Hell of Blisters, the unbearable chill causes painful blisters to form all over their bodies.

It is very cold at Larung Gar during the winter. If one does not dress warmly enough, blisters may develop on the skin. The same seems to apply to northeastern China. When I visited, someone warned me, “You must dress warmly; otherwise, you’ll end up with blisters.”

Winter is indeed very cold in the Tibetan region. Jigme Trinle Özer mentioned this in his biography: “Summer in Sershul is as splendid as the celestial realm, whereas winter is as bitterly cold as the cold hells.”

Sertar, the county where Larung Gar is located, is no different. Flowers bloom everywhere in the mountains during summer, nearly comparable to heaven. However, during winter, especially around December, it becomes freezing. Many Dharma practitioners are daunted by the harsh winter here.

Now, many people at Larung Gar have begun to prepare clothing and cow dung²⁸ for the coming winter, while some are also renovating and repairing their cabins, such preparation is essential. Otherwise, when the cold weather arrives, all we can do is endure it, making it difficult to accomplish anything else. Although the cold we experience in the human realm is incomparable to that in the cold hells, there are indeed some similarities that can aid our contemplation of the cold hells.

2) The hell of burst blisters

In the Hell of Burst Blisters, the blisters on the hell beings rupture. The Hell of Blisters and the Hell of Burst Blisters correspond to the Arbuda Hell and the

²⁸ Dried cow dung is the unique biofuel in the Tibetan region.

Nirarbuda Hell as described in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* and the *Dirghagama*. The names of the cold hells listed in *The Buddha Speaks of the Causes and Conditions of Golden Youth Sutra* are essentially the same as those mentioned in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*.

3) The hell of clenched teeth

In the Hell of Clenched Teeth, the unbearable cold forces the beings there to grit their teeth tightly in response to the extreme discomfort.

4) The hell of lamentations

In the Hell of Lamentations, their lamenting is ceaseless. The Hell of Lamentations is also known as the Hell of Atata. There, beings shiver in the cold, producing an a-ta-ta sound with their mouths. In this hell, beings lament the extreme cold. Mahadeva was a bhikkhu who committed three of the five crimes with immediate retribution. During his lifetime, he gave teachings, and many of his disciples attained arhathood. After his parinirvana, one of his arhat disciples visited a patron's house to accept offerings. While washing his hands, the disciple wondered, "I wonder which pure realm my master has been reborn into?" He then used his arhat clairvoyance and discovered that Mahadeva had been reborn in the cold hell, lamenting, "Why is my house so cold?"

Upon realizing this, the disciple immediately wished to perform a Buddhist puja to help his master. However, after finishing washing his hands, he checked again and found that Mahadeva had already been reborn in the Thirty-Three Heaven due to the merit accumulated from his Dharma teachings. This was wonderful. Mahadeva did not even realize he had been reborn in a hell realm; he was only feeling the cold, and soon he was liberated.

Mahadeva had over one hundred thousand disciples during his lifetime. As I previously mentioned while teaching the *Sakya Lekshe*,²⁹ the historical account states that no ordinary person was able to take as many disciples as Mahadeva did after the parinirvana of Buddha Shakyamuni.

5) The hell of groans

In the Hell of Groans, their voices are broken, and deep, drawn-out groans continuously escape from their mouths.

²⁹ It is also referred to as *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice*.

6) The hell of utpala-like cracks

In the Hell of Utpala-like Cracks, their skin turns bluish and splits into four sections resembling petals of a flower.

7) The hell of lotus-like cracks

In the Hell of Lotus-like Cracks, beings' raw, red flesh is exposed, and the intense cold causes it to split into eight pieces.

8) The hell of great lotus-like cracks

In the Hell of Great Lotus-like Cracks, beings' flesh darkens to a deep red and splits into sixteen, then thirty-two, and eventually countless pieces. Metal-beaked worms burrow into the fissures, devouring the flesh.

The names of the eight cold hells are derived from the unique torments that beings endure within each one.

What are the causes of being reborn in these cold hells? Some Buddhist teachings state that those who freeze beings to death in ice or ice-cold water will be reborn in the cold hells. Many fishermen are clearly committing such misdeeds. They capture large quantities of fish and shrimp and freeze them to death by placing them directly into freezers.

When I followed the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche on a pilgrimage to Mount Putuo,³⁰ I noticed that there were multiple freezers on the boat, which were used to preserve the fish caught by the fishermen. Freezing the fish to death is undoubtedly a primary factor that leads to the rebirth of the fishermen in cold hells. Many people today engage in similar misdeeds.

Some Buddhist texts state that those who strip beings of their clothing and subject them to the cold will also descend into the cold hells after death.

Additionally, it is mentioned in the *Jatakas*:

Nihilists will dwell in cold winds and darkness in the next life.

Nihilists who deny the law of karma and the existence of rebirth will be reborn in the dark cold hells, experiencing excruciating torments after death. The views of

³⁰ Mount Putuo is an island southeast of Shanghai in Zhoushan, Zhejiang, China. It is a renowned site in Chinese Buddhism and is the bodhimanda of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Mount Putuo is one of the four sacred mountains in Chinese Buddhism.

nihilists, particularly those of certain atheists, may lead countless beings directly into the cold hells.

Some individuals who have held teaching positions, especially those who have advocated materialism, may have rejected the law of karma, rebirth, or the existence of celestial realms and hells. Such teachings might have influenced many and destroyed their source of merit. All of these become causes for rebirth in the cold hells.

Furthermore, slandering sublime beings also leads to rebirth in the cold hells. It is stated in the *Abhidharma Treatise on the Establishment of Worlds*:

Bhikkhu Kokālika fell into the Mahapadma³¹ because he slandered the Great Shravakas Sariputra and Maudgalyayana.

Bhikkhu Kokālika, a disciple of Devadatta, slandered Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, the two chief disciples of the Buddha, and as a result, was reborn in the Hell of Great Lotus-like Cracks. Here is the story clearly told in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*:

Due to the influence of Devadatta, Kokālika often harbored negative perceptions toward Sariputra and Maudgalyayana. One day, after completing their summer retreat, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana were traveling to a certain country when they were caught in a heavy rain. Seeking shelter, they went to a potter's house to rest for the night. However, they did not know that a woman was already sleeping in a hidden spot in the house. The next morning, after having an erotic dream, the woman went to take a bath.

Kokālika happened to witness her actions and asked, "Where did you sleep last night?"

She replied, "In the potter's shed."

"Who else was there?"

"Two monks."

At that moment, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana emerged from the potter's shed, leading Kokālika to infer that they had engaged in sexual misconduct with the woman. He subsequently spread that rumor throughout the sangha and across the country, publicly slandering the two Great Shravakas.

³¹ Mahapadma refers to the Hell of Great Lotus-like Cracks.

Brahma attempted to prevent Kokālika from slandering Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, asserting that the two sublime beings would never behave in such a manner. However, Kokālika ignored him. Later, when Kokālika visited the Buddha, the Buddha himself tried to dissuade Kokālika from his slanderous behavior and scolded him three times. Yet Kokālika refused to stop, rose from his seat, and departed.

[As you can see, when a person's karmic effects have ripened, even the Buddha himself cannot dissuade the individual from committing misdeeds, let alone other persuaders.]

Later, Kokālika returned to his room, and sores and festering wounds began to appear on his body. He died that night and fell into the Hell of Great Lotus-like Cracks. Through this case, the Buddha taught the sangha about the lifespan and sufferings of the eight cold hells. Detailed descriptions can be found in the thirteenth volume of the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. If you are interested, you may refer to the text.

To summarize, there are three primary causes for rebirth in the cold hells: holding nihilistic views, slandering sublime beings, and causing the death of other sentient beings through freezing. *The Compilation of Extraordinary Stories in Sutras and Vinaya* states:

Those who slander sublime beings will be reborn in the cold
hells.

Therefore, slandering arhats, including Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, will certainly result in rebirth in the cold hells.

In a broader sense, those who generate aspirational bodhicitta and practical bodhicitta can also be regarded as “sublime beings,” as mentioned in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Should Bodhicitta come to birth
In those who suffer, chained in prisons of samsara,
In that instant they are called the children of the Blissful One,
Revered by all the world, by gods and humankind.³²

³² Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

Therefore, since we do not know who has already generated bodhicitta, it is best to refrain from speaking ill of anyone.

If you are a member of the management team of a monastery, you may need to address someone's actions in order to uphold the pure precepts for the sangha. Otherwise, even if you discover an inappropriate action, you do not have to make it known to many people unless it is absolutely necessary. After all, what you see may not always be true. As I mentioned before, people often believe that "seeing is believing," but due to their preconceived notions, what they perceive may not reflect the truth. When people speak carelessly, it is easy to commit misdeeds.

The Buddha repeatedly emphasized the importance of "pure body, pure speech, and pure mind," so if our body, speech, and mind can be purified, we are living a meaningful life. Many lay practitioners today talk carelessly about the faults of others. In fact, they are not qualified to do so. If they focus too much on the faults of others, they will be the ones who suffer the consequences.

If the individuals we criticize are indeed ordinary people, and we have compelling evidence of their faults, it may seem acceptable to discuss these issues from a mundane perspective. However, if the individuals are sublime beings, then what should we consider regarding the karmic consequences? Throughout the ages, many sublime beings have appeared eccentric, yet their inner realization is inconceivable. It would be tragic if we were to descend into the cold hells and endure excruciating suffering for thousands of kalpas simply due to a few moments of heedless speech.

Everyone should carefully contemplate how to live a truly meaningful life in this world. Most people do not understand the meaning of life, believing it is sufficient to have a happy family, abundant wealth, and enough provisions, including food and clothing. In reality, even ants share this perspective. Ants also seek a comfortable nest and sufficient food. Oh? Ants want clothing? My mistake. It should be that ants desire food and drink. However, some young ants do wear high heels. See, some lay practitioners are nodding—they must have seen it! (*The audience laughs.*)

Let's return to the text:

The lifespan in these cold hells is remarkably long. Imagine a container large enough to hold two hundred Kosala measures³³ of sesame seeds. Life in the Blister-

³³ An ancient measure named after the Indian city of Kosala (near modern Ayodhya).

ing Hell lasts as long as it would take to empty that container by removing just one seed every hundred years. In the other cold hells, both lifespan and suffering increase twentyfold. For instance, the lifespan in the Hell of Burst Blisters is twenty times longer than in the Blistering Hell, and in the Hell of Clenched Teeth, it extends another twenty times beyond that, continuing in this manner.

The *Treasury of Abhidharma* states:

Remove a single grain every hundred years from a container full of sesame seeds.

The time it takes to empty the container represents the lifespan in the Blistering Hell.

The lifespan of other cold hells increases by multiples of twenty for each one.

The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection cites scriptural evidence from the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, which states:

Imagine a container filled with sesame seeds that can hold two hundred times the capacity of the scale used in the city of Kosala for measuring sesame. If you remove a single grain of sesame every one hundred years, the time it will take to empty that container reflects the duration one will be trapped in the Blistering Hell. For the other cold hells, that time increases by multiples of twenty for each one, along with the suffering.

You should keep these sufferings in the cold hells in mind and meditate on them just as you would for the hot hells. Reflect on how unbearable it is to be exposed to the icy winter wind for even a moment in this human world. Then, imagine how intolerable it would be if you were reborn in one of those cold hells. Confess your misdeeds, promise never to commit them again, and give rise to compassion for the beings currently enduring such torment in the cold hells.

Such a meditation should not be too difficult. Many masters have implemented this practice in the past. For example, on the coldest winter days, we stand outside naked or dressed very lightly to truly feel the cold. When we can no longer endure it, we contemplate, “What should I do if I am reborn in cold hell?” or “I am currently experiencing the torments of cold hell.” Additionally, we might think, “I am not living in cold hell in this life, but since beginningless time, many of the misdeeds

I have committed must be the causes for being reborn in cold hells. Therefore, I cannot be certain that I will not fall into hell in the future. What should I do?”

During our meditation, we should repeatedly contemplate in this manner.

Then, as we meditate on the hot hells, we continue to think, “At present, I am not actually living in those hells. It is still not too late to confess my faults. I have encountered an authentic spiritual teacher and received profound instructions, and I am now living in Jambudvīpa, where there is always an opportunity to change my life if I practice the Dharma. Therefore, I must confess my past misdeeds with intense remorse. From now on, I will never again commit acts that lead to rebirth in the hell realms.”

Meanwhile, we should consider, “The mild cold in the human realm already feels unbearable to me, so I can only imagine how excruciatingly unbearable the extreme cold must be in the cold hells, where my parents, loved ones, and friends since beginningless time are currently suffering.” Then, we should develop overwhelming and intense compassion for them. Close our eyes and meditate in this way.

In fact, when you meditate according to Longchenpa’s practical instructions of Longchen Nyīngtik,³⁴ your practice will be more effective if you integrate each instruction with the content covered in Patrul Rinpoche’s text. Of course, you may also choose to practice Longchenpa’s and Patrul Rinpoche’s teachings separately. Nevertheless, you should apply the instructions into real practice.

We should recognize that actual practice is completely different from theoretical study. If we understand only the literal descriptions of the cold hells without engaging our mind and heart in real practice, our minds will not change significantly. However, if we do engage in real practice, at a certain point we will feel, “This is not just a theoretical assumption. I will indeed be reborn in these worlds when I die!” With this realization, we will be fearful day and night of falling into the hell realms. Consequently, we will be diligent in our purifying practices and

³⁴ Based on the guided meditative instructions of Longchenpa’s *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind*, a heart essence of practical instruction of Longchen Nyīngtik through which diligent practitioners can achieve enlightenment after just six months of practice, these meditation teachings cover the fundamental yet essential preliminary practices necessary for one to be fully prepared to enter into the ultimate realization of Great Perfection (Dzogchen). The detailed meditation instructions can be found here: <https://www.khenposodargye.org/meditations/longchen-nyingtik/>

remain careful in our words and actions, thereby greatly reducing the possibility of falling into hell.

The night before last, I dreamed that I had fallen into the realm of the pretas or hungry ghosts, which was very frightening. In the dream, I was trying to change this karmic effect but was unable to do so. When I woke up, my heart was still pounding. I thought the dream might be a sign that I would fall into the realm of hungry ghosts because of my actions in this life or previous lives. I have felt a bit anxious over the past two days, so I have been reciting the Vajrasattva mantra daily, though it may not change anything.

We live in this world, and in fact, everything resembles a dream and holds little meaning. Many people place too much emphasis on fame and fortune in this life and are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. However, they fail to realize that they will have to endure the consequences of their actions, long after their deaths. After all, human lifespan is very short, and it is highly likely that one may be reborn in a different realm, where there may be no blue skies or green grass. At that point, even if a person is the president of a country or the secretary-general of the United Nations in this life, they will have no choice but to experience the consequences of their actions.

Can our karmic effect be changed? Before our deaths, if we take the time to repent sincerely and practice the Dharma, we will create happiness for ourselves in the future. Beyond this, no one can save us—not our family and friends, nor our wealth and status. Our only refuge is the authentic Dharma. Non-practitioners may not perceive this truth, whereas seasoned practitioners will eventually come to recognize it. This conviction is evident among many lineage masters.

Therefore, we should not occupy ourselves with meaningless trivialities, especially those lay practitioners who must earn a living. Although they face significant life pressures and may occasionally have no choice but to deal with trivial matters, they should not live without the Dharma in their minds. These days, some people do not pursue the Dharma. Others may appear to study it, but they are only Buddhists in name, not in essence, which means the Dharma has not truly penetrated their minds; thus, their practice becomes merely a formality. Such individuals are quite pitiful, and it is difficult to predict their ultimate fate. In short, everyone must reflect on the teachings we have just learned. It is insufficient to understand them only at a surface level. After contemplation, we must put these teachings into genuine practice. On one hand, we must reflect upon the possibil-

ity of falling into the hell realms. On the other hand, we should cultivate deep and intense compassion for beings currently suffering in the hells and enduring excruciating torments.

2.1.3.2.1.4. The Ephemeral Hells

The ephemeral hells exist in various locations, each presenting vastly different forms of suffering. Inhabitants of these hells may be crushed between rocks, imprisoned within stones, frozen in ice, boiled in scalding water, or burned by fire.

The existence of ephemeral hells has been mentioned in many sutras. For example, according to the *Vinaya*, Maudgalyayana saw many beings from the ephemeral hells near the seashore, where some appeared as stones, trees, and other objects. All of them were experiencing excruciating torments in the forms of non-sentient beings. Maudgalyayana sighed:

There is no peace and happiness in the three realms of existence:
Beings living in the ephemeral hells
Are tormented by suffering,
Like those trapped in a blazing fire.

I once bought a book titled *Nature's Wonders*, which introduces many miraculous phenomena. For example, in the Pyrenees, a mountain range straddling the border of France and Spain, there is a “crying rock.” On sunny afternoons, the rock emits a sound resembling a girl crying, hence its name.

In 1997, a news report stated that in the forests of northern Myanmar, there is also a crying rock. The rock is usually silent, like any other rock, but on rainy days, it produces a sound akin to a person wailing.

We are currently building the Dharma hall for nuns at Larung Gar. It has been raining in recent days, which has delayed the construction progress. When it rains, I feel sad, worrying that the construction may not be finished on time. Sometimes I think, “If I die suddenly, will I be reborn inside a rock and produce a crying sound every rainy season?” After all, karmic effects are beyond our imagination, so such a rebirth does make sense.

Actually, beings in the ephemeral hells can sometimes be observed in real life. For example, in 2006, Mr. Li, a stonemason from Shandong Province, split a large

bluestone in half during one of his stone mining trips and found two worms living inside.

It is hard to believe that these two living beings survived inside an airtight rock without oxygen. According to *The Compendium of Materia Medica*,³⁵ a worm living inside a rock is called “Shi Ha,” meaning “worm of stone shrimp.” It is highly valued and can be used to treat eye diseases. Knowing this, Mr. Li quietly hid the two worms. So far, science has not provided a valid explanation for how the worms can survive inside a rock. [From a Buddhist perspective, it is understood that worldly knowledge may not offer the right explanation.]



Image source: Shandong News Network, 2006

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited Canada, he noticed many peculiar stones along the seashore. The shapes of these stones were somewhat unusual, and the locals could easily identify them. It was said that there were living beings inside the stones because, when placed in a certain position, they rolled slowly on their own. However, the locals were unsure of what exactly resided within the stones.

In addition to being trapped in rocks, some beings from the ephemeral hells are frozen in ice, similar to certain fish in the Tibetan region that remain frozen in winter and come back to life in summer. Some beings are burned in fires, like the rats mentioned in Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo’s *Entering the Way of the Great Vehicle*. Others are cooked in boiling water yet still remain intact and alive.

Some other beings of the ephemeral hells feel as though they are the trees being chopped down when someone cuts their branches. Others experience suffering by identifying their bodies with everyday objects in constant use, such as mortars, brooms, pans, doors, pillars, stoves, or ropes.

[Doors, brooms, and other items we use may appear to be non-sentient objects, but they could be beings of the ephemeral hells suffering tremendously when

³⁵ *The Compendium of Materia Medica*, or *Bencao Gangmu*, is a Chinese herbology volume written by Li Shizhen during the Ming dynasty; its first draft was completed in 1578 and printed in Nanjing in 1596. It is a work that catalogs the materia medica of Chinese medicine known at the time, listing plants, animals, and minerals believed to have medicinal properties.

utilized. Of course, not all doors are beings of the ephemeral hells; otherwise, you might hesitate to open your door, thinking, “Ah! This is a being of the ephemeral hells!”]

Here are two stories about beings in the ephemeral hells. One is about the fish seen by Lingje Repa in Yamdrok Lake, and the other is about the frog that the siddha Tangtong Gyalpo found inside a stone.

◆ Story one: the fish seen by Lingje Repa in Yamdrok Lake

According to historical accounts, Yamdrok Lake was created during Dakini Yeshe Tsogyal’s meditation in Yamdrok. It is said that a piece of pure gold, thrown by a Bönpo practitioner, was miraculously transformed into water.

Another historical account regarding the formation of the lake states that it was initially nine small individual lakes. Dakini Yeshe Tsogyal was concerned that the lakes would dry up and the creatures living inside would perish, so she recited prayers and mantras while throwing seven taels of gold into the air, merging all the small lakes into what is now known as Yamdrok Lake.

Additionally, another historical account suggests that the lake existed before Dakini Yeshe Tsogyal’s arrival. Legend has it that long ago, the lake was merely a spring, and nearby lived a wealthy family with a servant named Dawa. One day, Dawa saved a goldfish near the spring, which transformed into a beautiful naga woman who granted Dawa a wish-fulfilling jewel. Eventually, the wealthy host discovered this and forced Dawa to return to the spring, demanding she summon the naga woman. When Dawa refused, the wealthy host pushed Dawa into the spring, leading to his drowning. At that moment, the naga woman appeared and unleashed a flood that engulfed the wealthy host. Thus, Yamdrok Lake was formed.

It is about 170 kilometers from Lhasa to Yamdrok Lake, and over five hundred kilometers from Yamdrok Lake to the Nepalese border. It is one of the four renowned lakes in the Tibetan region, spanning over six square kilometers. It is so long³⁶ that walking from its starting point at Lung Kangchen to its endpoint at Zemaguru takes several days.

On his way to India in 1990, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche passed by this lake with us. The lake was stunning at first sight, and my immediate reaction was to take photos with my camera. Rinpoche then scolded me, saying, “You people!

³⁶ 250 kilometers

Why do you just take a camera and shoot photos? When coming to a sacred place, the first thing to do is to make the aspiration!” After that, I dared not take any more photos. The great Jigme Phuntsok recited some prayers at the lake and also shared the following story from *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Here is the story about the fish:

One day, Lingje Repa, a highly accomplished master, gazed at Yamdrok Lake and began to weep, exclaiming, “Poor thing! Do not misuse offerings! Do not misuse offerings!”

When those around him asked what he meant, Lingje Repa explained, “The consciousness of a lama who misused offerings has been reborn in an ephemeral hell in this lake and is enduring immense suffering.”

Curious, they wanted to see what he was describing. In response, Lingje Repa miraculously caused the lake to dry up instantly, revealing a massive fish whose body stretched across the entire lake. The fish writhed in torment as it was covered in tiny creatures devouring it alive.

When his attendants asked who it was that was enduring such horrific karmic effect, Lingje Repa replied that it was Tsangla Tanakchen, the Black Horse Lama of Tsang. This lama had possessed great power and blessings in his speech; even a glance from him could heal those afflicted by spirits. As a result, he was deeply revered throughout the four provinces of Ü and Tsang.³⁷ However, during funeral rites, when performing the transference of consciousness for the deceased, he would demand an excessive number of horses and cattle as payment for each “P’et!” he uttered. This misuse of offerings led to his terrible rebirth as the massive fish, a being of the ephemeral hells.

[This Black Horse lama must have been quite renowned. Some lamas were famous around Lhasa but not known in Kham and Amdo, while others were well-known around Qinghai yet remained unknown in Kham. In the past, transportation and information technology were not well developed, so many things or people were unknown to others. In comparison, this lama was highly renowned in the four provinces of Ü and Tsang, indicating that he was obviously a very famous lama.]

Therefore, if a lama receives the deceased’s possessions but does not perform the transference of consciousness properly, he will undoubtedly experience a

³⁷ The four provinces are: Ali, also known as Ngari, U-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham.

miserable rebirth. We ordinary monastics should pay more attention to this. We must perform the transference of consciousness properly. The offerings from the deceased's possessions should be used for things related to the Three Jewels or other meaningful causes. We must not use these offerings for negative purposes; otherwise, the consequences will be severe.



Lesson 44

“One day the siddha Tangtong Gyalpo ... the words and terms involved is truly shameful.” [page 70–72]

We first covered the sufferings of the hell realms in the chapter on “the defects of samsara.” We have studied the hot hells, neighboring hells, cold hells, and part of the ephemeral hells. Today, we will continue with the section related to the ephemeral hells.

When learning about the sufferings of hells, we should first listen to the teachings attentively. After listening, we should not remain at a superficial understanding, assuming that grasping the meaning means our practice is already sufficient. Such thinking is unreasonable.

We should put the teachings into diligent practice, just as the eminent masters of the past did. From the biographies and stories of these eminent figures, we know that they all began their practice step by step, following a proper sequence, and they always engaged in practice with great joy. Their dedication to Dharma practice and emphasis on a practical sequence are truly admirable.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s lifelong endeavors serve as an excellent example for us. Among all his Dharma activities, his teaching and expounding of the Dharma, as well as hearing the Dharma, have always been the most important aspects. As his lineage disciples, we must keep this priority firmly in our minds. Due to the limited merit of today’s sentient beings, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche has left us and passed into parinirvana. However, his great achievements remain with us, allowing us and future practitioners to learn from and emulate them.

As for me, ever since I received the lineage teachings, I have always regarded studying and practicing the Dharma as the most important aspects of my life. The same is true for my Dharma friends at Larung Gar, who are highly motivated in their pursuit of Dharma.

From what I understand, many practitioners living in urban areas are also earnestly pursuing the Dharma. Although they face many challenges, such as pressure and distractions in the mundane world, they still manage to carve out time for their practice. This is indeed no easy feat.

However, rather than being hindered by uncontrollable external factors, some individuals impede others' Dharma studies for personal reasons. This is a serious fault! Therefore, I once again urge group leaders, tutors, and individuals in charge of group studies not to obstruct others' Dharma practices due to personal issues.

For example, one person in charge chose to attend a meeting, resulting in the cancellation of a group study session for more than twenty Dharma friends. Another had to go on a business trip and simply instructed his group to study on their own for a month without making any other arrangements. Such occurrences happen frequently with certain individuals in charge. If they truly have pressing matters to attend to, we would not criticize them arbitrarily or prohibit leaves of absence. However, I still urge them to consider the impact of their decisions. Even a single disrupted session of group study can significantly hinder the continuous growth of wisdom in others.

If I must cancel a class, I first assess whether it is due to a personal reason. If it is not, such as for a life release or another event that can better benefit beings, then I am willing to cancel the class for that day. Aside from this, I have never canceled any of my classes due to trivial personal matters or minor illnesses. This has always been my principle. As I recall, every time I had to cancel a class and leave Larung Gar, it was because I was either too ill or had some other special obligation to fulfill. I always deliberated carefully before deciding to cancel my class. Without a legitimate reason, I have never canceled any of my teachings.

However, a few leaders of Dharma study groups do not seem to respect the established timetable. It is entirely up to their personal discretion to organize the study group or not. They simply do as they please. This is not right. If it is a worldly matter, such as going to work, you may choose to idle as long as your superior does not reprimand you or reduce your salary. However, studying the Dharma should

not be treated the same way, as there are always significant karmic consequences involved.

Typically, Dharma teachers at Larung Gar do not cancel classes, barring serious illness that requires them to take sick leave for a day or two. Moreover, they always prioritize Dharma teaching, which is the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's blessing and legacy. Therefore, I hope the tutoring and study sessions at Larung Gar will uphold this good tradition. I also hope that lay practitioners outside Larung Gar will do their utmost to respect this tradition, even though it may be challenging for them to replicate it exactly.

As far as I know, some study groups are performing exceptionally well— not a single class is canceled within a semester, and many Dharma friends never miss a class. However, other groups struggle, as their study sessions are often inconsistent, likely due to a lack of the right attitudes and determination, which poses a significant risk to their Dharma practice.

Therefore, I urge you to pay special attention to this issue and to appreciate the opportunity to listen to Dharma teachings. Although my teaching may be average, the content in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is essential for everyone to know. Regardless of your wisdom and state of practice, and no matter how busy you are, you really should complete the transmission of the teachings at this time.

In fact, many Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar are quite busy: they need to listen and reflect, meditate, serve the sangha or volunteer for Dharma activities, and recite mantras, among other things. Today, one Dharma student told me, “Ngöndro practice is important; hearing and contemplation are important; volunteer work is important. All these things matter, and I want to do everything well. But sometimes, I just don't have enough time.” What he said makes sense. If we have the intention and motivation, there is hope in whatever we do. In contrast, if a person lacks the intention and motivation to practice ngöndro and to engage with the Dharma, they may view these activities as burdensome. Instead, they might find greater interest in worldly matters, indicating they are already on the path to the lower realms. Therefore, the direction of our future lives is in our own hands; it is entirely up to us to ultimately rise or fall.

This is the most comprehensive teaching on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* I have ever given. I will not offer such an extensive teaching on this text again. After

receiving the teaching, you should carefully contemplate the content layer by layer, which will bring you only benefits and no harm.

Let's continue to study the second story about the ephemeral hells.

- ◆ Story two: the frog that the siddha Tangtong Gyalpo found inside a stone

Tangtong Gyalpo was an extraordinarily accomplished master of Nyingma. It is said that he followed more than five hundred qualified teachers to study Sutrayana and Vajrayana, and attained all the achievements. He revealed many terms or hidden treasures and manifested many miraculous sublime signs. Tangtong Gyalpo built fifty-eight metal bridges in the Tibetan regions, including Luding Bridge,³⁸ which was constructed through his miraculous powers. He also erected stupas to subdue maras at various crucial locations. Tangtong Gyalpo passed into parinirvana at the age of 125, but his emanations continue to appear in many places even today.

One day, Tangtong Gyalpo was practicing the yoga exercises of the channels and energies on a large rock. Due to his immense power of realization, the rock split apart, revealing a massive frog trapped inside. This frog was a being from the ephemeral hell, covered in countless tiny creatures that fed on it, causing it to open and close its black mouth in excruciating pain. When his attendants inquired about the cause of such a fate, Tangtong Gyalpo explained that the frog had once been a priest who performed animal sacrifices.

In the past, Tibet had a troubling tradition of animal sacrifice influenced by Bön, the native pre-Buddhist religious tradition. When Padmasambhava arrived in Tibet, King Trisong Detsen asked, "Is it proper conduct to sacrifice animals as offerings to the deity and the guru?"

Deeply displeased, Padmasambhava responded, "This will only cause countless living beings to fall into Vajra Hell, making liberation nearly impossible." He then elaborated on the negative consequences, such as animal sacrifice leading to rebirth as evil spirits, ferocious ghosts, or malevolent entities.

³⁸ Luding Bridge is a bridge over the Dadu River in Luding County, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, China, located about 80 kilometers west of the city of Ya'an. The bridge dates from the Qing dynasty and is considered a historical landmark. It was an important crossing on the road between Sichuan and the Tibetan region. The bridge was the site of the Battle of Luding Bridge, one of the most important events in the Long March.

Since the time of Patrul Rinpoche and other eminent masters, animal sacrifice has largely disappeared in many areas of Tibet due to the strong advocacy of these great figures. However, some Tibetan regions near the mainland of China have recently resumed this practice. I once visited a monastery and observed that during festivals, people from nearby villages sacrificed pigs to the gods. The villagers also slaughtered pigs or goats when someone died, claiming it was in honor of the deceased.

This tradition is more prevalent in mainland China. Despite humanity entering the twenty-first century and the sweeping tide of civilization affecting the globe, there are still rural areas where harmful superstitions persist. For example, some people believe that when a person dies, their family should kill a pig, and that the fatter the pig, the better it will be for the deceased. This belief is utterly misguided.

As stated in the *Original Vows of Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra*, the act of killing living beings for the deceased not only brings no benefit to the deceased but also inflicts great harm on that being. Even if the deceased could have achieved a favorable rebirth, the misdeeds committed by their family and friends will hinder their chances of attaining a good rebirth and true happiness.³⁹ Therefore, after studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, people everywhere should abandon this harmful tradition of animal sacrifice.

In 1995, due to illness, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche lived for a few months in an apartment complex named “International Metropolis,” where I served as his attendant. One day, I noticed a family carrying a rooster with them while transporting the body of a deceased family member to a funeral. I asked them

³⁹ The corresponding verses in the sutra are:

[...] do not kill, harm [beings], generate evil conditions, or worship and offer sacrifices to ghosts and spirits, or seek the help of goblins on the days when someone is nearing death. Why? Your killing, harming, worshipping, offering sacrifices, and so forth are not the least bit helpful to the deceased, but bind up conditions of wrongdoing so that they become deeper and more severe. If in this life or in the future the departed one gains elements of holiness¹⁴ and is to be reborn among humans or devas, but because his relatives commit these evil causes [for his sake] when he is on the verge of death, he will become involved in dispute and be delayed from being reborn in an upper realm. How much worse the situation will be for the dying persons who never had even a few roots of goodness from their lifetime!

The Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra, translated by Jenne Tsai, published by the Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center, chapter 7.

what the rooster was for, and they replied, “We’ll kill the rooster to accompany the deceased through difficulties.”

What nonsense! Similar acts of superstition may occur around you as well, so I hope you will make every effort to help people correct such misdeeds. After all, even if we cannot do anything meaningful for the deceased, we at least should not engage in actions that will harm them.

There is a story about animal sacrifice in the *Dhammapada*. During the Buddha’s time, a king had never met the Buddha or heard the Dharma because his country was remote. The king always believed in the doctrines of non-Buddhists called tirthikas and would sacrifice animals to worship the tirthikas’ celestial gods.

Once, the king’s mother fell gravely ill. Many doctors treated her, but she showed no signs of improvement. The king then consulted two hundred brahmins, who advised, “Prepare a young kid and one hundred animals of various species for sacrifice. Take them to a remote and clean location outside the city, kill them, and offer them to the celestial gods. By doing so, your mother will be cured.”

Upon hearing this, the king immediately dispatched someone to organize the sacrifice suggested by the brahmins. Soon, many animals, including an elephant, a horse, a cow, and a sheep, set out from the east gate toward the designated site for the sacrifice ceremony. Along the way, the animals’ wailing shook the ground.

When the Buddha learned that the king intended to kill so many innocent beings to save the life of just one person, he felt deep compassion for the king’s ignorance. Thus, the Buddha led his disciples to the king’s kingdom and met the king, the brahmins, and the animals outside the east gate.

The Buddha asked the king where he was going, and the king replied, “As instructed by the brahmins, I am going to immolate all the animals and offer them as sacrifices to the celestial gods, so my mother will be blessed and recover soon.”

The Buddha told the king, “If a person wishes to reap, he must first plow and sow; if a person desires wealth, he should practice generosity; if a person wants to live long, he must cultivate compassion; if a person seeks wisdom, he should study diligently. These four principles require the right cause to yield the desired effect. However, you are doing exactly the opposite. You are mistaking evil for good and attempting to prolong life by killing beings, which will not bring any real benefit.”

Then the Buddha recited a verse:

Better than living for one hundred years,
 Diligently serving all the gods,
 And making sacrifices of elephants and horses,
 Is one compassionate act.

Meanwhile, the Buddha emitted vast rays of light that shone upon all suffering beings. The king was overjoyed and swiftly attained fruition. After hearing the supreme teaching, the king's mother resolved her mental afflictions, and her illness vanished. The two hundred brahmins felt ashamed and confessed their faults, vowing to follow the Buddha and practice the Dharma as monks. From then on, the king ruled the country according to the Dharma, and gradually the nation became increasingly prosperous. This is a remarkable story from the sutra.

Some people kill animals for the sake of longevity today. For example, parents kill chickens and lambs to feed their children, hoping they will grow up healthy. A family may kill an animal and stew it into a soup to nourish a patient, hoping he will recover quickly. Such killing does not benefit the diners' health and longevity. On the contrary, it brings them harm.

Therefore, if we want to live a long life, we must not engage in killing. Recently, I mentioned that the oldest man to ever live in the world was a vegetarian. Many Buddhists enjoy very long lives and are successful in spreading the Dharma, primarily for two reasons. First, they are filled with compassion and refuse to kill or harm even the smallest living being. Second, they do not consume the meat of any living being, and their food is very healthy, keeping them free from various diseases.

The merits and virtues of being vegetarian are extensively discussed in the *Lankavatara Sutra*. If we practitioners have read and studied the sutra, then not only for the sake of all beings, but even for ourselves, we should adhere to a vegetarian diet.

In my book *The Vegetarian Views of Tibetan Buddhism*, I cited scriptural evidence from sutras such as the Mahaparinirvana Sutra and the Lankavatara Sutra, as well as teachings from eminent masters of Tibetan Buddhism. I still remember a touching story I included in the book:

One day, many meat vendors gathered in a market where Milarepa and his disciple Rechung Dorje Drakpa happened to be collecting alms. A butcher in the market cut open the belly of a goat, but the animal managed to escape with its

intestines trailing behind. The goat approached Milarepa, trembling, and sought his protection.

Milarepa recited prayers for the goat and blessed it, but sadly, the animal still died. Milarepa then sang a vajra song filled with great sorrow. Hearing it, Rechung Dorje Drakpa developed a profound aversion to killing animals for meat and experienced a strong disenchantment with samsara.

When eminent masters encounter an event, they can transform it into a means of spiritual practice. In contrast, ordinary worldly people are more drawn to things that stimulate greed, anger, and ignorance. Such influences easily penetrate their minds.

For example, when they hear a new pop song, they sing along immediately; when they hear a romantic story, they recall all the details right away. However, in terms of the Dharma, when they hear teachings that are beneficial across lifetimes, they quickly forget. The teachings leave no trace in their minds, much like a passing boat leaves no wake on the water.

Thus, beings of the degenerate age possess many unfavorable traits and lack virtues and good habits. Nevertheless, we all yearn for liberation and wish to embark on the path to liberation, so we should not passively follow the karmic forces arising from our heavy afflictions. Instead, we must guard and protect ourselves and strive to engage in virtuous deeds.

Although we cannot be like those sublime beings who commit no negative acts, we should at least devote some time each day to practice the Dharma wholeheartedly. By doing so, our minds will gradually become more capable, and we will no longer struggle with external temptations. Therefore, after embarking on the Dharma path, it is crucial that we train the mind.

During Patrul Rinpoche's time, it was common for Tibetan lamas to eat meat due to factors such as inconvenient transportation. As I wrote in *The Vegetarian Views of Tibetan Buddhism*, Tibetan Buddhism is indeed not as good as Chinese Buddhism in promoting a vegetarian diet. Consequently, Tibetan Buddhism is still subject to slander and criticism, making it challenging for eminent masters to clarify these misunderstandings.

That said, the Dharma practitioners who come to the Tibetan region in pursuit of Dharma should be careful not to start eating meat simply because you are now residing here. At Larung Gar, it has been a long-standing rule that the

fourfold assembly of Han Chinese disciples must adhere to a vegetarian diet over the long term.⁴⁰ You have all been doing very well with this. I hope this is not only a tradition at Larung Gar but also a guideline that can be gradually embraced by all masters in the Tibetan region.

Of course, it is never easy to start something new, but adopting a vegetarian diet can benefit both beings and the propagation of the Dharma. Therefore, I urge everyone to reflect on this issue. In particular, Han Chinese disciples of Tibetan lamas should carefully consider the question, “If my guru frequently consumes animals, is this beneficial or detrimental to the propagation of the Dharma, my guru’s Dharma activities, and my own practice?”

Some people have said, “I will not incur any fault by eating meat if my guru gives me permission. I can eat whatever meat my guru has blessed.”

Fewer and fewer people would express such sentiments today. Although some gurus still seem to consume animals, they do so discreetly, which should be seen as an improvement.

It may still be challenging for many Tibetan gurus and sangha members to adopt a purely vegetarian diet, like the monastics of Chinese Buddhism. However, in recent years, due to the positive influence of eminent masters from Larung Gar and elsewhere, there has been significant progress compared to a decade ago. As a result, some Han Chinese lay practitioners no longer openly criticize Tibetan Buddhism when Tibetan masters give teachings in Han region of China. Therefore, we should advocate for anything that benefits sentient beings and supports Dharma practice, such as vegetarianism.

Patrul Rinpoche was firmly opposed to meat-eating, and he vividly portrayed those lamas who consume animals:

Take a look at the lamas of today! When a patron slaughters a nice fat sheep and prepares a meal of its gullet, kidneys, and other organs, along with the meat and blood, they serve it alongside the still-quivering ribs of a yak. Our lamas then cover their heads with the shawl of their robes and eagerly devour the entrails, much like infants nursing at their mother’s breast. Following this, they use their knives to cut slices of the outer meat and leisurely enjoy their meal. Once

⁴⁰ This also applies to Tibetan disciples studying at Larung Gar.

finished, their heads emerge once again, hot and steaming. Their mouths glisten with grease, and their whiskers take on a reddish hue.

Meat eaters in restaurants in Han region are similar in this regard, with the only difference being their identities. If they recklessly consume animals in this life, they will have to pay back with their own bodies for all that they have eaten so many times in this life. At that time, unimaginable torments will await them in one of the ephemeral hells.

Because consuming meat has such serious negative consequences, a lay practitioner should consider giving up meat whenever possible, even if only for a year. This action will generate great merit. If it is difficult for you to completely cease meat intake for an extended period, you may gradually reduce your consumption year by year. This will be beneficial for your health, and your craving for meat will slowly diminish.

Monastics cannot accept offerings of sacrificed animals. Moreover, if they excessively use such offerings donated by the faithful, they will have to pay back with their own bodies. Here is a story from the *Record of Self-Reflection from the Disciples of Shakyas*:

Once upon a time, there was a Chan master who did not practice well but had received offerings from a patron for years. Not long after the master died, a soft mushroom that tasted like meat began to grow on a piece of dead wood in the patron's garden. The patron's family would cut the mushroom to eat every day, and it would soon grow back. This continued for a long time, and the whole family was very happy.

As time passed, the patron's neighbors learned about the mushroom. One neighbor wanted to taste it, so one night he climbed over the wall and cut the soft mushroom with a knife.

Suddenly, a human voice emerged from the dead wood, "Who is cutting my flesh? I don't owe you anything!"

The neighbor was stunned and asked, "Who are you?"

"I used to be a Chan master whose practice was mediocre and who relied too much on the offerings donated by the host of this family. I did not deserve the abundant offerings, so I must repay them with my own body. Please help me repay my patron so I will suffer less." The neighbor was taken aback by what he heard, so

he informed the patron and sent him more than six thousand kilos of rice. Since then, the soft mushroom stopped growing.

This is something that today's practitioners can learn from. When we receive offerings, we must determine whether it is appropriate to use them. If the answer is no, then, no matter how difficult our lives may be, we must not deceive others for their offerings through hypocrisy or other improper means.

Some monastics today are neither sublime beings nor Mahasiddhas, yet they label themselves as such and deceive the faithful everywhere to receive money and possessions. Even if they lead abundant and happy lives, the sufferings of the ephemeral hells await them after death, as Patrul Rinpoche said.

Therefore, those who truly want to protect themselves must reflect on their actions, asking, "How do I make a living? Is it proper?" Of course, there is no need to fear enjoying basic provisions. However, it is certainly not good if one earns a living by deceiving others out of greed.

For example, if someone claims to be an emanation of a great Mahasiddha, boasting, "I have clairvoyance, so I know who you were in your previous life," or "I know why you are sick. There is a spirit attached to you. As long as I give blessings and gaze at it, it will be scared away." Such trickery is considered a form of wrong livelihood, which is very harmful.

We should live a pure life and care for the well-being of others and ourselves. At the very least, we should strive to avoid falling into the lower realms in the next life. However, many urban dwellers do not even acknowledge the existence of hell realms, so there may be little that can be done to stop their misdeeds.

Nevertheless, we must do our best, particularly by embracing a vegetarian diet. We should also invest more time in studying relevant instructions and thoughtfully considering the benefits of vegetarianism as well as the drawbacks of carnivorous diets.

In the text, Patrul Rinpoche shared another story about the ephemeral hells:

Once, Palden Chökyong, the High Abbot of Ngor, was visiting Derge. He assigned several monks to stand along the banks of the River Ngulda and instructed them to prevent anything from passing by. As evening approached, they noticed a large tree trunk floating in the water. They pulled it to the bank and brought it to the Abbot, informing him that they had not seen anything else.

“That must be it,” he responded. “Split it open.”

Upon opening the trunk, they discovered a large frog being devoured by a swarm of insects. After performing a purification ritual, the Abbot revealed that the frog had once been a treasurer of Derge named Pogye.

Therefore, a monastery must pay close attention to its property management. According to the *Vinaya*, funds donated for the sangha, Dharma halls, Buddhist statues, and Buddhist scriptures should be clearly designated. I have heard that after receiving a donation, some monasteries simply ask a monk to arbitrarily decide how to use that money. How terrible!

Many monastics present during this teaching are likely to become chief masters, high abbots, or chief receptionists in the near future. I hope you will allocate the funds donated by the faithful toward matters related to the Three Jewels. You must not use the funds for personal matters or distribute them to family or friends.

It is emphasized repeatedly in the precepts that it is the sangha who determines how to use collective possessions. If you wish to use any funds, you must first discuss it with the sangha. Regardless of your position, you cannot make unilateral decisions; otherwise, you will face the karmic effects.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche also placed significant importance on this issue. He reiterated on various occasions that the accounting department at Larung Gar had to consult with the sangha before utilizing any funds or property; otherwise, such actions would result in serious karmic repercussions.

I have observed that some masters and abbots in a few monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism and temples of Chinese Buddhism treat collective possessions as if they were their own, likely because they have not studied the precepts. They decide to buy a car today, send gifts to a government official tomorrow, or donate to a cause the day after. With a single directive, they can easily allocate several million dollars from the collective funds for a specific purpose.

If it is your own private fund, then you can do as you wish. However, if it is a collective resource, improper use will result in severe karmic effects. There are many related examples in the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* and the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*. Therefore, those in high-ranking positions who manage collective funds should reflect on the ephemeral hells and exercise caution in their actions.

They cannot act solely based on their power, assuming that no one will dare oppose them. The law of karma is unfailing. Moreover, there are hells in this world

that are invisible to the naked eye, and they are far more terrifying than the worst worldly prison. Thus, if we engage in the aforementioned transgressions of animal sacrifice and improper use of funds, we must strive to cease those misdeeds.

I have heard that some regions in mainland China still uphold the tradition of animal sacrifice, which is deeply concerning. Historical accounts indicate that sacrifices during the Shang dynasty⁴¹ were among the most brutal, including not only animals but also humans. A similar tradition existed in ancient India but gradually faded away. During the eras of Confucius and Mencius, human sacrifice became rare; however, animal sacrifices remained prevalent, primarily involving six types of animals: cattle, sheep, horses, pigs, dogs, and chickens. Such harmful traditions still persist in some areas and must be abolished.

In my book *The Miserable Worlds*,⁴² I quoted a verse from *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*:

Immolating beings as sacrifices
Will not yield any benefit,
(Because) the gods will not accept them,
And the killers commit evil deeds.

Immolating living beings as sacrifices can never lead to happiness or merit. This is because the gods, who favor virtuous actions, will not accept such sacrifices, while the killers will have committed boundless crimes. If such a harmful tradition continues, it will lead to natural disasters involving the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. Additionally, it will bring many harms and obstacles to ourselves.

Many Dharma practitioners here have either taken ordination or received the precepts of lay people. However, before you did so, you may have committed many misdeeds. Some misdeeds can be attributed to tradition, some to ignorance, and some to strong emotional afflictions. Not to mention greater misdeeds, even a small act, such as angrily swatting a mosquito that bites you, is a misdeed in itself. Therefore, each of us must carefully repent before our deaths.

Dharma practice is not about cultivating an external image but rather about

⁴¹ The Shang dynasty, also historically known as the Yin dynasty, was a Chinese dynasty that ruled in the middle and lower Yellow River valley in the second millennium BC, succeeding the Xia dynasty and followed by the Zhou dynasty.

⁴² In this book, Khenpo Sodargye covered topics including ethics, humanity, Tibetan culture, animal welfare, and so forth.

taming and nourishing the mind. This is very different from academic research, which only requires intellectual understanding. Genuine Dharma practice emphasizes the importance of reflecting on the mind. When a practitioner reads a Buddhist text, they cannot simply focus on its literal meaning; instead, they should examine their mind in relation to the text. They should ask themselves, “Did I commit such a misdeed in the past? If so, what should I do to purify those negative actions? Is it possible that I might commit the same misdeed again in the future? If so, what should I do to prevent it?” If we can examine and tame our minds in this way, we are true practitioners.

In fact, eminent masters and accomplished practitioners, whether from the Han region or Tibet, all possess the ability to tame their minds. In contrast, those of us wandering in samsara are often distracted by the external environment and by fabricated thoughts, rather than focusing on controlling and taming our own minds. Even if they occasionally read a good book or listen to a guru’s instruction, such individuals tend to make changes that last only a day or two, eventually reverting to their previous states. This is not ideal.

After all, a guru cannot always supervise you with a stick in hand. You must rely on yourself. It is like completing elementary school; you will not go back to first grade and start all over again. Similarly, there is a time limit for following a guru at Larung Gar, and it will not last forever.

Those with great merit may follow a guru for ten or twenty years, while other disciples may only follow for five to six years, or even just a few months. Regardless of how long you follow a guru, you should integrate their teachings into your mind. The biographies of some eminent masters illustrate that even brief periods of receiving teachings can bring significant benefits to their lives.

On the other hand, following a guru for an extended period does not necessarily mean that achievement will come more quickly. Someone may have been following the guru for a long time, yet they seem increasingly indifferent. They might complain, “Ah! The guru rambles every day! There’s nothing worth listening to. I’ll just do my own thing.” Such a person may continue cooking their stir-fry while listening to the teachings on the radio. Is it possible? Perhaps someone was cooking and then stopped after hearing what I just said. Are you embarrassed? Just kidding. But such a scenario is indeed possible.

Last, Patrul Rinpoche shared a few more stories about the ephemeral hells:

During the time of the Buddha, there was a butcher in a village who vowed never to slaughter animals at night. As a result, he was reborn in an ephemeral hell. In this hell, he experienced immense pleasure at night, residing in a magnificent mansion where four beautiful women attended to his every need, providing him with abundant food, drinks, and other indulgences. However, during the day, the walls of the mansion would undergo a distressing transformation, turning into scorching hot metal, and the four women would morph into terrifying brown dogs that would devour his body.

Here is another case: Long ago, Śroṇa witnessed an adulterer who had vowed to abstain from infidelity during the day. Unlike the butcher, this person only experienced suffering at night. This demonstrates that even observing a single precept, whether during the day or at night, can lead to significant merit and rewards.

These are the true events witnessed by Śroṇa. Here is another relevant story:

In the past, there existed a delightful monastery that accommodated approximately five hundred monks. However, when the bell signaled midday and the monks gathered for their meal, an unusual transformation occurred—the peaceful monastery turned into a battleground. The monks' utensils, such as begging bowls and cups, mysteriously transformed into weapons, leading to a chaotic scene as the monks began to strike each other. This fighting would persist until the lunch hour was over, at which point the monks would disperse and return to their places. In the days of Buddha Kashyapa, many monks used to argue during the midday meal, and this was the fully ripened effect.

These eight hot hells, eight cold hells, the neighboring hells, and the ephemeral hells are collectively referred to as the eighteen hell realms. It is crucial to thoroughly study the number of these realms, the duration of time spent in them, the sufferings endured, and the causes that lead to rebirth in them. Through compassionate meditation, reflect on the beings born in the hells. Strive diligently to ensure that neither you nor anyone else is ever reborn in these realms. Merely intellectualizing this knowledge without internalizing it as a profound experience will render you akin to those stubborn and conceited practitioners who are criticized by sublime beings and condemned by the wise.

Many of the topics covered in today's class warrant deep contemplation. As Nagarjuna stated:

If simply seeing pictures of the hells
And hearing, thinking, reading of them scares,
Or making sculpted figures, need we say
How hard to bear the ripened fruit will be?⁴³

When people with roots of merit see images of hell, hear about the suffering, contemplate these scenes, or read the descriptions, they become frightened—let alone if they were to experience the torments firsthand. Therefore, we should all pay special attention to the law of karma. Additionally, we should put the teachings into practice and meditate diligently and earnestly, without any arrogance. If we fail to grasp the fundamental teachings of the Buddha, we may engage in many foolish actions.

Here is the story told by Patrul Rinpoche in the text:

There was a monk who displayed exemplary conduct but harbored immense pride. He visited Shang Rinpoche, who inquired about his understanding of Dharma.

“I have listened to many teachings,” the monk replied.

“Then tell me the names of the eighteen hells,” Shang Rinpoche said.

“The eight hot hells and the eight cold hells... that makes sixteen... and eighteen if you include the Black and Red Hat Karmapas.”

The monk did not count the Karmapa Lamas among the hells out of disrespect; he simply could not recall the names of the ephemeral hells and neighboring hells. Since the Red and Black Hat Karmapas were well-known at that time, he impulsively included them. Now, whether or not you have practiced the teachings you have received is one thing, but not knowing at least the words and terms involved is truly shameful.

Such a know-it-all may be found not only among Buddhists but also among worldly people. Once, a man from the northeast came to work in the south as a government official. A local chief invited him to dinner. During the meal, a servant served a dish of water chestnuts. The man had never eaten such a thing, but he was embarrassed to ask. The host invited him to taste first, so he had no choice but to pick up a water chestnut, put it in his mouth, and start chewing.

⁴³ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

The host was surprised that he ate it without peeling the shell and asked, “The water chestnut should be eaten after its outer shell is peeled. Why are you eating everything?”

The man realized he had made a mistake, but still, he said in all seriousness, “I just came to the south, and my body is still adapting to the new environment. The reason I ate the water chestnut with its shell is that I wanted to clear away internal heat and toxins.”

The host shook his head and said, “I have never heard that the shell can do this. Are there many water chestnuts in your hometown?”

The man replied, “Quite a lot! They grow everywhere in the mountains!”

Hearing this, the host broke into laughter.

The man pretended to know something of which he was actually ignorant, bringing only humiliation upon himself in the end. As Sakya Pandita said,

The fools show their knowledge on the lips,
The wise hide their knowledge in the mind;
Wheat stalks float on the water,
Precious gemstones sink in the water.

That is all for today’s teaching.



Lesson 45

“There are two sorts of preta: ... and this causes them immense suffering.” [page 72–73]

Let’s continue with “the defects of samsara.” Today, we’ll study the sufferings of the pretas, or the hungry ghosts.

Before the teaching, I want to address something: My current approach to teaching primarily follows the traditional method of mind training in Buddhism. Some people dismiss past traditions as outdated and obsolete, rejecting and abandoning them entirely, which is unreasonable. We can more easily accept and embrace new ideas by building on the foundation of old traditions. Completely discarding the past is also an extreme act.

On the other hand, some individuals believe that new ideas have little value while old ideas are the most valuable. Consequently, they reject new concepts, knowledge, and technology. This perspective is also misguided.

Regardless of who we are, we should keep up with and advance with the times; otherwise, we risk being left behind. This principle applies to us Buddhists as well. While preserving the true Dharma, we can adopt modern methods and approaches to teach and propagate the Buddha’s teachings. If the methods and approaches used to introduce the Dharma are not aligned with contemporary society, it will be challenging for people to understand and accept the Dharma, no matter how profound it is.

However, many people today often take extreme positions. Some Dharma students refuse to accept contemporary Buddhist interpretations and modern

methods, focusing solely on the content of early Buddhist scriptures. In particular, practitioners from the older generation tend to be more conservative.

Dharma teachers of the new generation are quite different. They show little interest in the practical instructions of the past and the examples in the sutras, emphasizing instead that the Dharma must adapt to new trends; otherwise, it may not be readily accepted by others.

Personally, I believe that both attitudes are somewhat extreme, especially the latter. If a Dharma teacher completely disregards the instructions in the Buddha's teachings—such as the precious human life and the defects of samsara—and focuses solely on mundane matters like food, clothing, accommodation, and transportation, there is a high likelihood that many listeners will engage in wrongful actions and experience negative rebirths due to their ignorance. From a Buddhist standpoint, such an attitude from a teacher is highly irresponsible.

Therefore, to better propagate the Dharma, a teacher can integrate Buddhist practices into everyday life and adopt systematic, information-based approaches. However, the teacher should not modify the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. For example, they cannot omit topics such as the sufferings, categories, and causes of rebirth pertaining to the three lower realms. If they make these changes and do not clearly explain the pain or happiness of the next life, then no matter how eloquently they teach, their own fabricated thoughts will lead beings down the wrong path.

Thus, when I teach Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and Karma Chagme Rinpoche's *Aspiration Prayer of Sukhavati*, my pedagogical approach aligns with that of past eminent masters. My teaching is grounded in examples and scriptural evidence from the sutras, and I sometimes incorporate a few contemporary examples to engage the class and capture your attention.

Some people may find this teaching approach quite rigid. For example, when I discuss the sufferings of the pretas, some practitioners are able to empathize, while others may find the teaching boring and less engaging than worldly topics.

However, in order to be responsible to everyone, I will not change my teaching style. I will do my best to extract the true meanings from the text and present them to you, as I believe this will be beneficial for most people.

Furthermore, my reason for teaching you *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is my hope that, in the future, it will not only be me, but also all of you here, including

both monastics and lay practitioners, who will encourage others to establish a solid foundation in ngöndro. When you have the opportunity and capacity to teach others the Dharma, it is better not to directly introduce advanced states of realization. Instead, you should guide others to first study and practice ngöndro thoroughly, as it is the most reliable sequence of practice.

The purpose of introducing the sufferings of the three lower realms is to inspire everyone's disenchantment with samsara. In fact, such disenchantment is not difficult to achieve; sometimes it requires only a simple cause.

Recently, a Dharma student asked me, "To generate renunciation, should I meditate on coarse or subtle impermanence?" My answer was, "The coarse one." Later, I reflected on this question. Indeed, many eminent masters took ordination because of their conviction regarding coarse impermanence, and at that time, they may not have fully considered or understood subtle impermanence. As we know, Shravakas believe in the inherent existence of indivisible particles and indivisible time—a realist view that asserts the real existence of entities, which contradicts the doctrine of emptiness. Nevertheless, this does not prevent them from generating renunciation and attaining liberation. Therefore, meditating on coarse impermanence can still lead us to generate renunciation.

For example, the great tantric master Lama Zurcungpa Sherap-tra (1014–1074) generated renunciation for a simple reason: when he was thirteen years old, his family arranged for him to marry a child bride known as a Tongyangxi.⁴⁴

One day, while Zurcungpa was reading a Buddhist scripture in bed, a flood occurred outside, and his wife asked him to help. He went out to block the water wearing a new undergown that his wife had just made for him.

He worked hard for quite a while and became very sweaty. His wife complained, saying, "Why did you make the new clothes so dirty?" Zurcungpa was upset and responded, "You do not care about me! Instead, you care about a piece of clothing! Then, I don't want it anymore." He took off his undergown and tossed it to his wife, then walked away without looking back. His wife was also angry and returned home.

After this conflict, Zurcungpa felt that worldly life was meaningless and

⁴⁴ Tongyangxi, also known as Shim-pua marriage in Min Nan dialects, was a tradition of arranged marriage dating back to pre-modern China, in which a family would adopt a pre-adolescent daughter as a future bride for one of their pre-adolescent (usually infant) sons, and the children would be raised together.

developed a strong disenchantment with samsara. At that moment, he did not reflect on subtle impermanence. His biography also details how his wife made a scene, how they divided their possessions, and so forth.

Although this is the biography of a great eminent master, it includes many details that resemble the quarrels, divorces, and remarriages of ordinary people. However, it seems you are not interested in knowing more about these details, so let's stop here.

In short, whether we meditate on “the impermanence of life” or “the defects of samsara,” we must develop a strong aversion to everything in samsara. This aversion is the goal of our study and practice of the Dharma. If we can cultivate this aversion, even if we appear to depend on provisions to sustain our lives, we will not cling to them strongly. Most importantly, we will not believe that these provisions and everything else exist inherently.

2.1.3.2.2. The Pretas

There are many ways to classify pretas, or hungry ghosts. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, pretas are divided into those who live collectively and those who move through space. In the *Treatise on the Foundation for Yoga Practitioners*, pretas are categorized into those who suffer from external obscurations, those who suffer from internal obscurations, and those devoid of obstructions.⁴⁵ In the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, pretas are classified as those who experience happiness⁴⁶ and those who are perpetually starving. In the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra*, pretas are divided into those who possess majesty and those who do not.⁴⁷

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* presents the broadest classification, categorizing pretas into thirty-six types. I recently reviewed the text and

⁴⁵ This type of hungry ghost, also referred to as “unobstructed ghosts,” faces no barriers in eating and drinking; however, whatever they consume turns into burning coals due to their karmic forces, leading them to endure great hunger and thirst.

⁴⁶ This type of ghost experiences joy and happiness similar to that of celestial beings but lives alongside hungry ghosts, thus serving as their master.

⁴⁷ Those with majesty may reside in splendid forests and gardens, surrounded by beautiful trees or in picturesque mountain groves. Some even inhabit palaces in the sky, indulging in a range of blessings and pleasures in pristine and peaceful locations. In contrast, those without majesty may dwell in unsanitary places like toilets, dung heaps, muddy pits, and other impure environments. They endure unfortunate circumstances, poverty, hunger, and thirst.

found it very good. Our Dharma practitioners should study it as well. The text can be printed and distributed to everyone at Larung Gar. By reading it, you will learn that careless actions can lead to rebirth as a preta.

For instance, the cause of being reborn as a Dharma-eating preta is providing incorrect teachings in pursuit of wealth; the cause of becoming a meat-eating preta is running a meat business using deceitful practices; the cause of being reborn as an incense-eating preta is charging exorbitant prices for low-quality incense; and the cause of becoming a demon preta is clinging to wrong views, rejecting authentic teachings, and preaching erroneous paths to others. According to the text, there are many other types of pretas, each with various causes for their rebirth. I hope the Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar will take the time to examine it closely.

For those of you who are not at Larung Gar, since you browse the internet daily, you can read the text online or print it out yourself. This will undoubtedly benefit you greatly. You will recognize that countless beings are suffering in the realm of pretas at this very moment. Additionally, it will serve as a reminder to be mindful of your own actions—of body, speech, and mind—so that you do not engage in misdeeds that could lead to your rebirth in the realm of pretas.

We should always reflect on the following: What are the causes of falling into the three lower realms? Have I committed any of them?

Such reflections apply when you study the sufferings in the hell realms as well as in the preta realms. The *True Attainment Treatise*⁴⁸ states:

Being stingy and greedy with food, drink, and other things leads
to rebirth in the realm of pretas.

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

Rebirth as pretas results from stinginess, greed, and jealousy.

Here, the causes of rebirth as pretas include jealousy, in addition to stinginess and greed. During our interactions with others, such negative emotions can easily arise. As we study the text below on the sufferings of pretas, each of us should make time for self-reflection.

As mentioned in the *Beacon of Certainty*, beginning practitioners should

⁴⁸ Skt. Satyasiddhi-śāstra

engage in analytical meditation. They should not simply close their eyes and think of nothing; instead, they should learn to contemplate effectively.

For example, when meditating on the suffering of pretas, we should first develop a theoretical understanding. We should believe in the existence of such a preta realm, which may be inhabited by animals, exist in the air, or lie below ground. Next, we should familiarize ourselves with the sufferings of the preta realm and the causes of rebirth in it. Finally, we should make an aspiration that all beings—including ourselves—can be freed from the causes of rebirth in a preta realm. We should wish that those who have not yet been born as pretas will never experience such a rebirth. We should consistently recite prayers and dedicate merit to those who are currently pretas. Even when we discard leftover food, we should recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, whose blessing allows the pretas to partake of the food. Additionally, we should visualize with compassion that tens of thousands of pretas can consume this food. Many eminent masters in the past practiced in this manner. Such practice is very necessary.

2.1.3.2.2.1. Pretas Who Live Collectively

Pretas who live collectively can be categorized into three types: pretas suffering from external, internal, or specific obscurations. This classification is very similar to that in the *Stages of the Yogacara*. According to the *Comprehensive Chronicles of the Buddhas*, there are four types of pretas: those who suffer from external obscurations, those who suffer from internal obscurations, those who cannot obtain food, and those who cannot consume food.

Specifically, pretas who suffer from external and internal obscurations are the same ones mentioned by Patrul Rinpoche in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. The pretas who cannot obtain food can find delicious food but cannot reach it, as many of Yama's henchmen guard it. When the pretas who cannot consume food attempt to eat, the food turns into iron pellets or molten copper, which burns their entire bodies.

Therefore, the teachings in Chinese Buddhism are largely consistent with those in Tibetan Buddhism. We should not assume that the practical guidance in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is unique to Tibetan Buddhism and entirely unknown in Chinese Buddhism.

In my commentary on the *Aspiration Prayer of Sukhavati*, nearly all the

Buddhist stories I referenced can be found in the Chinese Tripitaka. The same holds true for my discussion of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. With very few Tibetan examples, all the quotations from sutras and shastras can also be found in the Chinese Tripitaka. It is just that they were not emphasized in the past.

Today, some practitioners who exclusively follow Chinese Buddhism tend to believe that Tibetan Buddhism significantly differs from it, which is misleading. As Mipham Rinpoche states in *The Unity of Three Precepts*, all schools and lineages do not contradict each other, much like two sons sharing the same father. There is no need for a fight over the question of whose father he truly is. Therefore, when you follow a specific lineage or take on disciples in the future, you should first establish the understanding that the lineages do not contradict each other. Otherwise, our fabricated thoughts can become very powerful, and if not dispelled, they will undoubtedly hinder our temporary happiness in this life and our ultimate happiness in future lives.

2.1.3.2.2.1.1. Pretas Suffering from External Obscurations

These pretas experience extreme hunger and thirst. For centuries, they have not even heard the mention of water. Driven by an unending obsession with food and drink, they wander endlessly in search of sustenance, yet they never encounter even the slightest trace of nourishment or hydration.

Occasionally, they catch a glimpse of a stream of clean water from afar and long to approach it. However, their fragile joints cannot bear the weight of their enormous bellies, making the journey agonizingly difficult. When they finally reach the stream, utterly exhausted and in great pain, they find that the water has vanished, leaving only the stony riverbed behind, adding to their torment.

It is a great pity for beings to be reborn as pretas. *The Buddha Speaks of the Differences in Karmic Retribution for Elder Śuka Sutra* explains the various causes and conditions leading to rebirth as pretas. *The Retribution of Pretas Sutra* also lists the causes that Maudgalyayana identified regarding rebirth as pretas.

According to *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, pretas suffering from external obscurations can see a river from a distance, but due to their karmas, when they finally arrive at the river, the water has already disappeared. In the human realm, when we see food from afar, it remains the same when we approach it. For example,

if there is an apple over there that I really want to eat, when I get closer, the apple does not change into something else.

However, the situation is different in the realm of pretas. First, pretas suffering from external obscurations cannot see or find food in their environment, and even if they can, due to their karmas, the food either disappears or transforms into something inedible. Why is this the case? Sutras state that those who frequently offered unclean food and drink to others will be reborn as pretas and that their food will turn into something filthy.

At times, they spot an orchard full of fruit trees in the distance. However, as they draw closer, they discover that the massive trees have all dried up and withered.

On other occasions, they see an array of food, drink, and other delightful offerings, but upon nearing, they find these treasures guarded by numerous armed men who attack and strike them with weapons, inflicting immense pain.

*The Sutra on Removing Fear, Misfortune, and Anxiety*⁴⁹ also introduces the sufferings of these pretas. Once, when the Buddha was crossing a river with his retinue, he encountered 84,000 pretas. Pretending he did not already know, the Buddha asked them, “What did you do in past lives that caused you to be reborn as pretas in this life?”

The pretas answered, “Although we encountered the Buddha in a past life, we neither recognized his existence nor believed in him; although we encountered the Dharma, we neither understood it nor believed in it; although we encountered the sangha, we neither recognized its existence nor believed in it. We did not accumulate merit, and in the meantime, we dissuaded others from accumulating merit as well. We laughed at those who accomplished wholesome deeds and rejoiced at those who committed wrong deeds. Because of such negative actions, we are pretas in this life.”

The Buddha asked, “How long have you been pretas?”

They answered, “Seventy thousand years.”

The Buddha asked, “What have you eaten in seventy thousand years?”

“Nothing,” they replied. “Sometimes we saw a tiny stream of water, but it disappeared right away. Sometimes we saw a lot of water, but when we got near, we were chased away by spirits and rakshasas, so we couldn’t drink it.”

⁴⁹ Skt. Śrīkaṇṭhasūtra

Therefore, we should read more of these Buddhist scriptures, which can bring us great benefit. However, in today's society, many people are not interested in the Buddha's wisdom. Instead, they are obsessed with texts filled with fabricated thoughts that foster their greed and hatred. This is due to their karmic effects.

Practitioners should read the Tripitaka more often. Each time I read a good Dharma book or find valuable scriptural evidence and examples, I feel an indescribable joy. I find books on wars, shopping, and similar topics to be of little meaning for spiritual growth, as they have nothing to do with liberation from samsara.

In fact, the most important thing is to achieve liberation from the cycle of birth and death in samsara. This is also why the Buddha did not place great importance on topics related to the material world.

There is a compelling analogy on this issue in *The Sutra of the King of Law*. A person shot with a poisonous arrow experiences excruciating pain; if he removes the arrow immediately, there is a chance for survival. However, if he delays and instead focuses on the material aspects of the arrow—such as where the bamboo for the shaft came from, which bird's feather was used for the fletching, or who shot the arrow—he may die before the arrow is removed.

Similarly, in our brief lifespan, the most important task is to transcend life and death. If we neglect this and instead conduct meticulous research on the macro and micro worlds, we may exhaust our entire lives without gaining essential knowledge. Thus, as Atisha said:

Our life is limited, but knowledge is limitless;
It is hard to know how long our lifespan will be;
Thus, we should extract the essence as per our need,
Just as swans extract milk from the mixture of water.

In the vast ocean of knowledge, we should seek the most useful understanding, just as swans, the kings of birds, extract milk from the mixture of water. So, what constitutes the most useful knowledge for us? It is not that which pertains to various appearances in the material world, but the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering.

Of course, this does not mean we should ignore worldly knowledge. After all, we live in this world and need some general understanding to effectively propagate

the Dharma. However, we must recognize that the most important goal is to attain liberation by any means. Otherwise, if we spend our short lifespan solely pursuing worldly knowledge and fail to prepare for our deaths, when death inevitably arrives, no matter how much worldly knowledge we possess, it will be of no help.

Therefore, attaining liberation from the cycle of birth and death is of utmost importance. To achieve liberation, we must first understand the sufferings of samsara, and then find ways to avoid falling into the lower realms. It is akin to a person wanting to drive somewhere; they must first inquire about potential dangers on the road—where the potholes and cliffs are—so they can proceed with caution when encountering them. The same applies to our practice for liberation. We should first recognize the dangers of samsara and then make every effort to avoid them. In doing so, we will successfully reach our destination.

The four seasons are inverted for pretas. During summer, even the moonlight scorches and burns them, while in winter, the sun feels freezing cold. These extreme sensations cause them immense suffering. Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend* states:

In the realm of pretas, the moonlight feels hot in spring,
And the sun feels cold in winter.

*The Four Noble Truth Shastra*⁵⁰ says:

The moonlight is as hot as the summer sun,
The blow of wind feels like a blazing fire,
The drops of rain are like boiling liquid copper,
Walking on the ground is like stepping on hot ashes.

Those who do not know much about samsara and the law of karma may doubt the sufferings of pretas. However, if you have no doubt about samsara and karma, you will truly believe that countless beings are experiencing tremendous torment at this very moment. Consequently, you will proactively dedicate your merit to them after any virtuous action.

Here is a story about Śroṇa's experience in the realm of pretas:

Once, while Śroṇa was in the realm of the pretas, he was overwhelmed by the poisonous greed that pervaded the place. It caused him to develop a fever, leaving

⁵⁰ Skt. Catuḥsatyaśāstra

his mouth completely parched. As he wandered, he came across an iron castle guarded by a terrifying figure with red eyes and a grim demeanor.

“Where can I find some water?” Śroṇa asked.

Hearing this, a group of pretas, resembling charred lumps of wood, gathered around him and pleaded, “Great being, please give us water!”

“I haven’t found any myself,” Śroṇa replied. “It is you who should give me some.”

The pretas responded in disbelief, “What do you mean? We’ve been in this land for twelve years, and not once have we even heard mention of water!”

This story is from the *Carma-vastu* section of the *Monastic Code of the Mūlasarvāstivāda*. On his way back from a treasure-hunting trip at the ocean, Śroṇa accidentally arrived at a place inhabited by pretas. The plot is similar to that of the previous story.

Later, he asked the pretas, “What caused your rebirth as pretas?” The pretas replied, “When we were in the human realm, we were stingy with our wealth and never made any offerings. Moreover, we often became angry and scolded others. As a result, we are pretas in this life.”

After being reborn as pretas, they went for twelve years without even hearing the mention of water. However, since their karma had not been exhausted, they could not die even if they wanted to.

As for us human beings, not to mention twelve years, going without water for even twelve days can be very challenging. When the tsunami hit Indonesia in 2004, a person miraculously survived after being buried in debris for thirteen days without food or water. In the realm of pretas, they go much longer without anything to eat or drink, yet they cannot die. They have no choice but to endure the torments of hunger and thirst year after year.

In the *Century of Noble Deeds*,⁵¹ there is a story about Uttara’s mother, who was reborn as a preta and went without a single drop of water or a bite of food for twenty years. Here is the story:

Not long after Uttara’s birth, his father passed away, and he grew up with his mother, living an affluent life. He was born with a reverence for Buddhism and sought his mother’s permission to become a monk. His mother vehemently

⁵¹ Skt. Avadānaśataka

opposed this idea, telling him, “As long as I am alive, you are not allowed to become a monk! When I’m dead, you can do whatever you want.”

After being rejected, Uttara contemplated suicide. Terrified, his mother pleaded with him, “Please do not do that! How about this: From now on, as long as you want to make offerings to spiritual practitioners, I will prepare everything for you to offer as you wish.” Hearing this, Uttara no longer insisted on becoming a monk and often invited monks to his house to receive offerings.

Seeing so many monks visiting, Uttara’s mother grew increasingly annoyed and scolded them, saying, “You men do not work at all. You rely solely on faithful householders for your livelihood. Your presence makes me so angry!”

One day, when Uttara was not at home, his mother dumped all the prepared food on the ground and kicked out the monks who came to receive the offerings. When Uttara returned, his mother lied to him, saying, “While you were away, I offered the best food to a few monks.” Uttara believed her and felt very happy.

Not long after, Uttara’s mother died and was reborn as a preta due to her negative actions. Uttara became a monk as he had hoped, and through his diligent practice, he soon attained arhathood.

Once, while Uttara was meditating in a cave by a river, he suddenly noticed an ugly preta who painfully approached him and said, “I was your mother. I have been living as a preta for twenty years.”

“This is impossible,” Uttara said. “My mother was kind and benevolent when she was alive. She made offerings to many monks, so it is impossible for her to have fallen into the realm of pretas.”

The preta replied, “Although I made offerings, I was stingy deep down in my mind. Moreover, I had no respect for the monks and other practitioners, and I even scolded them. That is why I had to experience this karmic consequence of my actions. If you can repent on my behalf and provide generous food offerings to the Buddha and the sangha, I will be liberated from the realm of pretas.”

Upon hearing this, Uttara felt deep sorrow and compassion for his mother, so he did his best to make the offerings and dedicate the merit to her. After the first food offering, his mother was reborn as a preta moving through space. After the second food offering, she was finally reborn in the celestial realm.

As you can see, pretas must endure an extremely long time without food and drink, and it is difficult for them to attain liberation.

2.1.3.2.2.1.2. Pretas Suffering from Internal Obscurations

These pretas have mouths as small as the eye of a needle. Even if they were to drink all the water from the vast oceans, their throats—narrow as a strand of horsehair—would cause the liquid to evaporate due to the heat of their breath before it could reach their stomachs. If they managed to swallow even a small amount, their stomachs, as large as an entire country, would remain empty. And even if their stomachs were ever filled, the food inside would ignite during the night, burning their lungs, heart, and internal organs. When they try to move, their enormous bellies are too heavy for their thin, frail limbs to lift, subjecting them to unbearable torment.

Here is a story from the *Compilation of Interesting Stories in Sutras and Vinaya*:

Once, on the banks of the Ganges, five hundred pretas were weeping aloud from thirst. The Buddha happened to be there as well.

The pretas told the Buddha, “We are so thirsty that we will soon die.”

The Buddha replied, “You can drink water from the Ganges.”

The pretas responded, “It is water in the Tathagata’s eyes, but it is fire in ours.”

The Buddha said, “Only by dispelling your deluded thoughts can you see the water.” He then began to explain extensively the faults of stinginess.

The pretas pleaded, “We have been thirsty for too long. Although we hear the Dharma, it cannot penetrate our minds. Please give us some water first, and then we’ll continue with the teaching.”

Through his clairvoyance and blessings, the Buddha made them drink well and then continued to teach them the Dharma. The pretas all generated bodhicitta and were eventually liberated from the realm of pretas.

Thus, the rivers and lakes that we normally see would be filled with either pus and blood or fire for pretas. Even if the poor pretas suffering from internal obscurations managed to drink a little water, it would transform into fire in their bellies.

Although we cannot see real pretas in our human world, the suffering that some humans experience is no different from that of pretas. For example, patients

with esophageal cancer cannot eat anything, and if they swallow a bite of food, their throats hurt as if burned by fire. This is a very similar karmic effect.

Of course, however painful the experience in the human realm may be, it is incomparable to that in the realm of pretas. Some people can barely endure hunger if they skip meals for one day or postpone a meal for two or three hours. But no matter how hungry we feel as humans, our suffering is far less than that of pretas. Therefore, we should meditate more on their corresponding sufferings so that, to avoid falling into the preta realm and experiencing the excruciating torments in future lives, we are more motivated to engage in Dharma practice. This is very important!



Lesson 46

“These pretas have all sorts of different experiences ... the three methods for the beginning, main part and conclusion.”
[page 73–75]

Next, we will study the pretas suffering from specific obscurations.

2.1.3.2.2.1.3. Pretas Suffering from Specific Obscurations

These pretas endure a wide range of sufferings, varying significantly in nature and intensity. For instance, some are tormented by creatures that inhabit their bodies, gnawing at their flesh.

One day, Śroṇa traveled to the realm of the pretas and came upon a magnificent palace where he encountered a stunningly beautiful woman adorned with precious jewels. She sat upon an exquisite throne, to which a preta was tied at each of its four legs. The woman offered Śroṇa some food, cautioning him not to share even the smallest piece with the pretas, no matter how much they begged. After delivering this warning, she left the room.

As Śroṇa began to eat, the pretas started pleading with him, saying, “We have gone so long without food. Please have mercy and give us just a little!” Moved by their pleas, Śroṇa gave food to one of them, but it turned into chaff. The food he gave to the second turned into a lump of iron. The third preta, unable to consume what was given, began devouring his own flesh, and the food given to the fourth turned into pus and blood.

[What a terrible scene it was! One can hardly imagine it without witnessing it firsthand. Some individuals hold deep-rooted wrong views and do not believe in the law of karma from a young age, leading them to develop misguided thoughts or doubts after hearing this story. However, it is clearly stated in the sutras that, due to the consequences of their actions, the food of pretas will indeed transform into various things.]

At that moment, the preta who had swallowed the burning lump of iron was engulfed in flames, emitting a foul odor. The woman detected it.

When the woman returned, she cried out, “Didn’t I tell you not to give them anything? Do you think you’re more compassionate toward them than I am?”

Śroṇa then asked, “What is your connection to these four beings?”

She replied, “This was my husband; that one was my son, the other was my daughter-in-law, and the fourth was my servant.”

“What past actions brought you to this situation?” Śroṇa inquired further.

“The people of Jambudvīpa are too skeptical,” the woman replied. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“How could I not believe you when I’m witnessing this with my own eyes?” Śroṇa assured her.

The woman then recounted her story: “I was once a brahmin woman in a village. One evening, I prepared a delicious meal to mark an auspicious day. By chance, the great and noble Kātyāyana came by on his alms round. Feeling inspired, I offered him food. Afterward, I thought my husband might want to share in the merit, so I said to him, ‘Rejoice with me! I have given alms to the great and noble Kātyāyana, the Buddha’s heir.’ But my husband was furious. He shouted, ‘You have not even offered food to the brahmins or paid your respects to family and friends, and yet you give the best portion to this shaven-headed monk! Why doesn’t he just eat chaff instead?’”

[There are many similar occurrences happening nowadays. Someone made offerings to a great master and a monastery, but his family members opposed him, leading to quarrels, the smashing of Buddha statues, slander against the sangha, and more. It is truly disheartening! The law of karma never fails. Such actions, if not repented, will inevitably lead to rebirth in the lower realms. Yet some people remain indifferent, which is genuinely saddening.]

“I made the same suggestion to my son, and he angrily shouted back, ‘Why doesn’t your bald-headed monk eat lumps of iron?’

That evening, my parents sent over some delicious food, but my daughter-in-law ate it all, leaving me with only the scraps. When I confronted her, asking, ‘Did you eat the good food and leave me with the worst?’ she lied, saying, ‘I would rather eat my own flesh than touch food meant for you!’

Similarly, when my servant ate the meal she was supposed to deliver to my family, she claimed she would rather drink blood and pus than steal food from me.”

[The reason the whole family was against her was likely because she made an offering to Katyayana. They did not understand her actions and refused to rejoice with her. Moreover, they treated her very poorly.]

“I became a powerful preta because I wished to be reborn in a place where I could witness the consequences of their actions. Without that wish, I would have been reborn among the gods in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three as a result of offering alms to a sublime being.”

[The consequence of making an evil wish is dire. If one cannot transform this negative thought on the path to enlightenment, it is highly likely to lead to making evil wishes.]

“If you ever visit our village, please tell my daughter, who has become a prostitute, that you met her parents. Let her know that we asked you to warn her that the path she is on will lead to negative consequences and is not the right way to live. Urge her to abandon these harmful choices.

If she doubts your words, inform her that in her father’s old house, there are four iron pots filled with gold, along with a golden stick and a monk’s ablution jar. Encourage her to use these items to make offerings to the sublime Katyayana from time to time, dedicating the merit in our names. Doing so will help alleviate our karma until it is completely exhausted.”

As reflected in this story, when offering recitations and dedicating merit to a deceased person, it is best to mention their name. The tradition in some Han areas of China aligns with that in Tibetan regions. Specifically, every time people conduct a puja or offer sacrifices to protect a departed spirit, they write the names of the deceased on paper. This practice is very important.

Some people only write down the name of the deceased once, right after they

pass away, and never do it again. This is not acceptable. Even if the person has been dead for many years, you should still write down their names and invite the sangha to perform recitations for them whenever you think of this person. Ideally, it is best to mention their name whenever there is a puja of transference performed for the deceased.

I do not know whether there is a similar tradition in the Han area, but in the Tibetan region, during the ritual of reciting prayers, one person is specifically assigned to spend a long time reading the names of the deceased. Some people only offer 5 yuan but write down the names of fifty individuals, which the person in charge has to recite for an extended period. This is not appropriate. It is always beneficial to write down the names for the recitations. By doing so, even if the deceased has been reborn as a hell being, a preta, or an animal, they can be liberated from the lower realms, provided someone in the human realm reads their name and dedicates the merit to them. This has been verified through examples in the sutras, in stories of eminent masters visiting the lower realms, and through the visions of great accomplished masters in their pristine awareness. Therefore, it is very important in our daily lives to perform prayers, rituals, and dedications for the deceased.

The stories mentioned above are from the first volume of the *Carma-vastu* section of the *Monastic Code of the Mūlasarvāstivāda*, which was translated by Master Yijing of the Tang dynasty. The text is rendered in ancient Chinese, which can be challenging to understand, but the plot remains largely the same. Almost all the examples I quoted from the sutras while teaching the *Aspiration Prayer of Sukhavati* and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* can be found in the Chinese Tripitaka. Therefore, when listening to the teachings, you should not think, “This is just the viewpoint of Tibetan Buddhism. It has nothing to do with me because I am not pursuing Vajrayana.” Please refrain from such thinking. The aforementioned stories, which illustrate the law of karma, are not merely catering to the perspective of a specific lineage.

After studying these stories, it is important to begin understanding the karmic consequences of negative actions and to pay attention to your behavior. Once one grasps the law of karma, individuals who previously opposed their family members’ gestures of offering to eminent masters or monastic institutions, and perhaps even reprimanded them severely, will develop correct views and no longer dismiss the law of cause and effect.

We should gain something from each Dharma class we attend. For example, after learning from today's stories, we should reflect on ourselves in this way: "Have I ever committed such a misdeed before? If so, what should I do to purify my faults? How should I respond if I encounter a similar situation in the future?"

After such self-reflection, we should always be cautious and mindful about our words, thoughts, and actions.

Here is another Buddhist story:

Once, Master Jetari journeyed to the realm of the pretas, where he encountered a female preta with a grotesque appearance, who was the mother of five hundred children. She was weeping and said, "My husband left for Bodh Gaya twelve years ago to search for food, but he has not returned. If you go there, please tell him that if he doesn't come back soon, all our children will starve to death."

Master Jetari asked, "What does your husband look like? All pretas appear the same—how will I recognize him?"

"You won't miss him," she replied. "He has a huge mouth, a flat nose, and all nine features of ugliness."

When Master Jetari arrived in Bodh Gaya, he saw a novice monk offering food and water tormas outside. After the novice left, a swarm of pretas rushed to grab the offerings. Among them, Master Jetari spotted the one he was looking for and delivered his wife's message.

The preta responded, "I have been wandering for twelve years but have not found anything to eat—except once when a pure monk accidentally dropped some mucus. Even then, I barely got any because so many of us were fighting over it, and I was severely injured by the others."

In another account, it says the preta had a bit of snot and held it so tightly in his hand that he did not even notice when his thumb pierced through his palm. Later, the snot dried up. When the preta discovered the snot was missing, he thought it had leaked from his palm, so he desperately searched for it, wanting to bring it back to his children. As you can see, the attachment that a parent has to their child is very strong, and this also applies to pretas. However, what the child gives back to the parents is often very limited.

Regarding the lifespan of pretas, some sutras say it can reach up to seventy thousand years, while others state it can last eighty-four thousand years. It is truly

sad that they cannot obtain any food for such a long time. Therefore, while we are still in the human realm, we must meditate on the suffering of pretas, sometimes contemplating the cause of their rebirth and other times reflecting on their specific torments. We should then ask ourselves, “How many misdeeds have I committed that could lead to my rebirth as a preta? Will I really fall into the realm of pretas?” Such constant reflection and visualization are, in fact, a very profound practice.

Some Dharma students believe that practicing ngöndro only involves performing prostrations. While they are willing to engage in this physical practice, they find it very challenging to contemplate in their minds. Other Dharma students are particularly interested in visualizing the bindu or the mantra syllables illuminating, but they struggle to meditate on the profound teachings that hold great significance in this life and the next.

Since I began teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I have been guiding you to meditate on the Longchen Nyingtik ngöndro.⁵² The corresponding meditation instructions are so simple that anyone can engage with them.

I recently met a Dharma student and asked him whether he had meditated on the Longchen Nyingtik ngöndro. He replied, “I don’t practice according to your instructions.”

I asked, “How do you meditate?”

He responded, “I follow the practical instructions of the Middle Way and also integrate my personal insights into my meditation.”

It seems he has “climbed” quite high in his practice. Meditating according to the state of the Middle Way certainly “goes beyond” the state of ngöndro. However, for me, although my level of realization is modest, my teachings have certain dependent arising.⁵³

If you completely abandon the instructions in the ngöndro teachings and create a new practice based on your fabricated thoughts, claiming, “My meditation is based on a view of the Middle Way that transcends any fabrication and concepts, and I also integrate it with my own view in my practice...” I fear such a meditation

⁵² It is based on the guided meditative instructions of Longchenpa’s *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind, a heart essence of practical instruction of Longchen Nyingtik*. For more information, please visit <https://khenposodargye.org/meditations/introduction-longchen-nyingtik-ngondro/>

⁵³ It corresponds to the Tibetan term *tendrel*, or, more fully, *ten ching drelwar jungwa*, meaning the nature of phenomena and how they are related to each other.

may not be effective. This is because it relies solely on your own fabricated thoughts and worldly opinions, rather than the guidance of the great masters.

Based on their own experience and realization, great masters such as Longchenpa, Patrul Rinpoche, and Mipham Rinpoche have clearly outlined the correct methods and sequences of practice, beginning with establishing a solid foundation through ngöndro practice. If you adhere to their guidance and reflect upon it repeatedly, it will undoubtedly have a positive effect on your mind. However, if you disregard their instructions and insist on creating your own practices, you may not attain the same state as the great masters.

Since I began teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I have sometimes felt happy because many people have put the teachings into practice. However, I also feel upset sometimes because some individuals do not value the teachings, and even with my constant reminders, they appear indifferent and continue practicing in their own ways. Some have even advised me not to teach too much, suggesting that less is sufficient as long as they are introduced to a few concepts to practice. This perspective is not very reasonable.

Even in a worldly context, when recruiting public servants, the Chinese government requires candidates to have at least a bachelor's degree; otherwise, they can hardly be considered qualified. Even for a simple matter like this in the mundane world, a strong foundation is essential. So, when it comes to the profound, supreme, and transcendental state in Dharma practice, how can we expect to achieve any substantial progress if we engage in meditation blindly without first carefully studying the Dharma? I truly doubt it.

Recently, I heard someone say, "So-and-so center focuses on studying the texts. Our center focuses on meditation, which is at a very high level!" He was "advertising" his affiliated center to others even while on a bus. Of course, he is free to express himself as he wishes, and if his center is truly "at a very high level," we will rejoice with him and show great respect to anyone there who has attained a high level of realization. However, any supreme state in Dharma practice requires a solid foundation. If you do not get this right and instead focus only on a portion of the practical instructions, obsessing over it day after day, you may eventually lose your sanity.

This is why some people's practice often goes wrong. It is a perilous approach if one has not yet established a firm foundation through preliminary practices,

including “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” “the defects of samsara,” and more. Instead, if one clings to a particular advanced approach and practices it daily with the aim of quickly attaining enlightenment, this mindset becomes highly dangerous and requires serious attention.

Let’s return to Patrul Rinpoche’s text. When we meditate on the suffering of the pretas, we first need to understand the causes of falling into the realm of pretas. Ten causes are listed in *The Buddha Speaks of the Differences in Karmic Retribution for Elder Śuka Sutra*. These ten are:

- First, committing minor misdeeds of the body;
 - Second, committing minor misdeeds of speech;
 - Third, committing minor misdeeds of the mind;
 - Fourth, feeling excessive greed among all mental afflictions, or
being attached to many things;
 - Fifth, craving something unwholesome;
 - Sixth, feeling jealousy;
 - Seventh, holding wrong views;
 - Eighth, clinging to something at the moment of death;
 - Ninth, dying of hunger;
 - Tenth, dying of thirst.
- These ten karmic causes lead to rebirth as pretas.

Knowing these causes, we should examine ourselves according to the teachings and assess whether we have committed such misdeeds. If so, we must repent and purify these negative actions through methods such as reciting mantras. Meanwhile, we should also recognize the plight of the pretas and do our utmost to offer them food and drink.

Regarding the sadhanas of offering to pretas, practitioners of Chinese Buddhism primarily utilize the food offering sadhana found in the *Dharani Sutra for Bringing Salvation to the Hungry Ghost with the Flaming Face*. Here is the story, according to the sutra:

Ananda, one of the Buddha’s principal disciples, was meditating in a quiet place when a preta named Flaming Face appeared before him, saying, “You will only live for another three days and will be reborn as a preta after death.”

Upon hearing this, Ananda was horrified and asked, “Is there any way to prevent this from happening?”

The preta replied, “If you make offerings to as many pretas as the grains of sand in the Ganges River, and to hundreds of thousands of brahmins and sages, giving each of them one container of food and drink in the Magadha⁵⁴ measure, and if you also make offerings to the Three Jewels on my behalf, you can prolong your lifespan.”

Ananda thought, “This is such a large-scale offering. As an ordinary monk, I am unable to make it.” Terrified, he rushed to the Buddha and made a full-body prostration at the Buddha’s feet. Ananda said in great fear, “World-Honored One, please save me! A preta told me I would die in three days and be reborn as a preta. I asked him how to avert my fate, and he told me to make a vast offering. World-Honored One, what should I do?”

The Buddha told Ananda, “Do not be afraid. I have a special means that will allow you to offer food and drink to all those pretas, brahmins, and sages. Once, when I was a brahmin in my previous life, I received a mantra from Avalokiteshvara and the Tathagata named Carefree Virtue, which can make offerings to thousands upon thousands of pretas. Now you may protect yourself with this mantra, so you won’t fall into the realm of pretas.”

Then, the Buddha introduced the mantra:

*Namah Sarva Tathagata Avalokite Om Sambhara
Sambhara Hum.*

This mantra is also included in the sadhana of fire puja⁵⁵ in the *Larung Daily Chant Book*. If you recite this mantra while making food offerings, you will not fall into the realm of pretas.

How should we make food offerings? First, we should place some food in a clean container and bless it by chanting this mantra seven times. After sprinkling a bit of water on the food, we either place it outdoors or burn it in a fire. Any being

⁵⁴ Magadha was an ancient Indian kingdom in south Bihar (before expansion) and was counted as one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas, ‘Great Kingdoms’ of ancient India. Magadha played an important role in the development of Jainism and Buddhism, and two of India’s greatest empires, the Maurya Empire and Gupta Empire, originated in Magadha.

⁵⁵ *Freedom from All Adversity—A Sur Offering to Harmful Influences, Obstacle-Makers and Elemental Spirits*, by Mipham Rinpoche.

touched by the smoke will receive the benefits. By regularly chanting this mantra and making food offerings, countless pretas will be nourished, and we can also make offerings to billions of tathagatas.

Additionally, when performing the fire puja for pretas, Tibetans typically chant the names of four tathagatas:

Rinchen Mang La Chaktsal Lo

Zuk Dzé Dampa La Chaktsal Lo

Ku Jam Lé La Chaktsal Lo

Jikpa Tamché Yongsu Dralwé Lha La Chaktsal Lo.

In English, this translates as:

Namo Tathagata who possesses all jewels,

Namo Tathagata who has precious form,

Namo Tathagata whose body is omnipresent, and

Namo Tathagata who is free from fear.

By reciting the names of the four tathagatas, countless pretas can be liberated from their sufferings. Especially when a person has just passed away, food offerings made according to the sadhana of fire puja can greatly assist the bardo body of the deceased. Such food offerings also provide significant benefits to ghosts, earth gods, non-humans, and others.

When the sangha of Chinese Buddhism makes food offerings, they typically recite numerous mantras. These include the universally invoking mantra, the mantra of relieving hatred, the mantra of widening throat, the mantra of transforming food, the mantra of ambrosia water, the mantra of offering to the Buddha, and the mantra of bestowing food without obscurations.

The corresponding sadhanas and mantras are imbued with blessing power, so Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar should also know how to recite them. Some Sutrayana practitioners claim they do not practice Vajrayana; however, their daily chanting in the morning and at night includes many Vajrayana mantras. In addition to the mantras just mentioned, they also need to recite the Shurangama mantra, the Amitabha Pure Land Rebirth mantra, the great compassion mantra, the ten

short mantras, and more. They may have recited more mantras than we tantric practitioners do.

These mantras are rooted in Buddhist scriptures and have been carefully examined by great masters throughout history. Chanting these mantras is essential to our practice. When Buddhism was first introduced in China, there was no consensus on what Buddhists should recite. From the Jin dynasty to the Tang and Song dynasties, although Buddhists engaged in routine morning and evening chanting, what was chanted varied among different schools.

During the Ming dynasty, Master Lianchi and Master Ouyi Zhixu standardized the content of the morning and evening prayers for the benefit of their disciples' practice. It was not until the beginning of the Qing dynasty that the recitation was finalized by Master Yulin Tongxiu. Following this, members of the sangha in Chinese Buddhism began to adopt the same recitations.

Today, temples in the Han region of China conduct nearly identical morning and evening prayers, which include recitations of the *Amitabha Sutra*, the *Eighty-eight Buddhas Great Repentance*, and the *Mengshan Food Bestowal Ritual*, among others. The *Mengshan Food Bestowal Ritual* was specifically composed by Master Ganlu at Mengshan in Ya'an, Sichuan Province, to make food offerings to pretas. Consequently, the sadhana was named after the location of Mengshan.

In the practice of the *Mengshan Food Bestowal*, there are two forms: a big offering and a small offering. The former refers to *fang yan kou*, also known as the Flaming Mouth Ceremony—a formal food offering puja, while the latter refers to the food offerings made each night during the evening chanting.

The origin of food offerings in Chinese Buddhism can be traced back to the time of Emperor Wu of Liang. Following the advice of Chan Master Baozhi, the emperor extensively studied Buddhist scriptures, compiled sadhanas, and organized major Dharma assemblies known as *The Liberation Rite of Water and Land* to liberate beings of the six realms. Later, the *Mengshan Food Bestowal Ritual* was compiled and introduced.

Many routine recitations in Chinese Buddhism are quite similar to those in Tibetan Buddhism, particularly the parts involving prayers to Dharma protectors and offerings to pretas in the evening, as well as chanting mantras and reciting the names of the four tathagatas.

Therefore, whether you are a Sutrayana practitioner or a Vajrayana practitioner,

it is essential to engage in routine recitations. Some Vajrayana practitioners believe that the daily prayers in Chinese Buddhism hold little value for them, leading them to fall asleep during daily chanting with the sangha in a Chinese Buddhist temple. This is inappropriate.

In fact, not only does Chinese Buddhism place great importance on daily recitation, but Tibetan Buddhism also requires newly ordained monastics to memorize all the prayers in the recitation to be qualified to join in the sangha. Hence, routine recitations in both Sutrayana and Vajrayana are vital. We should not look down upon the recitations in Sutrayana simply because we are tantric practitioners.

The mantras and names of the Buddha used in the morning and evening prayers in Chinese Buddhism derive from the Tripitaka, as stipulated by great masters like Master Yulin Tongxiu during their compilations. Thus, the compilation of the chanting prayers was not based on the teachings of specific lineages or masters but includes the sacred words of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, which we should all venerate.

I visited several Chinese Buddhist temples where the sangha began their routine chanting at 4 a.m., and the melodies were standardized across all these temples. Since I did not know how to chant, during one visit to a temple in the Han area, I chose to stay in the doorway and silently observe the sangha. While listening to their beautiful chanting, I felt inspired.

I hope that practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, whether monastics or lay practitioners, will also learn the morning and evening prayers of Chinese Buddhism, which encompass the vajra words of the sublime ones. Each of you should chant these prayers well. Meanwhile, Sutrayana practitioners should not slander Vajrayana, as what you recite in the morning and evening includes tantric mantras. It does not make sense to denounce Vajrayana while reciting Vajrayana mantras.

Let's return to Patrul Rinpoche's text. To summarize, regardless of the type of preta, the being suffers from hunger and thirst. Please keep in mind the various torments that pretas endure wherever they are reborn, particularly their intense suffering from hunger and thirst. Reflect on how uncomfortable you feel after just one morning without food or drink. Now imagine being reborn in a realm where you do not even hear about water for years. Understand that the primary causes

of rebirth as a preta are stinginess and obstructing the generosity of others. We, too, have committed such actions countless times, so it is essential to take every possible step to avoid being reborn as a preta. In this world, some people are born to be generous, while others are born to be stingy. For the latter, even giving a little is as painful as cutting their own flesh. There is a story in the *Garland of Examples Adorned by Poetic Fancy*:⁵⁶

Once, a king saw a pagoda during his hunting trip and casually offered five coins. Someone nearby witnessed the king's act and remarked, "Nice," as a compliment on the king's generosity. However, the king felt displeased upon hearing it and ordered his attendants to take the person back to the palace.

The king said, "You said 'nice' when I donated five coins. Are you mocking me for offering too little, or for some other reason?"

The person crawled on the ground, begging, "I only dare to speak if Your Majesty grants me pardon."

The king replied, "Very well, I will grant you pardon."

The person thanked the king for his kindness and said, "I used to be a bandit in the mountains. One day, I captured a man who was clenching his fist and would not loosen his grip. I thought he must have something very valuable in his hand, so I threatened him with harsh words, but he still would not let go. Then I threatened him with my bow and arrow, yet he continued to hold on tightly. I nocked an arrow and pretended to shoot him in anger, but he still refused to open his hand. In the end, driven by greed, I shot him dead.

When I finally managed to pry open his fist, all I found was a small copper coin. Comparing you to someone who would rather die than give up a coin, I genuinely rejoiced that Your Majesty willingly offered five coins to the pagoda without being coerced by anyone. I did not mean to laugh at you, not even the slightest bit."

Therefore, no matter who the donor is, as long as they are willing to make offerings to the Three Jewels, it is worthy of applause and rejoicing, even if the offering is small. Nobody should ridicule them by saying, "Oh, they are a wealthy entrepreneur! Why do they only donate so little?" We should refrain from such comments because any offering made without a stingy mindset is commendable. If a person lacks the intention and is unwilling to sacrifice personal benefit to

⁵⁶ Skt. Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā

make offerings, this reluctance can easily lead to rebirth as a preta. Therefore, we practitioners must eliminate stinginess.

In fact, it is easy to commit misdeeds that result in rebirth as pretas. It is stated in the *Buddha Speaks of Protecting Purity Sutra*:

Touching the sangha's clean vessels with unclean hands,
Touching the monk's clean food with unclean hands,
Mixing unclean food in the monk's clean food,
And offering unclean food to the sangha,
Will cause rebirth as a preta for the following five hundred lives.

Here is a story from the *Century of Noble Deeds*:⁵⁷

Once, Maudgalyayana encountered a preta with a repulsive body and asked what the preta had done in a previous life. The preta replied, "I am too hungry and thirsty to talk. It would be better if you asked the Buddha instead."

Maudgalyayana then approached the Buddha and posed the question. The Buddha explained, "During the time of Buddha Kassapa, a monk who had been walking a long distance became extremely thirsty. When he asked a woman who was fetching water for some, she refused to give him any. As a result of her actions, the woman was reborn as a preta after her death."

This story illustrates how easily we can commit wrongdoings that lead to rebirth in the realm of pretas. Therefore, when we encounter a beggar or someone in need, we should help them without any hint of stinginess. Even if the assistance is simply offering some leftover food, we should still do it. Otherwise, the consequences of our stinginess can be unpredictable.

Meditate in this way from the depths of your heart using the three supreme methods. First, generate bodhicitta. Then, focus on the main part: you may meditate on the suffering of pretas and the causes of rebirth in their realm. Alternatively, you may reflect on what you would experience if you were to become a preta, or give rise to great compassion for those mother-like beings who are currently suffering in the realm of pretas during your meditation session. Finally, dedicate all the merit of this practice to all beings. Practicing with these three supreme methods generates immense merit.

⁵⁷ Skt. Avadānaśataka



Lesson 47

“These are the tsen, gyalpo, ... and cultivate love and compassion for them.” [page 75–76]

Now let us continue our study of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. We are currently learning about the suffering of pretas in the chapter titled “The Defects of Samsara.”

Meditation practice on the common preliminaries is very important. Although my teaching on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is so comprehensive that it takes much longer than that of other teachers, it is essential because many Dharma students have established a solid foundation for their practice, and their right views and faith in the Dharma are less likely to regress in this lifetime. Therefore, comprehensive teaching remains crucial.

Some people claim to have had visions of the deity or to have seen the bindu (essence drop), which I do not necessarily admire. After all, individuals differ in their chakras and faculties, so it is not surprising if some have special visions. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often mentioned in class:

Some people can see signs of practice even if they have not attained a high level of realization. Therefore, a person’s state of realization should not be judged by whether they have seen the signs of practice. Instead, it should primarily be assessed by whether they have recognized and realized the fundamental truth in Buddhism through solid Dharma practice.

Through studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time, the fourfold

disciples at Larung Gar and many lay practitioners have developed conviction in the common preliminaries, which helps them better progress to the uncommon preliminaries. In the past, many of us may have only briefly heard about the eighteen hells and the different types of pretas, without taking the time to carefully reflect on the corresponding content, let alone meditate on it repeatedly.

Now, through repetitive practice, many practitioners eventually realize that the impact of meditating on the mindstream is quite different from merely hearing the teachings. It is similar to the difference between seeing food and tasting it. Therefore, many sutras, such as the *Flower Ornament Sutra* and the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*, emphasize that hearing and contemplation must be followed by meditation.

Recently, the sangha at Larung Gar was asked to practice ngöndro in the format of a daily retreat. It seems you have been practicing well. I asked a few sangha members, “How is your practice on the defects of samsara? How is your practice on the impermanence of life?” Given their responses, it appears many have indeed deepened their understanding of the text. I taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* a few times in the past, either in Tibetan or in Chinese. Many Dharma practitioners may have received my earlier teachings, but the content of the text might not have fully penetrated their minds. This time, through applying the teachings in your daily retreat, many people have experienced a transformation of their minds after contemplating the content repeatedly.

According to the tradition of Patrul Rinpoche and Thubga Rinpoche, a practitioner should not merely listen to the teachings of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. The most important thing is to actually put the teachings into practice. Many individuals have joined to study and practice *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time. Through this auspicious dependent origination, I hope this collective engagement will significantly assist future generations in following the proper sequence in the study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

In a few years, if you can successfully complete the common and uncommon preliminary practices, it would greatly enrich the purpose of my existence in this world. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is indeed the quintessence of all the buddhas’ and bodhisattvas’ precious instructions. Throughout my teaching, this text is explained in the most comprehensive way possible, providing you the opportunity to first understand it intellectually and then apply it in practice. This is indeed a rare chance for all of us.

I may do many things in my lifetime, but teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is among the most important. As for you, you may also do many things throughout your life, from birth to death, but if you earnestly study the text and genuinely practice accordingly, it will bring you immeasurable benefits in this life and in many lives yet to come.

Therefore, please do not become weary during the study of this text. Some people, who have listened to the teachings of a single scripture for an extended period, may inevitably wish the teaching would end soon. Many prefer shorter texts so they can frequently change the focus of their studies. For example, they may enjoy attending teachings on Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend* today, the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child* (*Di Zi Gui*) tomorrow, and the *Commentary on Bodhichitta*⁵⁸ the day after.

I do know how to teach such shorter texts, and I have translated many of them myself. However, in order to fully impart the most profound teachings of Tibetan Buddhism to you in a sequential order, I have decided, after careful consideration, to teach you *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time.

I may not accomplish many things in this short life, but if I do not face an untimely death in the next few years, I sincerely wish to contribute something to society and Buddhism. As for how to enjoy myself or what life has to offer me in the future, I have hardly given it any thought. Even if I had considered it, what I envisioned might not have come to pass, so such thinking is unnecessary.

However, to contribute to society and benefit sentient beings, I must make plans and gain the support of others. Given my age, I will not be as energetic in ten or twenty years. By then, even if I have not yet passed away, I will not be able to do much. Therefore, the next few years are very precious, and I want to engage in as many meaningful activities as possible.

To fulfill this wish, I often pray for blessings from buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Dharma protectors so I can complete the current teachings. Later, when the causes and conditions ripen, I will offer you tantric teachings.

I have received many tantric teachings from the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Although I do not claim to have attained great enlightenment, I believe I have some understanding of those teachings. I want to give tantric teachings to

⁵⁸ *Commentary on Bodhichitta* (Skt. Bodhicittavivāraṇa; Tib. བླ་མཁའ་མེས་ཀྱི་འགྲེལ་པ་; Wyl. byang chub sems kyi 'grel ba) is a shastra written by Nagarjuna that belongs to his *Collection of Advice*.

those who have established a solid foundation through ngöndro practice. By doing so, even if I cannot accomplish many things in my lifetime, I would feel satisfied if the teachings can be helpful to you.

I often tell the volunteer staff at Larung Gar, “Consider this: if you spend five years on volunteer work and quietly contribute to the welfare of sentient beings, even if nobody knows about it, your presence at Larung Gar holds meaning, and your parents’ efforts for you are not in vain. In our lives, the opportunity to become rich or famous may come by chance, yet the chance to genuinely benefit living beings is much rarer and more precious.”

As for Dharma fellows outside Larung Gar, please do not grow weary in your study and practice of the Dharma. The organization of the Bodhi Association should remain, and everyone is encouraged to join a study group to hear, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma. For worldly endeavors, we cannot achieve meaningful goals without the support and collaboration of a group. The same holds true for Dharma activities. While individual realization can occur alone, the widespread propagation of the Dharma requires the support of many, which is beyond the capacity of one or two individuals. Therefore, I hope you maintain your interest in group study and remain committed to the group once you join, minimizing any tendency to quit. If a Dharma student can leave at will, what can they ultimately achieve? I believe we all know the answer in our hearts.

2.1.3.2.2.2. Pretas Who Move Through Space

These pretas refer to the *tseu*, *gyalpo*, *shindre*, *jungpo*, *mamo*, *theurang*⁵⁹ and others.

When the pretas are mentioned, some may think they are merely folktales or superstition. This perspective is misguided. In my book *Buddhism and Science*, I use the personal experiences of renowned figures, such as Zhang Taiyan,⁶⁰ to illustrate the true existence of ghosts. Due to a lack of understanding of the true nature of phenomena, materialists and some scientists accept only the existence of material matter, dismissing any mysterious phenomena beyond that.

In addition, some practitioners claim that everything is empty, so pretas, or

⁵⁹ As said in the footnote of the English version of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, these are different categories of spirits with no equivalent terms in English.

⁶⁰ Zhang Binglin (January 12, 1869 – June 14, 1936), also known as Zhang Taiyan, was a Chinese philologist, textual critic, philosopher, and revolutionary.

ghosts, do not exist. This perspective is also unreasonable. At the ultimate level, when the primordial purity is concerned, not only do ghosts not exist, but all phenomena also do not exist. This is articulated in the vajra songs of Milarepa and Longchenpa. However, at the relative level, there do exist heaven above, hell below, and the realm of pretas in between, due to the delusion present in the conceptual minds of sentient beings.

The Buddha introduces many different kinds of ghosts and spirits in the twelve volumes of *The Great Consecration Sutra*. These beings have various appearances; for example, some have heads while others are headless. There are mountain ghosts, water ghosts, fire ghosts, road ghosts, and so forth. Ghosts are all around us, just as insects are everywhere outdoors in the summer. Some sutras state there are 84,000 kinds of pretas, while others say there are 6,600. Although the number varies, there are indeed a large number of pretas. After learning this, some people become too frightened to even walk. However, not all ghosts harm people. Some may cause harm due to karmic connections from previous lives, but others simply take their own food without harming anyone.

Therefore, one should not be overly academic when studying the Dharma. It is not appropriate to immediately dismiss something mysterious as mere superstition or folklore. There are indeed many suffering beings in this world, and when you come to understand how they become pretas and how they suffer, your hatred toward them will dissolve. When you encounter unfavorable conditions initiated by them, you will not resort to extreme measures to drive away these beings or destroy them.

Thus, Buddhist knowledge is very important because it allows us to cultivate compassion for all living beings. Without this understanding, when a person faces an obstacle created by ghosts or demons that hinders their practice, they may be tempted to harm them using powerful mantras of subjugation. Such an intention is truly troubling!

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said:

Some yogis have the capacity for subjugation, but not liberation.
It is a grave fault if such yogis use the mantra to harm ghosts, instead
of liberating them.

Therefore, in our practice, we must not harm any living being. Instead, we should use compassion to transform any adversity into opportunities on the path.

I once read a story about a Rinpoche's experience in retreat.

During his retreat, he was attacked by a demon. Initially, he forgot to show compassion and took on a wrathful form by visualizing himself as a six-armed Mahakala. However, the demon was not afraid of him. The demon then transformed into the appearance of Amitabha Buddha, sitting on the Rinpoche's head.

In that moment, great compassion arose in the Rinpoche. He realized that although this demon was powerful, it had committed misdeeds everywhere—how pitiful! As soon as he felt compassion, the demon turned into a small bird and quickly flew away in fear. Thus, the power of the secret mantras is encompassed by compassion. Any subjugation must be carried out with great compassion.

All of the pretas spend their lives consumed by fear and delusions. Their minds are fixated on malevolent thoughts, driving them to harm others whenever possible. Many of them, upon death, descend even further into lower realms, such as the hells.

Normally, we assume that pretas will harm us, so we do everything possible to subdue them. In reality, they have been reborn as pretas due to their misdeeds in previous lives, and in this life, they harm living beings in various ways, which will lead to their rebirth in lower realms again. Because of their continued wrongdoings, they cannot be freed from this cycle of suffering life after life. How pitiful!

Therefore, regardless of how pretas may harm us, we must treat them with compassion. We must not harbor malice to subjugate or expel them.

Compassion is the foundation of all Dharma practices. Recently, I invited the renowned Tulku Thupten Nyima Rinpoche to give a teaching, which was recorded on a DVD.

As he mentioned in his talk, during the Cultural Revolution, when he witnessed opposition against Buddhists and the torture they endured, he initially felt angry and could not accept it. However, he then shifted his perspective, thinking, "Those who harm Buddhists are truly pitiful! How could they commit such misdeeds?" His entire perception changed when compassion arose within him.

He continued to practice despite difficulties and did not waver in the face of adversity. During this challenging period, he managed to recite *A Concert of Names*

of *Manjushri*⁶¹ at least three times a day, sometimes up to thirteen times. He never ceased this recitation, not even for a day.

Later, when religious policies in China relaxed, Thupten Nyima Rinpoche was invited to give teachings in many countries, earning a good reputation and favorable treatment. In these favorable conditions, he felt his Dharma practice did not progress as much as before, and he recited *Chanting the Names of Manjushri* less frequently.

This reflection comes from Thupten Nyima Rinpoche himself, with which I strongly resonate. Indeed, when facing hardships, many practitioners may make significant progress in their Dharma practice, such as developing conviction about the suffering of samsara and cultivating compassion. However, once they attain wealth, fame, or status, it becomes difficult for them to return to their previous practices. Thus, favorable conditions in life can actually become unfavorable conditions for Dharma practice.

As for pretas, we should calmly face the harm caused by their actions and must not be malicious toward them. This is also my personal experience from years of practice. Some people become very upset when they are sick, thinking, “Is a ghost making fun of me, causing my illness? I’ll recite mantras to get rid of it!” This is not the correct approach.

There is a story about a practitioner and a ghost in the *Older Sutra of Parables*:

A practitioner was meditating in a hermitage when a ghost intended to harm him. The ghost appeared in the form of a headless man. Seeing the ghost, the practitioner said calmly, “Without a head, you will not get a headache. Without eyes to see visual objects, ears to hear gossip, a nose to distinguish smells, and a mouth to taste flavors, you have fewer afflictions. How wonderful!”

The ghost then transformed into a being with no trunk, only four limbs. It moved closer to the practitioner again. Upon seeing the ghost in this new form, the practitioner remarked, “Without a trunk, you will not feel pain or itch; without abdominal organs, you will not suffer from illness. How delightful!”

Next, the ghost changed into a form without hands and feet, approaching the practitioner from left to right, back and forth. The practitioner said, “That is better! Without hands and feet, you won’t steal, which is what practitioners should avoid.” Hearing this, the ghost immediately vanished.

⁶¹ Skt. Mañjuśrī-namasamgiti

After a while, the ghost transformed into a dignified man who walked up to the practitioner, bowed to him, and said, “It is truly admirable that you are so committed to the path. Soon you will attain realization.” He then venerated and prostrated to the practitioner once more before departing. [A true practitioner should reach such a state of practice, but for many people, it may be challenging to achieve this.]

Pretas are truly pitiful. What is especially unbearable is that, regardless of whether they died from illness, were killed by sharp weapons, or committed suicide by hanging, they must relive the pain of dying in that same way once every seven days.

A twenty-one-year-old man in my hometown was perfectly fine yesterday but hung himself this morning. It seemed that nothing serious had happened to him. Perhaps his suicide was impulsive.

Unnatural deaths, such as suicide, are quite inauspicious. However, many worldly individuals choose to take their own lives, which is extremely unwise. The *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* says:

One sees that some who are overwhelmed
By suffering long for death,
Yet entirely due to their confusion
They will not reach the excellent state.⁶²

Some people are so overwhelmed by suffering that they commit suicide, hoping to escape it. They end their lives out of ignorance, which prevents them from embarking on the path to liberation. According to Schopenhauer, when a man’s fear of life exceeds his fear of death, he will choose suicide. From a Buddhist perspective, committing suicide does not eliminate suffering; rather, it results in being reborn as a preta, who then experiences the agony of suicide repeatedly. Instead of achieving a rebirth in a higher realm, individuals who take their own lives will continue to descend into even lower realms. Therefore, suicide is regarded as an extremely ignorant act.

Especially after studying the Dharma, one should not commit suicide. Last year, someone told me, “Because of your teaching of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

⁶² Aryadeva’s *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

quite a few individuals decided not to take their own lives.” I do not know if this is true.

Today’s young people will inevitably face adversities, but after studying the Dharma, they should understand that everything is subject to causes and conditions, so there is no need to cling to anything. What is the use of committing suicide when their business or marriage doesn’t work out? Life is so precious; we must live it well. As we all see, there is snow in winter and roses in summer. Can I mention roses? Those who intend to end their lives may feel even sadder when they see roses. Never mind that. In any case, a person who commits suicide can easily fall into the realm of pretas and relive the pain of suicide repeatedly.

The pretas seek to transfer their suffering onto others, causing harm wherever they go. However, this does nothing to alleviate their own misery. Even when they joyfully visit former friends and loved ones, their presence brings only illness, madness, and other unwanted hardships. Therefore, these pretas are truly pitiful. We should recite the sadhana of fire puja for them.

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* explains why we should make offerings to pretas. Here is a story from that sutra:

Once, the Buddha walked to a barren field where a preta who had taken many lives would eat one person each day. The Buddha wanted to tame and liberate him. Since the preta could not yet accept the Dharma due to his violence and ignorance, the Buddha first transformed himself into a powerful ghost and shook the preta’s palace, disrupting his peace.

The preta living in the barren field emerged with his followers. Upon seeing the powerful ghost, he was so frightened that he fainted and fell to the ground like a lifeless body. The Buddha restored the preta to consciousness, resumed his form as the Tathagata, and imparted Dharma teachings to the preta and his followers. The Buddha bestowed upon them the precept of not killing.

After receiving the precept, the preta asked, “My followers and I live on flesh and blood. Now that we’ve vowed not to kill, does it mean we’ll starve to death?”

The Buddha responded, “From now on, wherever my Shravaka disciples practice the Dharma, I will ask them to make food offerings to you.”

Therefore, in Chinese Buddhist temples, the sangha makes food offerings every day before lunch and chants this verse:

*Garuda, pretas in barren fields, rakshasas and Hārītī,
Now the ambrosia is everywhere (for you).*

As you can see, the pretas in barren fields are mentioned in their chanting.

Tibetan practitioners make food offerings to pretas through fire pujas. There are two types of fire puja: the vegetarian one and the meatitarian one. The latter relies solely on flesh and blood, similar to tigers and wolves that cannot survive on grass; therefore, blood, meat, or alcohol is added to the fire to nourish those pretas.

[Some people are the same. They only eat seafood and avoid vegetables. I even met a government official who said, “I cannot just eat vegetables like a yak. I am a carnivore.” People who constantly crave meat will likely be reborn as meatitarian pretas after their deaths.]

The sadhana of the meat fire puja should be recited in the afternoon. When meatitarian pretas enjoy the smoke from the meat fire puja, they will no longer harm other beings. Therefore, practitioners should always remember to make offerings to pretas.

While making food offerings, we should recite more of the mantra from the *Dharani Sutra for Bringing Salvation to the Hungry Ghosts with the Flaming Face*:

*Namah Sarva Tathagata Avalokite Om Sambhara
Sambhara Hum*

Meanwhile, we should also recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara and the names of the four tathagatas. This is what we practitioners should be doing regularly. Many senior practitioners in my hometown constantly think of benefiting sentient beings in their daily lives. For example, even when they go to the bathroom, sweep the floor, or take out the garbage, they recite mantras to benefit those invisible pretas.

In fact, it is very important for a Buddhist to maintain a kind heart at all times. By doing so, regardless of what we are doing or where we go, everyone around us is a being we can help. Benefiting living beings does not necessarily mean we must become the president of a country to encourage everyone to commit virtuous actions. As long as we cultivate a kind heart toward beings in hell, pretas, animals, and humans, and genuinely care about them at all times, we can help countless beings.

Conversely, if a person lacks a kind heart, when they encounter harm from pretas, they may easily feel inclined to seek revenge.

These pretas endure relentless torment. Some individuals with supernatural power subject them to various forms of suffering—they bury them, burn them, and perform rituals that unleash an array of imagined weapons against them. They imprison them underground in total darkness for kalpas, incinerate them in sacrificial fires, and assault them with mustard seeds, crushed stones, and similar objects. Their heads are shattered into hundreds of pieces, and their bodies are torn apart into thousands of fragments.

In the stories of Zurpoche Sakya Jungne and Zurchungpa Sherap-tra, there are many examples of subduing pretas in such ways. Without generating compassion, practitioners must not subdue pretas with powerful mantras or subjugation sadhanas.

Someone carries a vajra dagger with them all day. Whenever they see a sick person, they fiercely recite the mantra of Vajrakilaya:

Om Vajra Kili Kilaya Hum Phat

Meanwhile, they glare at the sick person with anger, hitting and striking them, even tearing the person's clothes. Such actions may not necessarily benefit living beings.

The subjugation rituals and mantras in Vajrayana are remarkable, and when performed correctly, they can be very powerful. However, the prerequisite for such practices is compassion. Otherwise, if you carelessly recite the subjugation sadhana and throw mustard seeds at pretas, given the power of the mantras of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, you can bring immediate harm to them, causing them great suffering for kalpas.

These pretas are already very miserable. Like all beings in their realm, they experience distorted perceptions: the sun feels cold to them in winter, while the moon scorches them in summer. They cannot be freed from suffering at any time. If we worsen their suffering instead of alleviating it, we are not behaving like practitioners.

In the highest view of Mahayana Buddhism, everything is simply a manifestation of our own minds, including pretas. Therefore, what can truly harm us is not external pretas but internal self-clinging. Shantideva said:

All the harm with which this world is rife,
 All fear and suffering that there is,
 Clinging to the “I” has caused it!
 What am I to do with this great demon?⁶³

All the disasters, fears, and torments in this world are caused by our self-clinging. Clinging to the “I” is the most terrible demon. Because of it, we are harmed by pretas and demons. Therefore, what a practitioner should address is not the pretas, but deep-rooted self-clinging.

At the relative level, pretas do exist, but some people go so far as to reject anything they cannot see, which is not right. Others, in contrast, believe that everything is haunted by ghosts and demons, leading to unnecessary fear. In some supreme Dharma centers, there is no space for ghosts to linger due to the power of great accomplished masters. In fact, even those with misguided views cannot remain at Larung Gar for long, let alone ghosts.

Many people lack a sufficient understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. Some individuals are too “smart” to accept the existence of ghosts, while others are so superstitious that they perceive ghosts everywhere. Both perspectives are misguided. As practitioners, we should first maintain an open mind regarding the existence of ghosts. However, when we are harmed by them, we should attribute all our ailments, pains, humiliations, and similar experiences to our own self-clinging. As *The Seven Points of Training the Mind* states:

Lay the blame for everything on one.⁶⁴

If you can do this, your practice will surely succeed.

Of course, while being compassionate toward the ghosts and demons that harm us, we should nevertheless stop them when necessary. There is a story about an intellectual named Ta-jo Ying in *Four Lessons by Mr. Yuan-Liaofan*:

Once, Mr. Ying overheard a conversation between two ghosts. One ghost said, “A woman’s husband has been away for a long time, so her in-laws want to force her to remarry. She is unwilling to comply, so tomorrow night she will hang herself here. Ah! Finally, I’ll have a replacement, and I can be free from the ghost realm!”

⁶³ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

⁶⁴ Translated from the Tibetan by the Padmakara Translation Group.

Mr. Ying really wanted to help the woman, so he secretly sold his land for four taels of silver, sent a letter disguised as her husband, and delivered the silver to her at home.

The in-laws read the letter. Although it did not resemble their son's handwriting, the silver was genuine, so they stopped forcing the woman to remarry. Later, their son returned home, and the couple was reunited.

Mr. Ying later overheard a conversation between the two ghosts. One ghost said, "I found my replacement, but Ying ruined my opportunity." The other ghost asked, "Why don't you harm him?" The first ghost replied, "No, I cannot! His kindness and virtue have been recognized by the gods; therefore, he will be appointed as the minister responsible for keeping records of the beings in the underworld. How could I possibly harm him?"

There are many such wonderful stories in Chinese Buddhism that elaborate on the profound doctrines of Buddhism in a simple and accessible manner, guiding people on how to treat pretas and cultivate kindness. We practitioners do not necessarily have to do something grand. The key is to have a kind heart. Through studying the Buddha's teachings, if your speech, actions, and mind become more virtuous and less afflicted, it means the goal of our collective study and practice has been achieved.

Additionally, some pretas take the form of birds, dogs, or other animals, spreading disease and appearing hideous. In summary, the suffering of pretas is beyond comprehension.

For example, during the previous outbreak of avian flu in Canada in 2004, nineteen million chickens were culled. In 2009, people in Egypt killed 350,000 pigs in a single day to control the swine flu. More than 4.4 million cattle were slaughtered in the UK to eradicate mad cow disease.

From a Buddhist perspective, such actions are extremely cruel. We would never kill a person suffering from the same diseases, yet other living beings are slaughtered even if they are healthy. The misdeeds committed by humans are appalling. Such plagues are the consequence of such brutal killings.

Many people today are indifferent to the lives and deaths of animals. They do not truly understand the value and meaning of life. They may resemble humans, but their actions are not necessarily humane. Of course, we cannot expect everyone

to adopt Buddhist values, but in terms of behavior, are you more human or animal-like? It is important for everyone to deeply reflect on this matter.

All Dharma students should consider the following questions: What misdeeds did you commit before studying the Dharma? How did you treat other living beings before understanding the law of karma? How many beings did you harm during that time? How do you plan to repay your karmic debts now? After careful reflection, I believe that each of you has your own stories to share.

As for me, even though I was born into a Buddhist family and grew up in a place where Buddhism has always flourished, I still committed some misdeeds due to external circumstances and my environment. Many of you may have found yourselves in a similar situation. However, after encountering the enlightening Dharma, we have awakened from our confusion, all thanks to the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels.

From now on, each one of us should make a concerted effort to ensure that the second halves of our lives will be better. Although it may be unrealistic for us to completely uproot all afflictions and habitual tendencies immediately, we still need to make changes in our behavior moving forward. Otherwise, given the innumerable misdeeds we have committed in the past, whether we are aware of them or not, we may still be reborn as hell beings, pretas, or animals in the next life. It is akin to the way a person who ingests poison will suffer pain, regardless of whether they are aware of consuming it or not.

We are truly blessed and fortunate to have encountered the Dharma in this lifetime. Every worldly being seeks happiness and often claims, “I am willing to attain happiness at any cost.” But what is the difference between the happiness that worldly beings pursue and the happiness that Buddhists seek? A wise person should compare the two.

In short, countless pretas suffer from external, internal, and specific obscurations, as well as other demons and ghosts. They endure excruciating pain. Knowing this, we should keep in mind the suffering of these beings and cultivate love and compassion for them. We should aspire to bear their suffering and help them as much as we can.

Even when we spit, by reciting the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, it transforms the action into a great act of generosity. It is like pouring a soft drink on the grass in summer; a swarm of ants will naturally come. Similarly, when we spit or pour

water, many pretas will be drawn to us. At that moment, if we can recite mantras with a kind heart for the benefit of the pretas, even if the water is impure, it can still bring them great benefit and prevent them from fighting and harming each other. Such actions may seem insignificant, but they deserve everyone's attention.

In any case, we must have compassion for beings who are and will be pretas. Meanwhile, we should do our best to eliminate the causes⁶⁵ of being reborn as pretas. True practice is essentially about gradually transforming one's behavior, not about boasting grandly or flying around in the air.

⁶⁵ The causes are covered extensively in the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*.



Lesson 48

“There are two categories of animals ... But in fact even in the higher realms there is no happiness.” [page 76–78]

We have already studied the suffering of hell beings and pretas in the chapter on “the defects of samsara.” Today, we will begin learning about the suffering of animals.

Before today’s teaching, I want to emphasize the importance of listening to the Dharma teachings for every Buddhist. This is something I hope you will recognize at the start of this new semester. The sutra states:

From hearing, we know all the dharmas;
From hearing, we refrain from evil deeds;
From hearing, we cease acts of no value;
From hearing, we attain nirvana.

This verse explains the four qualities of hearing the Dharma teachings.

1) “*From hearing, we know all the dharmas*”: By listening to the teachings, we can discern what the authentic Dharma is and what it is not, as well as understand both mundane and transcendent knowledge.

In this world, even ordinary truths take a long time to learn. Today, almost all countries place great importance on education, which underscores the significance of hearing. A person who grows up with little exposure to knowledge will find it difficult to achieve success in the future. Given that hearing is already so vital for

acquiring worldly knowledge, it becomes even more crucial for understanding the Dharma, which is much more profound.

2) “*From hearing, we refrain from evil deeds*”: After studying the teachings of many sutras and shastras, we learn what to pursue and what to avoid, allowing us to refrain from misdeeds. For example, before studying the Dharma, we were unclear about the faults of killing and the merits of virtuous actions. Now that we have heard the teachings, we understand clearly that we should avoid misdeeds and must not harm living beings.

3) “*From hearing, we cease acts of no value*”: Hearing Dharma teachings can prevent us from meaningless idling. We idle externally or internally. External idling refers to immersing ourselves in trivial pursuits or engaging in idle chatter. Internal idling involves distractions and drowsiness of the mind that cause us to squander time aimlessly. Hearing the Dharma helps us avoid these faults.

4) “*From hearing, we attain nirvana*”: Through hearing the Dharma, we come to understand the temporary and ultimate benefits of the true Dharma and the harms of non-Dharma. From this knowledge, we can antidote afflictions, further realize the wisdom of no-self, and ultimately attain the fruition of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Thus, hearing is very important. Today, some people claim, “Meditation alone is sufficient. Hearing is not really necessary.” While this approach may benefit a very small number of individuals, the majority must follow the proper sequence based on their level of faculties.

Even if you possess superior faculties, hearing will not hinder your practice. What truly hinders your practice are various worldly negative behaviors. Hearing the instructions of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and eminent masters will only strengthen your faith, compassion, and wisdom; it will not diminish your good qualities.

Thus, we should cultivate the habit of reading more Buddhist scriptures and teachings, recharging ourselves daily through listening. By doing so, we continuously accumulate wisdom from hearing the Dharma, which greatly benefits us.

Here, I have briefly addressed the merits of hearing the teachings. I hope you will never give up studying the Dharma and always take it seriously.

2.1.3.2.3. The Animals

There are two categories of animals: those living in the depths and those scattered in different places.

Buddhist texts, including the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the *Agama*, and the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, classify animals into many categories and describe them in great detail. Generally speaking, animals are quite unintelligent, as the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* states:

Those sentient beings, due to their increased ignorance, engage in wrong actions through their body, speech, and mind. They are born there, are reborn there, and continue to exist there. Therefore, it is referred to as being born in the realm of animals.

According to *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, animals are categorized into those living in the depths and those scattered in different places. *The Sutra of the Life of Shakyamuni in His Twelve Years* states:

There are 6,400 kinds of fish, 4,500 kinds of birds, and 2,400 kinds of beasts.

We can refer to any one of these categorizations. Generally speaking, through this study, we must deeply recognize the suffering of animals. Simply knowing it is not enough; we must reflect and meditate on their suffering repeatedly. Meanwhile, whatever we do, we must ensure that we do not harm any animals.

I often encounter people who are particularly indifferent to the suffering of animals. It is understandable if non-Buddhists feel this way, as they may not be aware of the law of karma. However, if a Buddhist who has been studying the Dharma for several decades shows no concern for animals and lacks compassion for their suffering, it is truly disheartening! Therefore, through this study, we should all understand that animals, like humans, also seek happiness and wish to avoid suffering. We must cultivate this perspective!

Recently, in my hometown of Trango County, forty to fifty intellectuals (mainly teachers) and Dharma masters participated in a three-day symposium on education and philanthropy. During the meeting, one person said to me, “Through life release, you have saved many animals, especially cattle and sheep. If more and

more animals are released into nature, there will be less and less space for us humans to live. Isn't this harmful to our social development?"

I responded, "As a monastic, regardless of how many animals there are, I will always protect them. In my worldview, animals should be protected, not harmed. As for you, a householder who believes in Buddhism, please tell me: 'When there are many animals, should you kill them or protect them?'"

The person was left speechless and did not know how to respond.

Then a graduate student said, "Since ancient times, almost all Tibetans have believed in Buddhism and regarded the lives of animals and humans as equal. Those who do not embrace this value do not truly understand the law of karma. If society as a whole can respect the lives of animals and humans equally, it is entirely acceptable for its economic development to regress. We do not need such 'development.'"

Her impassioned words received warm applause from the audience. Several renowned Dharma masters from Larung Gar were also present, and they all found her perspective valuable.

Therefore, if we do not put the teachings into real practice, they will not significantly benefit our mindstream. We must avoid this mistake while studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Otherwise, without real practice, those with many fabricated thoughts may find it difficult to eliminate certain concepts instilled since childhood by worldly education.

Many school textbooks claim that certain animals are very similar to plants: Although they can move, their brains are not as well developed as those of humans, leading to slower responses to pain and a diminished capacity to truly feel it. Because of such views, many people do not consider it cruel to kill animals.

If they see a person about to be killed, they will not remain indifferent and will do their utmost to save that person. However, when they witness an animal facing death, many will remain indifferent and choose not to intervene. This disparity in attitudes toward the lives of humans and animals can be attributed to the different Mahayanist inclinations they cultivated in previous lives, as well as their current circumstances and education.

We must correct this misguided view of animals. By meditating on the relevant teachings, we can develop the conviction that animals are no different from humans. If animals are to be killed due to their perceived unintelligence,

what about those humans who are also unintelligent? For example, in a classroom of schoolchildren, fewer than one-third may achieve excellent grades. Would anyone consider killing the other two-thirds simply because they are perceived as less intelligent? Of course not!

Therefore, we should always contemplate, examine, and analyze the views we encounter. By doing so, we will truly understand the suffering of animals. This understanding will naturally cultivate compassion within us— this is the goal of studying Mahayana Buddhism.

2.1.3.2.3.1. Animals Living in the Depths

The vast outer oceans are filled with countless fish, reptiles, turtles, shellfish, worms, and other creatures, as numerous as the grains of malt at the bottom of a beer barrel. If we embark on an underwater cruise to explore the ocean world, we can indeed witness a multitude of living beings in the sea.

It is said that some serpents and monsters are so enormous that their bodies can coil around Mount Meru multiple times, while other creatures are as tiny as dust particles or the tip of a needle.

By far the largest animal in the world is the blue whale, which can reach thirty-three meters in length and weigh 190 tons. Some animals described in the sutras are even larger. For example, *The Sutra of the Great Conflagration* depicts enormous fish:

There are big fish in the ocean that can reach lengths of 4,000 li,⁶⁶ 8,000 li, 12,000 li...or even 32,000 li.

Therefore, due to their various karmas, some animals possess very large bodies.

Regardless of their size, animals experience tremendous suffering. Larger animals prey on smaller ones, while smaller creatures invade the bodies of larger ones, consuming them alive in the process. Many large animals host tiny parasites that feed on their flesh from within. Some beings are born in the dark depths between continents, where sunlight never penetrates, leaving them unable to

⁶⁶ Li, also known as the Chinese mile, is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. The li has varied considerably over time but was usually about one-third of an English mile and now has a standardized length of a half-kilometer (500 meters or 1,640 feet). This is then divided into 1,500 chi or “Chinese feet.”

perceive whether their limbs are bent or stretched. In their ignorance, they lack any understanding of right or wrong and are endlessly reborn into realms of suffering.

2.1.3.2.3.2. Animals that Live Scattered in Different Places

The animals inhabiting the realms of gods and humans suffer continually due to ignorance and exploitation, while the nagas endure torment, facing attacks from garudas and enduring showers of burning sand. Moreover, they are stupid, aggressive, and poisonous.

Many sutras, such as the *Dirghagama* and *The Questions of the Naga King Sutra*, explain the categorization of nagas and their sufferings. Ancient Chinese texts, such as *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, *Records of the Grand Historian*, and the *Huainanzi*,⁶⁷ also describe the existence of nagas or dragons.

Many people believe that nagas or dragons are creatures that exist only in myths, not in reality. Some Tibetan and Han Chinese scholars assert that dragons are entirely imaginary due to the lack of empirical evidence. However, such claims are not necessarily accurate. The sutras do not state that everyone can see a dragon. Even during the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni, when nagas came to hear the Dharma before the Buddha, many members of the sangha could not see them. Only a select few beings with clairvoyance or special karmic perception were able to see them.

In addition to invisible dragons, we can clearly see many other animals that also suffer tremendously. The wild animals that coexist with humans live in perpetual fear. They cannot take even a single bite of food without being constantly alert. Surrounded by mortal enemies, animals prey on one another while also facing relentless threats from hunters, predators, and countless dangers. Hawks hunt smaller birds, smaller birds feed on insects, and so on. This endless cycle of killing and being killed leads to the accumulation of negative actions.

Hunters, skilled in various cruel methods, use all sorts of deadly tools—nets, snares, traps, and guns—to torment and kill these animals, putting their lives in constant jeopardy. With the development of technology, I have heard that in coastal areas there are fishing nets as large as football fields. Once cast into the ocean, these nets can capture vast quantities of creatures such as fish and shrimp.

⁶⁷ The *Huainanzi* is an ancient Chinese text that consists of a collection of essays resulting from a series of scholarly debates held at the court of Liu An, Prince of Huainan, sometime before 139 BC.

Additionally, there are various snares designed to capture birds, and their operation is quite cruel.

Therefore, animals rarely experience a sense of safety. Although we humans may fear terrorists, thieves, and accidents, compared to animals that are constantly exposed to numerous harms and threats, we still live relatively secure lives.

Some animals are slaughtered for parts of their bodies, such as horns, fur, and skin. For example, oysters are harvested for their pearls, elephants for their tusks and bones, and tigers, leopards, otters, and foxes for their pelts, while musk-oxen are hunted for their musk and yaks for their meat and blood.

Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend* says:

Some of them are killed just for their pearls,
Their wool, or bones, their meat or skins and fur.⁶⁸

Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind says:

They are beaten and must suffer endlessly,
And for their meat and fur and bones they are condemned to
death.⁶⁹

As we can see, the torments that animals endure are beyond our imagination.

Every summer in the Faroe Islands, a constituent country of Denmark, people gather on the beach to participate in the annual whaling of long-finned pilot whales. Many whales are killed, and their blood stains the beach, turning the sea red. The scenes are horrifying. Afterward, the hunters cut the whales into pieces and distribute the meat to residents of the islands. What puzzles me even more is that locals view this whaling as a cultural heritage, with all family members expected to participate, meaning even toddlers are present to witness the slaughter. What a troubling tradition it is! Imagine what a young child will think and feel as they grow up, having been instilled with such values from an early age.

Some of the monastics present here once did not know the law of karma and killed many living beings before their ordinations. Their actions result in terrible

⁶⁸ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

⁶⁹ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

karmic consequences. Personally, I do not recall ever killing any living being intentionally. Perhaps due to karma from my past lives, and the blessings of the Three Jewels, I have been afraid of any scene of killing since birth. As a child, when I saw animals being killed, I would run far away and dared not look at the scene. However, people have different propensities, so some individuals may not share my feelings. We should all reflect carefully on our past actions.

Not to mention the misdeeds committed in previous lives, many people have already consumed large quantities of living beings in this life. Some absurd advertisements even promote statements like, “Eating live fish is good for brain health. It can enhance memory and strengthen the body.”

In some places, a very cruel method is used to kill pigs for barbecue. The pig is tied up, beaten with a stick until its body swells, and the capillaries bleed. Then parts of the pig are cut off for barbecue. The advertisement claims that this pork is particularly delicious, nutritious, and good for health. What a spurious promotional statement! Nevertheless, many people are drawn to it and genuinely want to try it.

Sometimes I feel that the hell realm actually exists in the human realm. Animals live very miserable lives. It is a tragic fate that the very bodies the animals are born with become the cause of their death.

Not only wild animals but also domestic ones endure unimaginable suffering. Domesticated animals often seem so bewildered that when their executioner approaches with a knife, they can only stare blankly, unable to even consider escaping. They are subjected to milking, heavy burdens, castration, nose-piercing, and being yoked to plows. None can break free from this endless cycle of servitude. Horses and yaks, even when their backs are raw and covered in sores, are still burdened and ridden.

Some circuses offer “wonderful” shows in which tigers jump through fire rings, monkeys juggle fire sticks, elephants stand on one leg, and dolphins play with balls. However, behind those performances lies animal cruelty that involves physical abuse. Due to this inhumane treatment of animals, legislation prohibiting animal performances in circuses has been enacted in many countries, including Brazil, Singapore, Finland, several states in America, and provinces in Canada. Without such regulation, many people driven by greed show no compassion for

these animals, viewing them merely as money-making machines, which is deeply unethical.

Animal cruelty still exists in many places, and the situation is appalling. Take cattle and horses, for example: when they can no longer move, they are beaten with whips and struck with stones. The suffering and possible illness of these animals rarely, if ever, cross the minds of their owners.

Cattle and sheep are relentlessly exploited until their deaths. When they grow too old, they are either sold or slaughtered by their owners. In any case, their fate is the slaughterhouse, and they never experience a natural death.

Especially in Qinghai, when a herdsman's livestock grows old, they are sent to a slaughterhouse. In contrast, people in the Garzê area feel gratitude toward their old yaks, allowing them to die naturally instead of killing them for meat.

However, many young Tibetans in Qinghai only think about having meat to eat and show no compassion for the animals. This reflects a complete lack of moral values.

In fact, the suffering that animals endure is beyond our imagination. It is essential for practitioners to treat animals and humans equally. From both a humanitarian perspective and the viewpoint of vegetarianism, animals are living beings with feelings, just like humans.

Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals is a 1975 book by renowned philosopher Peter Singer. Since its publication, the book has had a significant impact and has been translated into more than twenty languages and published in dozens of countries. The English version has been reprinted twenty-six times.

[I have read through this book. Since its narrative follows a Western style, which differs from Eastern ways of thinking, I sometimes find it challenging to grasp his ideas immediately. Nevertheless, the content of the book is truly valuable.]

According to Singer, humans have consistently gone too far in killing, eating, and abusing animals. With the rise of the Black Movement and the Women's Movement, people have gradually come to realize that all humans are equal. Therefore, there should be an "Animals Movement" as well, so animals can be liberated from their suffering.

Some readers may not feel inspired by the book, but conscientious individuals

may find it profoundly impactful. I hope you consider reading this book at your convenience. Although I personally find some parts challenging to understand, the content itself is highly worthwhile.

Some of our human values should be reevaluated. Otherwise, we will continue to believe it is acceptable for humans to eat animals or that animals exist solely for human consumption. As a result, our happiness is often built upon the suffering of animals. Such thinking and actions are illogical.

However, very few people grasp this concept. Therefore, we must begin with ourselves and gradually change our behaviors.

Of course, Buddhists do not necessarily need to adhere to worldly philosophical viewpoints. We may simply reflect on this:

Animals endure unimaginable suffering. Whenever you witness animals being mistreated, try to place yourself in their position and vividly imagine the pain and hardship they endure. Meditate with deep compassion for all beings reborn as animals. Especially if you have pets or animals in your care, treat them with kindness and love.

You should think like this: “All living beings have been my parents, and when they are suffering, I vow to suffer for them!” or “How could I bear these excruciating sufferings, should they fall upon me?” Then, make an aspiration to never harm any living being in the future and vow to liberate them.

You may contemplate this repeatedly. Some people often complain that nothing from *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* can be put into practice. In reality, if you have not meditated on the relevant teachings, there is indeed nothing for you to practice.

However, if you have integrated the teachings into your meditation practice, you will recognize that there are many aspects you can reflect upon. You will also understand that these extremely important practices of the common preliminaries are actually much more significant than those focused solely on the profound state of realization.

If you can truly regard animals and humans equally, then as a Mahayanist, you may gradually attain many states of realization. Consequently, you will not only cultivate more kindness and love toward your own domesticated animals but also develop great compassion for animals in general, aspiring to protect them as well. *The Brahma’s Net Sutra* states:

If the Buddha's heirs often generate great compassion...when they encounter cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, and any other animals, they should think to themselves and say, "You are now an animal. You should generate bodhicitta.

Whenever we come across an animal, we should generate compassion and think of helping it give rise to bodhicitta. We should express this aloud as well.

Mahayanists should keep these principles in mind at all times. Why? Because all animals, even the smallest insects, can experience pleasure and pain, and because they have all been our fathers and mothers in past lives, we should give rise to love and compassion for them. Integrate these principles into your practice using the three supreme methods.

Animals are unintelligent and ignorant. They lack merit and virtuous roots, and they do not have the opportunity to engage in virtuous deeds. They remain perpetually in a state of ignorance. How pitiful!

The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* states:

Beings in the realm of animals are countless;
They conduct meaningless deeds, deeds devoid of merit,
inappropriate deeds, non-virtuous deeds, and dishonest
deeds.

In considering the causes of their rebirth as animals, we must always remind ourselves not to commit these misdeeds, lest we fall into the realm of animals after death.

The *Sutra of the Questions of the Son of Pratibhāna* identifies five causes for being reborn as animals:

Five misdeeds lead to rebirth as animals:
The first is breaking precepts and stealing,
The second is failing to repay one's debts,
The third is killing,
The fourth is disliking hearing the Dharma,
The fifth is creating obstacles to the food assembly of monastics.

The causes of being reborn as animals are clearly explained in the sutras, so we

must remain vigilant at all times. If we carelessly commit these misdeeds, it may be too late to regret our actions in the future.

We should put the above teachings into practice, using the three supreme methods. That is, at the beginning we generate supreme bodhicitta; during the main part, we meditate on the suffering of animals in general or the suffering of a specific animal; and at the conclusion we dedicate the merit for all sentient beings.

Once we have literal understanding of the teachings, we must put them into practice. If we maintain a solid and steady practice of ngöndro, many states of realization will arise naturally within us. Conversely, if we do not regard animals and humans as equals, then even if we appear to be practitioners, none of our practice will bear fruit.

Now we have covered the teachings on the hell realm, the realm of pretas, and the realm of animals. Here is a summary of these three lower realms:

Wherever beings are reborn in the three lower realms, they endure immense and lasting suffering. Those born into these realms are marked by ignorance and lack understanding of the Dharma. Consequently, they can only generate further causes that lead to additional rebirths in these realms, making it extremely difficult to escape once they are trapped there.

As humans, no matter how poor our practice may be, we can still refrain from committing misdeeds and choose to engage in virtuous actions. For example, those with perseverance will find it easy to abstain from killing, and those with faith in Buddhism can at least recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara a hundred times a day. However, for animals, even if they could live for ten thousand years, they still cannot recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara even once.

Therefore, considering the suffering of animals, we should cultivate deep compassion for them. At the same time, we must recognize that humans and beings in the lower realms lead very different lives, making it difficult for a being reborn in the lower realms to escape.

In this life and countless past lives, we have committed numerous wrongdoings that have inevitably led to rebirth in lower realms. Therefore, we must sincerely regret our past wrongdoings, confess them, and commit to refraining from such actions in the future. With deep compassion for the beings who dwell in those realms, we should dedicate all the positive deeds we accumulate in the past, present,

and future to their benefit. We must pray fervently for their liberation from these unfortunate states of existence.

This is what we should meditate on and dedicate ourselves to daily, and there is no need for extensive explanation. We must keep this paragraph in mind from now until the day we die. Every time we perform a virtuous deed—such as participating in a Dharma teaching, reciting the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, releasing life, listening and contemplating, or memorizing Buddhist texts—we should dedicate the merit to the beings of the three lower realms. We can do this by reciting long prayers such as *The King of Aspiration Prayers* or other short verses. This practice is essential.

Meanwhile, we should also reflect, “Now that I have encountered the Mahayana teachings and have the opportunity to practice the path that brings true benefit to both myself and others, I should engage in Dharma practice with determination, overcoming all difficulties, and strive to lead all beings from the three lower realms to the Buddhafields.” With this aspiration, we generate bodhicitta and pray to the teacher and the deities for their guidance and support, thinking, “May my guru and the Three Jewels bless me to accomplish this goal!” Then, we dedicate the merit for the benefit of all beings, thereby integrating the three supreme methods into our practice.

This pith instruction is what we must practice regularly. It is not difficult: whenever we engage in virtuous activities such as meditation, we can apply this instruction. Some practitioners have been practicing well, while others remain caught up in afflictions and distractions. Nevertheless, regardless of which group you belong to, you should be able to engage in this analytical meditation. Some urban practitioners are busy making a living, so while working, they can also contemplate and visualize according to the instructions. Practicing in this manner consistently is very important.

Please highlight this paragraph in your book. During your analytical meditation, close your eyes and repeatedly supplicate: “May buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, and Dharma protectors bless me so I can truly generate compassion toward beings of the three lower realms.” Then, dedicate all your merit to those beings. If you can practice this every day, you are a true Dharma practitioner.

While rebirth in the three lower realms naturally entails suffering, one might assume that the three higher realms would be filled with happiness and comfort.

However, even in the higher realms, true happiness does not exist. We will begin to explain this in the next class.



Lesson 49

“Humans suffer from the three fundamental types of suffering, ... cannot but contribute to rebirth in the lower realms.” [page 78–80]

2.1.3.2.4. The Human Realm

Today, we will begin discussing the suffering in the three higher realms, starting with the human realm.

Humans experience three fundamental types of suffering, along with the four great streams of suffering: birth, old age, sickness, and death. Additional human sufferings include the fear of meeting hated enemies, the fear of losing loved ones, the suffering of not getting what one wants, and the suffering of encountering what one does not want.

2.1.3.2.4.1. The Three Fundamental Types of Suffering

Generally, the three fundamental types of suffering are present in all six realms; however, human beings have more explicit feelings about them, which is why they are discussed in the section on suffering in the human realm.

In the course of this study, we should carefully contemplate suffering in the human realm. After all, we cannot directly experience the sufferings of hell beings, pretas, and animals, so our understanding of their suffering is only approximate. The sufferings of humans are ever-present, leading us all to have some personal familiarity with them.

Of course, this will be a different matter if you have never contemplated them. However, if you reflect on these sufferings, you will come to realize that the Buddha's statements, such as "All phenomena are impermanent" and "All contaminated phenomena are suffering," hold true.

Therefore, regular contemplation is very important. You should not just quickly go through the literal meaning of the text during the group ngöndro practice. Although the text itself is simple enough that those who have a basic understanding of the doctrines and special terms should understand it well, contemplating it and putting it into real practice is not so easy.

It is similar to this: while it may be easy to read one or two books, integrating their content into your mind so that it arises naturally and can be applied in real life is much more challenging. That's why past eminent masters repeatedly emphasized, "It is easy to study the Dharma, but hard to practice it."

In fact, the three fundamental types of suffering that we'll soon discuss are not hard to find in our daily lives. The *Lotus Sutra* states:

But because of the three sufferings, World-Honored One, in the midst of birth and death we undergo burning anxieties, delusions, and ignorance, delighting in and clinging to lesser doctrines.⁷⁰

Because of the suffering of change, the suffering upon suffering, and the suffering of everything composite, we living beings have to endure excruciating torments in samsara.

How do we uproot the three fundamental types of suffering? We can only rely on the Dharma nectar. In general, people seek to attain good fortune and avoid misfortune, evade pain, and pursue happiness. For this reason, some seek a panacea, some pursue wealth, some chase romance, and some strive for status, while the only thing that can truly make us happy is the Dharma. When the Dharma merges with our minds, we can certainly eliminate all suffering. It is like a severely ill patient who must rely on a good doctor to alleviate all his pains.

Because of this, I truly want to spread the Dharma to everyone's mind. Those who possess faith, wisdom, and virtuous roots recognize that Dharma is indispensable, as it offers a remedy for the three fundamental types of suffering for human beings.

⁷⁰ Translated by Burton Watson.

The Infinite Life Sutra states:

The medicine of Dharma can treat the three sufferings.

We often say things like, “All living beings suffer,” and “It’s hard to live in this world.” Indeed, upon careful examination, we realize that life is perpetually filled with suffering that can ultimately ruin our happiness, comfort, and joy.

So, who are the happiest people in the world? It may not be those with wealth or status. It is true practitioners who have reached a state of letting go, releasing attachment, and being carefree. This is not mere self-praise as Buddhists; it is supported by many historical accounts and practitioners’ personal experiences.

In today’s world, to eliminate the deep suffering in our minds, Dharma is the essential and invaluable remedy. That said, since you have generated bodhicitta, you should not ignore those around you and enjoy the Dharma alone. Once you possess capacity, wisdom, and compassion, you should share the Dharma with sentient beings who have an affinity with you.

Of course, the propagation of Dharma cannot be achieved quickly. If you are not sufficiently mature as a practitioner but hastily rush to a city to benefit beings, you may easily be influenced by the external environment. As a result, not only will you fail to benefit others, but you may also become trapped yourself. Therefore, in our practice, we should aspire to benefit others while also protecting ourselves.

[Today is March 8th, International Women’s Day, and may all female Dharma friends perfect your practice, have no hindrances, be carefree, auspicious, and happy! Meanwhile, I have sent some gifts to the female teachers at the Wisdom and Compassion School.⁷¹ Initially, I had wanted to give special candies to the female practitioners at Larung Gar, but somehow, I forgot. Perhaps this happens because you did not perform the Yellow Jambhala practice. But no worries, as I pray to the guru and the Three Jewels from the bottom of my heart, wishing they bless each and every one of you to attain genuine happiness.

In an article I wrote in my book *Footprints on the Journey*, I mentioned that Women’s Day is widely recognized internationally. Although we are monastics who forgo all worldly holidays and festivals, it is still necessary to join the worldly people to celebrate certain holidays.]

⁷¹ The school was founded by Khenpo Sodargye in 2007, aiming to provide basic educational opportunities to children living in Upper Lukoma and Lower Lukoma villages in Luhuo, Garzê, Sichuan Province.

2.1.3.2.4.1.1. The Suffering of Change

The suffering of change refers to the suffering we experience when a state of happiness suddenly changes into suffering. One moment we are healthy, and then, without warning, we may catch a cold and have a runny nose. One moment we feel content and satisfied after enjoying a good meal, but the next, we are overcome by intense spasms caused by parasites in our stomach. [I had such an experience when I was a teenager. At that time, I had not yet attended school. Once, while herding yaks, I experienced a sudden violent spasm in my stomach, and I almost died. Fortunately, several young shepherds nearby noticed me and helped save my life.] This is the suffering of change, which demonstrates that no worldly happiness is reliable.

*The Sutra on the Causes and Conditions of the Golden Youth*⁷² tells a story about the suffering of change:

A merchant named Delicate Ear possessed wealth that was unmatched. He was as wealthy as Vaishravana, the guardian king of the North. Then he had a baby boy who bore eighteen marks of ugliness. A cascade of misfortunes plagued his family: his house suddenly caught fire, and all his possessions were lost. The merchant and his family, who once lived blissfully like celestial beings, were reduced to beggars and forced to endure a very miserable existence.

The suffering of change can often be observed in our daily lives as well. A few days ago, I encountered a woman who had endured great hardship: her house caught fire several years ago, and her husband was imprisoned. Over the past few years, she has had no choice but to live a vagabond life with her children. Since her children have nowhere to attend school, she asked me if they could study at the Wisdom and Compassion School, to which I agreed.

The suffering of change affects many of us. Initially, a person may have a loving family, youth, wealth, and intelligence, but suddenly everything can shift. Therefore, after studying the Dharma, we should understand that the suffering of change can happen to anyone, including ourselves. As stated in *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heart Sutra*:

All happiness in the world will inevitably change and come to
an end;

⁷² Skt. Suvarṇavarṇāvadāna

When conditions arise, entanglements and afflictions appear,
Hence, they are referred to as the suffering of change.

Many celebrities and millionaires, who once wielded great power and prestige, have ultimately left the world in a very miserable state. Thus, no one can escape the suffering of change.

Currently, many of us enjoy good health, a happy family, and a fulfilling Dharma practice. Nevertheless, we are living in contaminated samsara, and everything we possess will eventually be lost. As a vajra song says:

Beauty is like summer flowers,
Wealth is like autumn clouds.

Therefore, however wonderful something may seem, it cannot withstand the forces of nature and the passage of time. Eventually, it will be reduced to nothing. Of course, Mahayanists can understand and accept setbacks and changes. However, a person who has not studied the Dharma often feels a sense of unfairness—life is unfair to him, society is unfair to him—so all he does is complain to others.

In fact, life is filled with the suffering of change. One moment we are happy, but the next, we are plunged into suffering—an enemy may steal our wealth or livestock, a fire might destroy our home, sudden illness or harmful forces may strike us, or we may receive devastating news.

For example, on May 12, 2008, everything was normal at 14:27 in Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province. But at 14:28, everything changed. A massive and devastating earthquake struck, claiming the lives of more than 69,000 people, leaving over 18,000 missing, and leaving at least 4.8 million homeless. The earthquake brought catastrophic changes to countless lives.

It is clear from the above that human life is extremely fragile, and our bodies and sensations are unreliable. In truth, any comfort, happiness, or prestige found within samsara is entirely devoid of permanence or stability. Ultimately, none of it can withstand the inevitable cycle of suffering. Therefore, we should cultivate a sense of disenchantment with it all.

It is stated in a vajra song:

Happiness is as fragile and subtle as a strand of hair.
No one knows when it will break.

The Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma says:

In life and death, there are many faults and worries;
Nothing is solid or permanent,
Everything changes and crumbles easily.

Therefore, pains and difficulties are overwhelming, while peace and happiness are scarce in samsara. Even if there is occasional happiness, it is fragile and can quickly turn into suffering.

In 2008, a global financial crisis erupted, bringing ruin to many formerly well-off individuals in both the West and the East. For example, Adolf Merckle, then the fifth richest man in Germany and ninety-fourth on Forbes' *World's Billionaires List*, had amassed a fortune of \$9.2 billion. However, due to poor investments compounded by the global financial turmoil, Merckle's business empire collapsed, and he committed suicide by throwing himself under a speeding train.

Additionally, Patrick Rocca, an Irish property tycoon who once held a fortune of five hundred million euros, took his own life with a self-inflicted gunshot in his mansion. His action followed a massive downturn in the stock market, which led to the collapse of the third-largest bank in Ireland.

There are many similar incidents occurring around the world. During the financial crisis, numerous wealthy and powerful individuals went bankrupt in a matter of months, and their lives were abruptly transformed.

Those who have never studied the Dharma and do not understand the truth of samsara may feel it is the end of the world when they encounter misfortune, while those with some Dharma practice will not share the same response. Therefore, we practitioners should contemplate these teachings daily and truly recognize the sufferings in the human realm through the analogies and examples presented in the text.

If we can develop the conviction that all things in this world are suffering and that no happiness is permanent, we will cease to long for permanence and will generate disenchantment and aversion toward samsara. In this way, our practice is bound to be successful. Otherwise, if we remain unaware of the truth of samsara, it becomes meaningless for us to protect, pamper, and praise our image as practitioners while using seemingly profound Dharma jargon.

Dharma practice is about transforming our minds in every possible way. It is

only when we develop a deep renunciation of samsara—when we no longer wish to remain in it for even a moment, much like a patient with gallbladder disease detests greasy food, or a prisoner loathes their dark cell—that our practice can achieve complete success. The *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* states:

When there is no end at all
To this ocean of suffering,
Why are you childish people
Not afraid of drowning in it?⁷³

Samsara is a boundless ocean of suffering, in which ignorant beings are trapped. These beings perceive suffering as happiness, filthy manure as a delicacy, and remain blind to the samsaric reality of all phenomena. Consequently, they feel no aversion toward samsara.

In our society, many people's actions are completely meaningless. Life is so short, yet individuals fully devote themselves to the pursuit of wealth and fame. But what do they truly gain in the end? Reflecting on this can inspire many. If we present a bright and joyful path to liberation, they may think we are mentally ill and question our motives. Unfortunately, there is little we can do for certain individuals.

Nevertheless, those willing to pursue the Dharma should carefully contemplate the suffering of samsara and cultivate conviction through sustained practice. By doing so, many practical states, including the supreme tantric states, will naturally arise in their minds. Otherwise, except for a very few practitioners with superior faculties, it is extremely challenging for an ordinary individual to attain realization without following the proper sequence of practice.

2.1.3.2.4.1.2. The Suffering Upon Suffering

We experience suffering upon suffering, and before one suffering is over, we are subjected to another. We contract leprosy, then develop boils; as if that were not enough, we then suffer an injury. Our father dies, and soon after, our mother passes away. We are pursued by enemies, and on top of that, we lose a loved one. The cycle continues.

⁷³ Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

There was once a news report about a family in northeast China that faced a series of misfortunes:

The child in the family was killed by a van on his way home from school. The father attempted to save his son by stopping a car for help but was struck by the vehicle, which left his leg broken. The mother could not bear the loss and became mentally disoriented. The grandmother suffered a stroke upon hearing the news and was taken to a hospital. People remarked that this family was extremely unfortunate. Perhaps these misfortunes were the karmic consequences of their actions in this life or in previous ones.

There is a story about Bhikkhuni Marvel in the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*:

Many misfortunes befell Bhikkhuni Marvel when she was still a layperson. Once, while pregnant, she decided to return to her parents' home with her husband and son to give birth. One night during the journey, they spent the night under a large tree. At midnight, she went into labor, and a significant amount of discharge came from her body, which attracted a venomous snake. Her husband was bitten and killed by the snake.

The next morning, she moved close to her husband and held his hand, only to realize he was dead. Overcome with grief, she lost consciousness. Seeing this, her older son began to cry loudly, which gradually roused her. She had no choice but to leave her husband's corpse behind and continue the journey with her older son on her shoulder and her younger son in her arms.

On the way, she encountered a wide and deep river. She left her older son on the bank, crossed the river with her newborn in her arms, and then returned for her older son. Seeing her, the older son stepped into the river and waded toward her but was swept away by the strong current. She attempted to save him but was unable to do so; she had no choice but to witness him being carried away. Devastated, she returned to the other bank in search of her newborn, only to find that he had been eaten by a wolf, with blood and body parts left on the ground.

She fainted once more and regained consciousness only after a long while. She continued her journey and encountered a brahmin who was a friend of her father. The brahmin told her, "Your parents' house caught fire recently, and the whole family was burned to death!"

Most of us have not experienced as many misfortunes as she did, but we can

still encounter suffering upon suffering in our daily lives. For example, a person may catch a cold while someone is speaking ill of them; meanwhile, their most precious object may be missing, and they may have a hard time traveling to work, and so forth. After experiencing these mishaps, some people may feel unlucky, but in reality, it is nothing out of the ordinary because that is just how life is. If we understand the nature of suffering, it becomes easier for us to face it.

In his *Commentary on the Vimalakirti Sutra*, Master Huiyuan of the Sui dynasty defined “suffering upon suffering” as follows:

Suffering arises from another suffering,
Thus, it is called suffering upon suffering;

... ..

Suffering adds to suffering,

Thus, it is called suffering upon suffering.

As we often say, “Misfortunes never come alone.” A person entangled in the effects of multiple karmas must endure several misfortunes, with new suffering building upon previous suffering, resulting in suffering upon suffering.

We should not only understand suffering in the human realm literally but also truly feel it through meditation. Regardless of where we are reborn in samsara, our existence is filled with one suffering after another, leaving no opportunity for even a moment of happiness. In this context, we should pray to the guru and the Three Jewels, vowing to take on the suffering of all living beings. As stated in Gyalse Tokme Zangpo’s *Commentary on the Seven Points of Training the Mind*, when we experience suffering, we should think, “May the suffering of all living beings be taken by me; with this merit, may the suffering of all living beings be eliminated.” This practice is the best way to transform suffering into the path of enlightenment.

2.1.3.2.4.1.3. The Suffering of Everything Composite

Some of us may feel that life is going smoothly right now and that we are not experiencing much suffering. However, in reality, we are deeply immersed in the causes of suffering. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, our homes, and even the pleasures we derive from adornments and celebrations are all rooted in harmful actions. Since so much of what we do is built upon negative actions, it can only result in suffering.

The definition of “the suffering of everything composite” varies across Buddhist scriptures, including the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and the *Precious Garland of the Middle Way*. Generally, according to the Mahayana perspective, the suffering of everything composite refers to change. That is, as long as something is changing, it is inherently suffering. The *Introduction to the Middle Way* states:

Beings are like the moon in rippling water,
Fitful, fleeting, empty in their nature.
Bodhisattvas see them thus and yearn to set them free.⁷⁴

The Commentary on the Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way and *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* also explain something similar to this verse.

In general, it is difficult to recognize that we are experiencing the suffering of everything composite. In *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Lama Tsongkhapa elucidates the suffering of everything composite through an analogy. He said:

It is like having a sore that has not been touched—there may be no pain at the moment, but as long as it is there, the suffering can arise at any time. Therefore, although the suffering of everything composite may not yet be apparent, it always exists in a hidden form.

Some sutras state that birth, old age, and death correspond to the three fundamental types of suffering. Birth represents the suffering of everything composite, old age corresponds to the suffering of change, and death embodies the suffering upon suffering. You should frequently reflect on this throughout your practice to cultivate a conviction that the nature of samsara is suffering.

Some people argue, “Who says everything in samsara is suffering? I am very happy now. As you can see, I have money, status, and no pains.”

However, such happiness lasts at most a day or two. Can you guarantee that you will always be this happy? Have you always been this happy since childhood? The answer is a definite “no.” In fact, if we compare the suffering and happiness in our lives, except for a very few enlightened practitioners, most of us experience much more suffering than happiness.

⁷⁴ Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group.

Next, let's take tea and *tsampa* as examples to further illustrate the suffering of everything composite.

In regions of China⁷⁵ where tea is cultivated, countless small creatures are killed during the planting, harvesting of leaves, and other related activities. When I visited cities in Yunnan Province and Hangzhou, I noticed tea farmers spraying pesticides on tea trees, which killed innumerable insects on the tea leaves.

Recently, a Korean told me, "The good-quality tea leaves will not be put on the market for sale. What you bought is of low quality, so you would better not drink it anymore. If you want to drink tea, I will offer you some good ones!"

This is true to a certain extent. I have been told that tea farmers keep the good-quality tea leaves for their own consumption, while poor-quality leaves are sold. One-year-aged Pu-erh tea is labeled as "thousand-year-aged" tea, commanding a higher price.

Tea is indispensable to Tibetans in our daily lives. When Venerable Atisha arrived in Tibet, the Tibetans welcomed him with a cup of tea. Atisha first offered the tea to all buddhas and bodhisattvas, then began to drink it. He truly enjoyed the tea, exclaiming, "Tibetans are blessed to have such great tea to drink! We do not have this kind of tea in India. It not only quenches thirst but also improves wisdom, strengthens the body, relieves drowsiness, fosters virtuous actions, and so forth. Had Indians had this tea, I would have been willing to exchange it for gold."

Therefore, we should emulate Atisha and drink tea whenever we have the chance (*the audience laughs*). However, what Patrul Rinpoche wanted to convey is that tea is associated with various forms of suffering.

During Patrul Rinpoche's time, tea was transported to Dartsedo by porters, each carrying twelve six-brick packs. The weight rested on a band around their foreheads, which eventually wore away their skin. Even when their skulls became visible, pale and exposed, they persisted in their labor.

Additionally, there were often robbers and wild animals in the forests of Mount Erlang, so tea merchants rarely passed through the area without incident. The social conditions of that time can be seen in the historical accounts of Master Fazun and Tulku Gangkar Rinpoche.

⁷⁵ Tibet didn't grow tea in the past. It remains the same today, except in very few places such as Luhuo County in the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, where a special highland tea named Ese Tea grows.

From Dotok onward, the burden shifts to yaks and mules, whose bodies endure relentless strain. Their backs are bent under heavy loads, their bellies marred with cuts and abrasions, and their hair worn away from constant friction. They suffer immensely in their servitude.

Many senior Tibetans still recall how difficult it was to bring tea to the Tibetan areas. Some of them even personally experienced the hardships of carrying tea. Obtaining a brick of tea back then was no easy feat, and it involved tremendous effort and pain. In comparison, road infrastructure and transportation vehicles are much more developed now, but does that mean there are fewer negative actions involved? The answer is no. People do not necessarily commit fewer misdeeds in tea plantations and trade; it is just that some steps are skipped.

Carrying tea entails immeasurable suffering for both porters and animals. Additionally, trading the tea is nothing more than a cycle of broken promises, deceit, and disputes until the tea ultimately changes hands.

[Some entrepreneurs who are also lay practitioners find it difficult to conduct business without resorting to dishonesty, and if their business fails, they struggle to make a living. This has troubled them for a long time.

Their experiences highlight the conflict between the law of karma in Buddhism and the means of earning a livelihood in mundane life. Finding a win-win solution is challenging. I can only suggest that you strive for honesty as much as possible.]

Tibetans traditionally drank brick tea, a type of black tea, but they are now beginning to explore other varieties such as Pu-erh tea, Longjing tea, and Jasmine tea, the production of which often involves negative actions. Therefore, when we enjoy a cup of tea, savoring its fragrance and soothing taste, we should also recognize that it is not beyond the nature of suffering. Of course, this detailed analysis is not intended to deter you from eating or drinking; rather, it aims to help you understand that all forms of happiness are accompanied by countless sufferings or may lead to future suffering.

In fact, all conditioned phenomena are inseparable from constant change, which is, in itself, the suffering of everything composite. The *Commentary on the Heart Sutra* states:

All conditioned things have the nature of suffering.
They are always changing, compelled, and unreliable,

Thus, it is referred to as the suffering of everything composite.

You may feel joy while sipping a cup of tea, but the tea itself embodies the nature of suffering due to its association with many negative actions. You may feel content after a meal, yet it still involves the suffering of everything composite, as expressed in a poem:

Hoeing the crops in the midday sun,
Sweat drips to the soil.
Who knows that of our meal in the dish,
Every grain comes after hard toil.⁷⁶

This poem may not resonate with you if you have never visited a food processing facility or a farmers' market. You may even think everything is taintless and idyllic. Once you become aware of the realities surrounding food, your perception may change significantly.

The reason our practice is ineffective is that we rarely reflect on these matters. For example, while living in a house, have we ever considered what brought the house into existence? When using the donations of the faithful, have we thought about whether we have done anything beneficial for living beings? When feeling happy about dressing up in stylish dresses of various colors—white, red, black, green, multicolored, or black-and-white—have we ever contemplated what goes into making the dresses? When having a meal, even the simplest one, have we wondered where the rice and the fuel came from?

In fact, these reflections are part of our practice. If we can engage in this contemplation often, we are becoming good practitioners. Therefore, we should reflect on, as much as possible, whatever we think and do. Otherwise, if we behave like mentally disoriented individuals who only care about themselves, without ever reflecting on the past, present, and future, it will not benefit our practice in any way.

We just learned that carrying and bartering tea involves the suffering of everything composite. Does this mean there is no other suffering involved in the process of making tea? The answer is no. In the Tibetan region, tea was typically exchanged for animal products like wool and lambskins, which also entailed many negative actions.

Before shearing in the summer, wool is infested with fleas, ticks, and countless

⁷⁶ Li Shen (772–846), *The Peasant's Lot*, translated by C. K. Ho.

other tiny creatures, as numerous as the strands of wool themselves. During the shearing process, many of these insects are either decapitated, sliced in half, or disemboweled. Those that survive become trapped in the wool and eventually suffocate. Such actions inevitably result in rebirths in the lower realms.

Regarding lambskins, it is important to remember that newborn lambs possess fully developed senses, allowing them to experience pleasure and pain. Just as they begin to enjoy their first moments of life in perfect health, they are killed. While they may be considered simple creatures, they still cling to life and do not wish to die—they feel love for life and suffer greatly when tortured and slaughtered. Meanwhile, the ewes who lose their lambs exemplify a mother's anguish at losing her only child. With this in mind, even the act of enjoying a single sip of tea cannot escape contributing to the conditions for rebirth in the lower realms.

Therefore, sipping a mouthful of tea is not as simple as it may seem. Modern people use money instead of wool or lambskins to exchange for tea, but how do you acquire that money? We should analyze and contemplate this from various perspectives.



Lesson 50

“Now look at tsampa ... to be lower rebirths, and endless suffering.” [page 80–82]

Let us continue to study the suffering of everything composite, one of the three fundamental types of suffering.

It says in the text that our food and tea are linked to many negative actions. This does not mean we must stop drinking tea or eating tsampa and rice, nor does it imply that a true practitioner must starve themselves to death. Great Tibetan masters, such as Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781–1851), also explained the merits of clean food, so it is acceptable to eat and drink. The key is to understand that food and drink are associated with many negative actions that are unknown to many.

Eminent masters have praised clean food. Take tea, for example. When Venerable Atisha came to Tibet, he spoke highly of tea, stating that it can improve health, refresh the mind, and dispel drowsiness. Atisha also claimed that tea from China was akin to celestial nectar, making it an excellent offering to the Three Jewels. According to historical accounts, Atisha sent tea leaves as a precious gift to Indian masters and friends. Similarly, many eminent masters of Chinese Buddhism advocated for tea culture and integrated it into Chan Buddhism. Thus, you can see how special tea is.

There are indeed harmful actions associated with tea. As mentioned in the root text, during the growing phase on plantations, insects are killed, and during the bartering phase, cheating and arguments occur. However, if we tea drinkers do not harbor intentions of killing or cheating, we will not commit significant faults. For

instance, if a person drinking tea has neither the thought nor the action of killing insects, according to the sutras, they bear no fault of killing.

No sutra states that if you engage in actions that indirectly result in the death of living beings, you must bear all the faults and consequences of the killing. Our daily activities unconsciously involve many misdeeds, but as long as we live in this world, such occurrences are inevitable. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that none of our actions involve misdeeds. According to Master Hsuan Hua, it is unavoidable for ordinary people to step on ants and insects and inadvertently kill them while walking. Only noble beings like arhats can walk without their feet touching the ground,⁷⁷ thus avoiding the death of insects.

In this world, food and drink that do not involve harmful actions cannot be found anywhere. Nevertheless, we should not become indifferent to these issues; instead, we should care about all that lies behind them and strive to dedicate merit to the living beings involved. For example, every morning when we wake up, we should think, “Whoever is involved with my food and clothing, and whoever I encounter today, may they attain benefits in their mindstream.”

If we practice in this way with the guidance of bodhicitta, all our actions—walking, sitting, lying down, and so on—will become sources of merit, propelling us further along the path to enlightenment. This is extremely important for a practitioner.

Next, Patrul Rinpoche uses the example of tsampa, the indispensable food for Tibetans, to further analyze the suffering of everything composite.

Tsampa, a type of cooked highland barley flour, is the staple food for Tibetans, just as rice and noodles are for Han people in China. Barley typically grows in regions between 3,200 and 3,800 meters above sea level. Highland barley does not yield well at altitudes below 3,200 meters or above 3,800 meters. The altitude of Larung Gar exceeds 3,800 meters, and the pagoda of the mandala at our Buddhist institute is at 4,000 meters. Therefore, we are unable to grow highland barley here. Even if someone plants it, the crop does not yield well.

Many eminent masters have praised tsampa. For example, Geshe Chengawa said, “The only indispensable food for practitioners is tsampa.” When asked by someone, “What is the panacea for this world?” a renowned doctor replied,

⁷⁷ Master Hsuan Hua explained that arhats walk with their feet three centimeters above the ground.

“Tsampa.” Additionally, a master remarked, “Tsampa can help expel the cold from the body and enhance wisdom.”

According to historical accounts, tsampa is the food that Avalokiteshvara specifically blessed and bestowed upon Tibetans, so anyone who eats it will eventually give rise to great compassion.

No one has ever reported contracting food poisoning after eating tsampa, nor has a Tibetan doctor ever forbidden patients from consuming it. Some experts have discovered that tsampa has remarkable benefits for our health and longevity. Recently, empirical studies have shown that “In China, there are an average of 6.4 centenarians per one million people. However, in the Tibetan region, the rate is forty-four centenarians, which is significantly higher than the average. The reason Tibetans have so many more centenarians, despite living at a high altitude with low oxygen levels, may be their frequent consumption of tsampa.”

Compared to meat and fish, tsampa is undoubtedly a “clean food.” However, when discussing the suffering of everything composite, Patrul Rinpoche reminds us that tsampa also involves various harmful actions. Here is Patrul Rinpoche’s argument:

Before the barley can be sown, the fields must be plowed. Worms and insects from underground are forced to the surface, while surface creatures are buried below. Wherever the plowing oxen tread, they are followed by crows and small birds, eagerly feeding on these displaced creatures. When the fields are irrigated, aquatic animals are left stranded on dry ground, while terrestrial creatures are drowned. At every stage—sowing, harvesting, and threshing—countless lives are lost. Given all this, it is almost as though we are consuming powdered insects.

Someone may think, “Since Patrul Rinpoche says ‘eating tsampa is almost as if eating powdered insects,’ there is no difference between adopting a vegetarian diet and eating meat.” But such an argument is baseless. The phrase “almost as if” is used to convey the idea that while tsampa is associated with certain misdeeds, it does not mean that eating a bowl of tsampa is equivalent to eating a bowl of powdered insects.

Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol also stated, “Eating powdered insects is very different from eating tsampa. Eating tsampa brings a practitioner health and longevity and enables them to perform many virtuous deeds. When the practitioner

is in good health, the 21,000 parasites residing in their digestive system will also thrive.

“During the planting of highland barley, some living beings, like insects, are killed, but even if they are not, they will freeze to death in winter. As long as you do not intentionally kill the insects, the fault is not significant.”

However, there is still a minor fault involved. Therefore, when we enjoy food in our daily lives, we should dedicate merit to all beings connected to our food, wishing for their freedom from suffering and the attainment of happiness. By doing so, the merit will far outweigh the fault.

Whatever we are doing, we should evaluate whether it creates more merit or more faults. If you blindly believe you should not consume any tsampa, tea, or butter, and you starve yourself to death, the fault will be much greater. Nowhere in any sutra does the Buddha suggest that all practitioners should starve themselves to death. The reason Patrul Rinpoche discusses the faults of food is to remind us that our practice should be guided by mindfulness and vigilance. Otherwise, we will have to repay many karmic debts.

I once read a verse inscribed on the wall of a Chinese Buddhist temple that said:

One grain of rice from a donor is as large as Mount Meru;
If you don't practice diligently, you will have to repay with your
own furs and horns.

This verse aligns with the guidance provided by various Tibetan masters. We should always make recitations and dedicate the merit to the donors during our practice. We should appreciate the donors' offerings and never regard them as insignificant or dispensable.

Past eminent masters of both Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism especially cherished their good fortune; they cherished food and always dedicated the merit for the offerings they received. Otherwise, the improper use of donors' offerings may lead to rebirth as a horse or a cow, forcing one to repay karmic debts with one's own body.

Hence, we should study the law of karma. Through study, we will become aware of different perspectives, allowing us to analyze the ultimate secret meaning of each instruction. By doing so, your practice will not go astray. Otherwise,

upon hearing the faults related to tsampa and tea, you may find yourself eating or drinking nothing. There is no need for this.

Therefore, when practicing the Dharma, we should first understand the extraordinary intentions of the eminent masters. Only in this way can we grasp the secret meanings of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

In the same way, butter, milk, and other foods, often referred to as the “three white foods” and “three sweet foods,” are traditionally viewed as pure and untainted by harmful actions. However, this perception is far from accurate. Most baby yaks, calves, and lambs are killed, while those who survive face a harsh reality. Shortly after birth, before they even have a chance to taste their mothers’ sweet and nourishing milk, they are tied with ropes around their necks—either tethered to stakes during rest stops or bound together during travel. This ensures that every drop of milk, their rightful nourishment, is taken away to produce butter and cheese.

The Tibetan eminent masters spoke extensively about the merits and virtues of consuming butter. However, I will skip this topic since butter is currently quite expensive, and if I discuss it too much while you may not be able to afford it, it might make you a little sad.

By extracting essential vitality from the mother’s body, which is crucial for the baby, we leave them halfway between life and death. Herdsmen understand this very well, but Dharma students raised in Han areas may not be fully aware of it.

In some Tibetan regions, people are engaging in a distressing practice: calves are killed as soon as they are born so that households can continuously obtain milk from the unfortunate mother yaks throughout the summer. Even when some calves are not killed, they are deprived of access to their mothers’ milk. Compared to humans, these animals lead a very miserable life.

A few herdsmen who believe in the law of karma strive to find balance in everything, ensuring they do not harm the calves while obtaining milk. By doing so, they avoid committing significant wrongs. Some farmers in Han areas neither steal nor deliberately kill; they grow crops through diligent work, making the food they consume essentially fault-free. Even if there are minor faults involved, these can be purified through reciting mantras and dedicating merit.

Next is about the mother yaks. When spring arrives, the aged mother animals grow so frail that they can no longer rise from their stalls. During this season, the

grass has not yet grown, and the winter hay has run out, leaving the poor mother yaks unable to nourish themselves and causing them to become quite weak. Thus, a “financial crisis” for yaks occurs in the spring. The cattle become extremely emaciated, especially when heavy snow covers all the grass on the ground, resulting in many yaks and calves starving to death. The survivors, frail and emaciated, shuffle around on the brink of death.

They are so skinny that they resemble the stirring sticks Tibetans use for roasting highland barley in a wok. In the spring, when the calves appear skeletal, herdsman comment, “It looks like a stirring stick. It might not survive the spring.” This simile is commonly used in the Tibetan region to describe skinny livestock. It may be difficult for you to understand.

When I was in middle school, our textbooks included many similes and analogies from the Han region of China. Our Chinese teacher, a Han Chinese, taught enthusiastically, but we struggled to comprehend much of it. Despite his best efforts, we had little understanding of what he was conveying. Perhaps this was due to differences in culture and traditions.

It is said that some Gelugpa geshe had trouble understanding certain similes in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

As for “stirring sticks,” I once made them myself. As a child in a herdsman family, I was able to handle most household chores, including making butter (ghee) and roasting barley. If you give me a piece of cloth and a stick, I can quickly make you a stirring stick.

All the things we currently associate with happiness—such as having food to eat, clothes to wear, and any other goods or materials we can think of—are also the result of negative actions. Therefore, even goods associated with a seemingly pure life can be directly or indirectly linked to harmful actions when examined by noble beings such as arhats, not to mention actual misdeeds.

Anuruddha, the arhat foremost in divine vision, once looked at a glass of water and, through his clairvoyance, discovered innumerable living beings within it, so he dared not drink. Later, the Buddha advised him not to rely on his arhat clairvoyance but to use his naked eyes instead, determining what to do and what not to do accordingly.

The Record of the Vinaya for Daily Use in Chinese Buddhism also states:

The Buddha sees 84,000 living creatures in a bowl of water;
Without reciting this mantra, drinking water is akin to
consuming the flesh of beings.

Therefore, before drinking water, monastics are required to recite the Ratnaśikhī⁷⁸ mantra—*Om Va Svava Mani Svaha*—to avoid any faults.

With advancements in science and technology, instruments have helped verify the presence of many bacteria in a glass of water. However, more than two thousand years ago, the Buddha and many sublime ones had already perceived this.

So, is there any fault in drinking water? The Buddha taught that as long as we do not see any living beings with our naked eyes and do not intentionally wish to harm them, there will be no fault. Otherwise, countless things remain invisible to our eyes, including dark matter, which is believed to account for approximately 68 percent of the matter in the universe. Therefore, our decisions about what to do versus what not to do should be based on what we can perceive with our naked eyes. Otherwise, the faults we commit would be countless.

Karma is related to the mind. According to Mahayana scriptures, it can be categorized into non-transferable actions, non-meritorious actions, and meritorious actions, all of which stem from ignorance. Thus, karma is closely linked to our conceptual thoughts. Without the mind fabricating thoughts, unintentional non-meritorious actions do not become the root cause of falling into the lower realms. We must be clear about these issues.

To emphasize the suffering of everything composite, eminent masters repeatedly remind us that behind every seeming pleasure lies a multitude of negative actions. The ultimate consequence of these actions can only lead to the endless suffering of the lower realms.

Thus, it is necessary that we recognize the truths of “All conditioned things are impermanent,” “All tainted things are suffering,” and “The threefold world is like a burning house.”

However, many people struggle to accept that “everything is suffering in the three realms.” In particular, some worldly successful individuals often believe they are living a fantastic and happy life free of pain, yet they do not recognize that everything that seems to represent happiness today is, in fact, the suffering

⁷⁸ Buddha Shikhin

of everything composite. They simply have not yet experienced this suffering. When we examine everything through the lens of wisdom, we come to realize that nothing is free from the nature of suffering.

The above commentary addresses the final one of the three fundamental types of suffering: the suffering of everything composite.

2.1.3.2.4.2. The Sufferings of Birth, Sickness, Old Age, and Death

Regarding the eight streams of suffering, there are extensive descriptions in the *Sutra of the Five Kings*. The Chinese Tripitaka contains many canonical collections, but sadly, many of them are collecting dust on bookshelves, with only a handful of people truly learned in the canons. When I meet lay practitioners and Dharma masters, I find that some can only mention a few sutras, and beyond these, they do not study the sutras extensively.

The same is true in the Tibetan region, where the Buddhist Canon is divided into the *Kangyur*,⁷⁹ and *Tengyur*,⁸⁰ which together comprise more than three hundred volumes. Except for a select few eminent masters and geshe, hardly anyone regularly reads the canonical collections, let alone being learned in them. Some Buddhists are devout, but if you ask them, “What are the eight streams of suffering? Which sutra covers those clearly?” many cannot provide an answer.

In fact, many concepts presented in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* can be found in the Tripitaka. The Buddhist Canon has already been translated into Chinese, but I wonder how many Buddhists are truly learned about the Buddha’s teachings. Once, I met a renowned Dharma master of Chinese Buddhism who believed that what Patrul Rinpoche included in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is only relevant to Tibetan customs and traditions and has no connection to Chinese Buddhism.

I used the practice of the seven-branch offering as an example to demonstrate that the teachings in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* are consistent with those

⁷⁹ Kangyur (Tib. ཀུན་ལྷན་པུས་, Wyl. bka’ gyur) literally means the “translated words” of the Buddha. The Kangyur is a collection of the Buddha’s own teachings in their Tibetan translation. The words of the Buddha comprise both the sutras and the tantras. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁸⁰ Tengyur (Tib. བསྟན་པུས་, Wyl. bstan gyur) – the commentaries on the teachings of the Buddha. The Tibetan Buddhist Canon is divided into the actual words of the Buddha contained in the Kangyur and the treatises composed by the learned and accomplished masters of India, which are contained in the Tengyur. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

in the Tripitaka. It seemed that the Dharma master had not yet read through the Tripitaka. Had he done so, he would have realized that, aside from a few examples from India and the Tibetan region, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is very much in harmony with the Tripitaka. Therefore, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is not merely a collection of Tibetan traditions.

If you have the time and energy, I hope you will consider studying the Tripitaka. In particular, young Buddhists living in urban areas can easily access the canonical collections through the internet. However, some people may be too preoccupied with trivial matters to read sutras. Nevertheless, I hope those fortunate Dharma students can still find a way to read through the Canon and thoughtfully contemplate its teachings.

This time when I teach you the common preliminaries, I do not expect you to have an extraordinary understanding of the theories. Instead, I hope you can carefully and diligently contemplate and meditate on each instruction and the content of each class.

In terms of content, there is nothing difficult to understand. As long as the tutor reads the instruction once, you can incorporate it into your meditation practice. In fact, the sufferings of birth, sickness, old age, and death are easy to understand. If you find it challenging to put them into meditation practice, you might consider visiting a hospital, which is an ideal place to witness birth, sickness, old age, and death.

It was after witnessing scenes of sickness, old age, birth, and death during his excursions beyond the palace gates that Buddha Shakyamuni generated renunciation. He realized that even as a prince, he could not escape death and the suffering of samsara, so he left the palace, practiced diligently in a secluded place, and eventually attained Buddhahood.

Many monastics at Larung Gar chose to forgo everything and take ordination because they recognized that life is short and trivialities are boundless. However, some monastics may not yet possess the same level of renunciation.

As for lay practitioners, even if you do not have the opportunity to take ordination, you should strive to develop a deep understanding of the sufferings of birth, sickness, old age, and death. Then you should contemplate them repeatedly. In fact, everyone is capable of reflecting on these sufferings; it is just that many

people choose not to. If you do not engage in this reflection, you may never progress to a higher state of practice.

2.1.3.2.4.2.1. The Suffering of Birth

For humans in this world, birth occurs from the womb. Humans can actually experience four types of birth: birth from the womb, birth from an egg, birth from heat and moisture, and miraculous birth. Since humans in Jambudvīpa are primarily born from the womb, this text discusses the suffering of birth from the womb.

According to Buddhism, the continuity of a living being's life unfolds through several stages, including the existence of present life, the existence of death, and the intermediate existence. The existence of present life refers to the entire process of this life from the moment of rebirth to the moment of death. The existence of death refers to the period from being captured by the Lord of Death to the moment of ceasing to breathe. The intermediate existence, also known as the bardo body or the *gandharva*,⁸¹ refers to the transitional stage from the end of this life to the beginning of the next.

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states that the *gandharva* is a type of consciousness that encompasses concept-bound clairvoyance, such as knowing others' thoughts. It resembles a dream body that floats and sways.

Once driven by karma, the consciousness of a being in the intermediate state must first enter the union of the father's semen and the mother's blood. From this point, it faces the challenging and often painful stages of embryonic development, progressing through various forms such as a round, jelly-like shape, a viscous ellipse, a thick oblong mass, and eventually a firm oval and a hard round lump, and so on. As such, the physical body is formed.

Therefore, the body grows from the parents' seed of impurity. Does this seed of impurity have an origin? Yes, it does. The body of this life began from the parents' seed of impurity, and the bodies of the parents originated from the seed of impurity of their respective parents, and so forth.

Generation by generation, this can be traced back to the ancestors of humans. Further back, according to Darwinism, the origin of life starts from a protein that

⁸¹ Beings in the bardo who feed on odors.

gave rise to single-celled organisms, which gradually evolved into today's animals and humans. Thus, this is the origin of the body.

Does consciousness have an origin? Yes, it does. As you know, the self or “I” is merely a conceptual construct formed upon the union of the five aggregates, which consist of name and form.⁸² Specifically, the “name” refers to the four aggregates of sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness, with consciousness being the primary state of the mind.

Consciousness, which is clear and luminous, has always been within every living being. Even if the world we live in is destroyed, consciousness will migrate to other worlds, allowing it to continuously proceed forward. The origin of consciousness is explained in great detail in Anuttarayoga tantra, or the highest yoga tantra.

After a human's consciousness enters the womb, it typically goes through five or seven stages, as clearly outlined in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*:

Nescient consciousness, the wind-mind, gathers
In the parents' essences and, step-by-step,
In seven weeks' time, a body takes its shape.
From round to long, to oblong shape, “egg-like,”
“Round and flat,” “fish-shaped,” “like a tortoise”—
Thus its form evolves.⁸³

This process is clearly outlined in the chapter on “*Teaching to Nanda on Entering the Womb*” in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*. At your convenience, please take a look to understand the whole process of how consciousness enters the womb and how the fetus develops.

What suffering does the fetus experience? After the limbs, appendages, and sense organs have developed, the fetus, confined within the dark, oppressive, and suffocating environment of the womb, endures suffering akin to imprisonment. While we do not remember our time in the uterus, it is, in fact, a very painful experience. The uterus is dark and unpleasant, and the fetus is constrained and squeezed, lacking any freedom.

When the mother consumes hot food, the fetus experiences pain akin to being

⁸² Skt. nāma-rūpa; Tib. ming dang zuk

⁸³ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

scorched by fire. When she eats cold food, it feels as though it has been plunged into icy water. When she lies down, it is as if the fetus is crushed under the weight of a mountain. A full stomach feels like being squeezed between rocks, while hunger resembles the sensation of plummeting from a cliff. When she moves about, the fetus also feels pain like being swept by a violent wind. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* also states that the fetus suffers greatly when the mother consumes sour, sweet, or other flavors.

In his work *The Scientific Proof of Causal Reincarnation*, Dr. Zhong Maosen uses modern terminology to explain the sufferings of the fetus. I have read some of his articles and watched his videos.

However, the modern medical community mainly studies the sufferings experienced by the mother and seldom addresses the suffering of the fetus. The sufferings of the fetus are discussed in great detail only in sutras, as mentioned in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

Ananda, you should know that there are various sufferings while staying in the mother's uterus.

After residing in the womb for nine or ten months, it is time to be born. [Of course, there are special cases regarding the duration of pregnancy. For example, Barishiba, a Theravada monk, was in his mother's womb for sixty years.]

As the pregnancy reaches full term, the energy of karmic existence causes the baby's head to turn downward in preparation for birth. As the baby is pushed toward the cervix, it experiences intense suffering, as if a powerful giant were gripping its legs and slamming it against a wall. When forced through the bony structure of the pelvis, it feels as though it is being pulled through the small opening of a drawplate. If the passage is too narrow, the baby may not survive, and in some cases, both mother and child may lose their lives during labor. Even if they survive, they endure the immense pain akin to the process of dying.

There are also many cases of obstructed labor in modern times. In 2009, a twelve-year-old pregnant girl in Yemen experienced heavy bleeding due to obstructed labor and died three days later, along with her unborn baby. Due to karmic forces, there are many underage marriages in Yemen, with children as young as eight or nine years old getting married and divorced.

In 2007, a twenty-two-year-old pregnant woman faced difficulties during childbirth and died in a Beijing hospital after her husband refused to consent to

a Cesarean section. Both she and her unborn baby perished as a result. This case went viral in the media for an extended period. Some argued that the hospital was negligent for requiring a signed document to determine matters of life and death. Others found it extremely absurd that her husband, in a life-and-death situation, refused to pay for essential medical treatment. Ultimately, both the mother and her unborn baby endured immense suffering.

To alleviate pain, many wealthy individuals are willing to spend significant amounts on childbirth. In 2007, a celebrity from Hong Kong booked a six-star luxury delivery room, which cost over 1 million yuan for a seven-day stay. Living beings differ significantly in their karmic forces, but regardless of wealth, everyone must confront the excruciating suffering of birth when entering the human realm. Even if one is fortunate enough to survive childbirth, the experience is often akin to suffering close to death.

As Padmasambhava says:

Both mother and child journey halfway to the land of Death,
And every joint in the mother's body, except her jaws, is torn
apart.

Initially, I did not fully understand why all the mother's joints, except her jaw, are wrenched apart during childbirth. Later, I learned that it is indeed the case. A woman who has just given birth experiences loosening of her pelvis, the joints in her limbs, and her teeth, so she should avoid exposure to cold wind during the first month postpartum. Otherwise, this may have lasting negative effects on her health.

Once, while I was receiving inpatient care, a nurse shared her experience of giving birth. A Tibetan woman might be shy to discuss her childbirth experience, but this nurse recounted the entire process in detail, probably for an hour or two, from her registration at the hospital to the delivery of her twins and her subsequent discharge. Hearing her description, I felt deeply that being a mother is not easy. For mothers, the suffering of birth is not merely a literal description; it is a genuine experience.

We have learned that the baby experiences great pain while in the uterus and during delivery. But does the baby continue to suffer after birth? The answer is yes.

Everything the baby experiences is filled with discomfort. Landing on the mattress at birth feels like falling into a pit of thorns. Having the crusted slime

wiped off its back feels like its skin is being peeled away. Being cleaned feels like being pricked by sharp thorns. Being placed on its mother's lap feels like a fragile bird being snatched up by a hawk. Having butter applied to the crown of its head feels like being bound and thrown into a dark hole. Being laid in the cradle feels like being placed in filthy mud.

Whenever the baby suffers from hunger, thirst, illness, or other discomforts, its only response is to cry. Someone once said that an infant crying at the moment of birth is a complaint about the suffering of samsara, and that the last tear a person sheds at the moment of death reflects the suffering of their entire life. From birth to death, a person is in tears.

From a medical perspective, an infant crying loudly at birth indicates that they are healthy. While still in the womb, they received oxygen from the mother's blood, which was transferred across the placenta via the umbilical cord. After birth, infants need to breathe with their own lungs. Therefore, the first cry signifies that the newborn's lungs are fully filled with oxygen. If a newborn does not cry at the moment of birth, it may lead to various health issues and chronic complications.

Thus, if the newborn cries out loudly, the mother should be relieved; if the newborn has a weak cry, it may indicate a congenital condition. [Many of you are listening to me so attentively. You do not behave this way when I teach you the Middle Way, do you? (*The audience laughs.*)

From the moment we are born and as we progress through our youth, it may seem like we are growing and gaining, but in truth, our lives are steadily shortening with each passing day, drawing us closer to death. We become engrossed in an endless stream of ordinary pursuits, one after another, none ever reaching a true resolution, like ripples forming endlessly on water. Since these activities are rooted in negative actions, their inevitable result is lower rebirths and endless suffering.

In this world, there are many opportunities for us and others to commit misdeeds and very few chances to perform good deeds. Even if we want to pursue virtue, our intention is often weak: today we may want to follow a teacher and practice diligently, but tomorrow we'll give it up. This has much to do with our habitual tendencies and the external environment. Nevertheless, whatever we are doing—be it walking, sitting, lying down, or the like—we should often reflect on and meditate upon the aforementioned sufferings according to Patrul Rinpoche's

vajra words. Over time, we'll develop a solid understanding of the sufferings in samsara. This, in itself, is practice.

According to my observation, a significant majority of Buddhists, not to mention non-Buddhists, are working hard to pursue happiness in this life alone. Although these Buddhists study the Dharma, they rarely reflect on whether they will fall into the lower realms in their next life and how terrifying the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death can be.

It is of little meaning to study and practice the Dharma in this manner. In fact, there is no happiness at all in samsara. If you can truly recognize this from the depths of your heart, it means that your practice of the external preliminaries has been successful.



Lesson 51

“As we busy ourselves with... different from the torments of beings in the lower realms.” [page 82–83]

Among the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death in the human realm, we have completed the suffering of birth. Today, we will move on to the suffering of old age.

2.1.3.2.4.2.2. The Suffering of Old Age

While we immerse ourselves in endless and trivial worldly pursuits, the burden of aging quietly sneaks up on us, catching us off guard. People often favor youth, but few consider that old age will soon arrive. As Aryadeva says in the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*:

Youth lies behind and then
Once more it is ahead.
Though [one imagines] it will last,
In this world it is like a race.⁸⁴

As soon as youth fades, old age arrives. Although people wish to remain young forever and never grow old, youth is like a race against old age, and it quickly diminishes. Some individuals feel deep sadness when they grow old, lacking the courage to confront aging. This often stems from their failure to study the Dharma.

⁸⁴ Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

Those who truly understand birth, sickness, old age, and death will accept aging—and even death—calmly, free from worry or sorrow.

Many worldly individuals are spiritually barren and need to nourish themselves with the Dharma. Otherwise, accepting the inevitability of impermanence becomes difficult. In truth, birth, old age, sickness, and death are akin to the four seasons—they are natural laws that happen to everyone. Unfortunately, some people, clouded by ignorance, fail to grasp this, and when old age arrives, they cannot face it and suffer greatly.

Therefore, everyone should understand the principle of impermanence. As stated in the *Verse for Advising the World*:⁸⁵

Gradually, as our skin wrinkles and our hair turns gray, we notice
how our steps become weak and unsteady.
Even with halls filled with gold and jade, it is impossible to
escape the decline brought about by aging and illness.
Regardless of the many forms of happiness we may experience,
impermanence inevitably arrives.
The only path left is that of cultivating practice and wholeheartedly
reciting the name of Buddha Amitabha.

No matter how happy we are now, impermanence will come sooner or later. The only truly beneficial pursuit is Dharma practice, so we should dedicate our lives to practicing the Dharma, such as chanting the names of the buddhas. By doing so, we live a meaningful and fruitful life.

Each of us has the responsibility to carry forward the Dharma, so we should share Buddhist teachings and essence with people from various backgrounds. Of course, individuals differ in their capacity to accept the Dharma, and we do not need to convert everyone to Buddhism. To spread the Dharma, ritual formality is not always necessary. Instead, we should aim to spread the Dharma through various means.

As long as people have learned the Dharma, they will face old age calmly, understanding that aging is a natural part of life. They may even feel joy, saying, “Oh! Now that I am getting old, am I still greedy, angry, and ignorant? I have

⁸⁵ It was the work by the second patriarch of the Pure Land tradition, the great master Shandao.

been living my life upholding pure precepts and perfecting my practice, and in the end, I will surely go to the Land of Great Bliss!” Therefore, for those who have attained certain states of practice, everything—including birth, old age, sickness, and death—can be transformed into happiness. In contrast, an elderly person who has never studied the Dharma may become mentally weary with aging, even if their children buy them a house, hire a caretaker, and provide a wide variety of food and drink.

Thus, what the elderly need most is the Dharma. If an older person’s heart finds a home and they understand the importance of practicing the Dharma while grasping its fundamental teachings, they will always wear a smile, even in the absence of material wealth. Hence, it is essential to guide the elderly in studying the Dharma, as it offers them far greater benefits than monetary gifts.

So, what is the suffering of old age?

As we age, our bodies gradually lose vitality. No matter how delicious our food may be, we may struggle to digest it. We lose the appetite for the foods we once enjoyed in our youth. According to medical science, our digestive system is considered healthy when there is a balance between beneficial and harmful gut bacteria. Starting around the age of sixty, it is common to experience gastrointestinal discomfort. This occurs because our digestive system undergoes changes as we age, leading to a decline in the intestinal environment. Consequently, it is no longer optimal for beneficial gut bacteria to thrive. As a result, the number of beneficial bacteria gradually decreases each year, and many individuals begin to have difficulty digesting food.

As we age, our intrinsic eye muscles weaken, our eyes begin to struggle with focusing, and our vision loses sharpness. We can no longer see small or distant objects clearly. In fact, our eyesight starts to deteriorate after the age of forty, making it difficult to see things up close.

Because this is universal, an elderly person should not complain, saying, “I could see everything when I was young. Why can’t I see clearly now? Now I have to use a magnifier to read word by word: *om—mani—pa—me—hung—sheh*.”

When I first came to Larung Gar, an elderly lama from Xinlong County lived next door. He practiced with great diligence. Throughout the year, he would rise early every morning to chant prayers. Sometimes I would wake up to the sound of his chanting.

His eyesight was poor, so during puja or tsok offerings, he would recite the prayers with the aid of a large magnifier. [He has already passed into parinirvana]. Many senior practitioners at Larung Gar are similar. They would say, “My other senses still function well, but not my eyes. I have blurred vision now and can only see cabbage and nothing else.” I am joking here; I made this up.

Our hearing begins to deteriorate, making it more difficult to accurately differentiate between sounds and speech. The human inner ear contains tiny hair cells that convert sound vibrations from the surrounding environment into electrical impulses. These impulses are then transmitted to the brain through sensory nerves, enabling us to hear. However, as we age, the number of these hair cells, which are responsible for detecting sound, decreases. Consequently, it becomes more challenging for us to hear, potentially leading to age-related deafness.

[Here let’s skip the descriptions of the five sensory faculties in *Treasury of Abhidharma*. The perspectives on the five sense organs from the Sarvastivadin and Sautrantika schools differ, but I will not elaborate on those differences here.]

Today, the otolaryngology and ophthalmology departments of hospitals often receive many seniors seeking help, saying, “Dear doctor, please help me see and hear clearly!” However, this is not realistic. Your “machine,” composed of the four great elements, is now worn and aged, so it cannot return to its previous state, no matter what, unless your body undergoes a complete makeover or you are reborn as a “second you” like a tulku.

As we age, our tongues lose the ability to fully taste the food and drink we consume, and we struggle to articulate clearly what we wish to say. The reason we can distinguish flavors such as sour, sweet, bitter, or spicy is that there are many taste buds on the tongue, which serve as taste receptors. An adult tongue has around ten thousand taste buds, but gradually, this number decreases. Perhaps it is due to our overeating (*the audience laughs*). It is said that after the age of sixty, only half of the taste buds remain, causing an elderly person’s sense of taste to diminish when they eat.

The other day, I cooked a dish and shared it with a senior.⁸⁶ I asked him, “Is the meal delicious?” He replied, “It’s fine.” I asked again, “What does it taste like to you specifically?” He smacked his lips and said, “I cannot really tell, but it should be a fine taste.” By a certain age, we will inevitably become like this.

⁸⁶ Khenpo uses the term of “the old bodhisattva” to refer to the senior. This is a common usage in the Buddhist community.

As our mental abilities decline, our memory falters, leading to confusion and forgetfulness. Some neuroscientists believe that age-associated memory impairment in cognitively healthy older people is related to changes at the synapse, also known as the neuronal junction, which is the site of transmission of electric nerve impulses between two neurons or between a neuron and a gland or muscle cell. As we age, synaptic plasticity is impaired, resulting in the functional decline of the nervous system and cognitive decline.

It is said that the human brain contains one hundred billion neurons at birth. Unlike cognitively healthy older adults who do not lose a significant number of neurons, patients with Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, or other neurodegenerative disorders experience a substantial loss of neurons in their brains. Consequently, the cognitive capacities of these patients are severely impaired, a situation that worsens with age.

A few eminent masters seem to exhibit no age-associated cognitive impairment. Their cognitive faculties remain vigorous, as if they are not aging at all. For example, before his parinirvana, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, who was in his 70s, could still effortlessly recite a large number of scriptural citations from sutras and shastras at will while teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and the *Mahayana Uttaratanttra Shastra*.

A government official who is not a Buddhist heard his teaching on the radio and was very surprised. The official exclaimed, "Ah! A master in his seventies can recite so many verses by heart? This is amazing!"

Minling Terchen Gyurme Dorje (1646–1714) was over seventy years old when he wrote the *Ascertaining the Three Vows*. In the conclusion section of his work, he wrote, "Although I am aged and my physical body weakens, my wisdom grows more and more."

Recently, I heard the teaching of an eminent master. The master is nearly eighty, yet he can recite many texts from memory, including Buddhist texts such as *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* and *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. In contrast, ordinary men in their 70s or 80s often struggle to express themselves clearly or concisely, let alone recite Buddhist texts. Thus, some senior Buddhist practitioners are truly remarkable in their cognitive capacities, thanks to the blessings of all buddhas and bodhisattvas, especially Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara.

Not long ago, I watched a talk given by Master Benhuan when he was 103

years old, which is truly remarkable and beyond the reach of an ordinary person. Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo lived to 119 years old,⁸⁷ and Master Xuyun to 120 years old. In this degenerate age, these eminent masters demonstrated their mastery over the four great elements through their extraordinary longevity.

Therefore, a true practitioner does not experience significant age-related cognitive decline. For example, Khenpo Depa,⁸⁸ who is currently writing a commentary on Longchenpa's *Treasury of Pith Instructions*, brings no references with him except for a copy of Longchenpa's text. He simply resides in a city in the Han region and writes in retreat; he is about to complete his writing in a few days.

Khenpo Depa's approach to writing differs from that of a typical writer, who must consult numerous references. Experienced practitioners like Khenpo Depa have accumulated incredible wisdom throughout their lives, and it is essential for them to pass on this wisdom to future generations in written form.

Thus, while eminent masters are still present in this world, their disciples should utilize various methods, such as supplications and questions, to request their teachings and writings. Around Mipham Rinpoche, there were several great masters who frequently asked him to write. Responding to their requests, Mipham Rinpoche authored a considerable number of Buddhist texts in accordance with the causes and conditions. One disciple named Dargye, who was close to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, to whom I am especially grateful, as many significant works written by the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche were in response to his requests.

Therefore, it is very necessary to request teaching and writing from the gurus. Otherwise, once they leave this world, their wisdom may not be passed on to future generations, which would be truly regrettable.

⁸⁷ Although there is little evidence to date Rongzom with precision, there are several competing dates in published accounts: Tarthang Tulku, for example, gives 1012–1088, a timeframe used by both Hirshberg and Jackson. Dudjom Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje (1904–1987) calculates Rongzom's lifespan to be 119 years, a figure that coincides with the number of years occurring between 1012 and 1131, which Bradburn provides for Rongzom's date of birth and death. Furthermore, several sources, including the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), date Rongzom from 1042 to 1136. The publisher's colophon of the 1999 edition of Rongzom's Collected Works, compiled and edited by Ju Mipam Rinpoche (1846–1912) and published by Zengkar Tulku, indicates that the iron-dragon year (1040) is Rongzom's birth year. Thus, while some academics and some Tibetan Buddhist scholars, continue to assert the 1012 birth date, others have adopted the BDRC dates. [Source: *Treasury of Life*, by Dominic Sur (2021).

⁸⁸ Khenpo Sodargye received his ordination and many teachings, including *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, from Khenpo Depa.

Gendün Chöphel said: “When I depart from this world, it does not matter if my physical body is left behind. However, it is truly unfortunate if my supreme wisdom ceases to be accessible to anyone!” He passed into parinirvana in 1951 at the age of forty-eight.

Gendün Chöphel was a prominent Buddhist scholar and practitioner, and while his works are not abundant in quantity, they are well recognized in the Buddhist world. However, he was not renowned during his lifetime. Like other great masters such as Mipham Rinpoche and Venerable Longchenpa, Gendün Chöphel’s wisdom was discovered and widely acknowledged after his parinirvana. Of course, there were also eminent masters who, while still alive, were venerated by many, and the nectar of their wisdom nourished countless beings.

We just studied the suffering of old age from the perspective of the sensory faculties. Let’s continue on this topic:

As we age, our teeth may fall out, making it difficult to chew solid food, and our speech can become a garbled murmur that is hard to understand. Modern medical science suggests that after age forty, we produce less saliva, which can lead to dental problems such as severe gum infections that result in tooth loss and other oral health complications.

As we grow older, our bodies lose warmth, making lightweight clothing insufficient for comfort. When the elderly wear less, they feel cold; conversely, when they wear more, the garments can feel too heavy. It is a challenging situation! Therefore, we should provide special care for seniors. Chinese Seniors’ Day coincides with the Double Ninth Festival, which falls on the ninth day of September in the lunar calendar. What specific activities should we engage in on that day? (*Many audience members shake their heads.*) So, you are not aware?

Recently, a senior Khenpo from Larung Gar delivered a speech to a group of Tibetan teachers at a school, emphasizing the importance of Tibetan as their mother language. During the speech, the Khenpo asked, “Do you know which day is International Mother Language Day?” No one could answer, and the Khenpo was disappointed. The answer is February 21st.

Now, what day is the International Day of Older Persons? Who knows? (*The audience members look at each other, shaking their heads again.*) It is October 1st. In 1990, the United Nations General Assembly voted to establish October 1st as the

International Day of Older Persons, as recorded in resolution 45/106. The holiday was first observed on October 1st, 1991.

While October 1st is also China's National Day, it is a special day for older persons around the world. On International Children's Day, which is commonly celebrated on June 1st in China, children dress up nicely. Therefore, on October 1st, I hope all seniors will diligently recite the name of Amitabha, all right?

As we grow old, the condition of our skin, hair, and bones begins to deteriorate. While we still crave pleasure and enjoyment, our energy wanes. As our channels and energies decline, we become irritable and impatient. Despised by others, we experience sadness and despair. The imbalance of the body's elements results in numerous ailments and challenges. Even simple actions like walking and sitting become arduous struggles. I need not elaborate further on the suffering of old age; many people understand it well.

Next is a story about Milarepa, also known as Venerable Milarepa, which further illustrates the suffering of old age:

Once, Milarepa was heading to the hermitage on a snow-capped mountain during the autumn harvest period. He encountered a girl around fifteen years old who exhibited all the signs of a dakini and was leading villagers to harvest crops. Milarepa asked the girl for alms, and she gladly agreed, saying, "Please wait at the door of my house. I will be back shortly."

Following her instructions, Milarepa walked to her house and pushed open the door. When the door opened slightly, an old lady suddenly jumped out from inside, brandishing a handful of ashes, and yelled, "You poor vagabond yogi! You beg for milk and butter in summer and grain in winter. Now that you see no one at home, you want to steal the jewelry of my daughters and daughters-in-law, don't you?" The old woman was about to throw the ashes in his face.

Milarepa calmly replied, "Old lady, please wait a moment. Allow me to sing you a song, and you may throw ashes at me afterward." He then sang a vajra song, explaining the suffering of old age and urging her to practice the Dharma diligently.

After the song, the old woman developed great faith. She confessed all her past misdeeds in front of Milarepa, and the ashes fell from her fingers to the floor. Shortly afterward, the young girl returned, listened to Milarepa's teachings, offered him a generous amount of food, and became his disciple.

Here is an excerpt from the vajra song, which, along with Patrul Rinpoche's explanation, describes the suffering of old age:

Milarepa sings:

One, you rise to your feet as if pulling a peg from the ground;
Two, you creep along as if stalking a bird;
Three, you sit down like a sack being dropped.
When these three things come together, Granny,
You become a frail old woman, with your illusory body fading
away.

In old age, standing up becomes a challenge that we can no longer accomplish in a single smooth motion. We need to press both hands against the floor, as if we were struggling to pull a peg from solid ground. Some older sangha members take a long time to put on their shoes after class. While the younger members have already left, the older ones are still sitting there and find it difficult to get up. This is also true for elderly individuals in other situations, such as walking or going to the toilet. Many young people do not understand why the elderly move so slowly, but this is beyond their control, as aging brings these changes.

When we walk, we tend to hunch over at the waist, unable to lift our heads. Moving our feet quickly is beyond us, so we shuffle cautiously, like a child carefully stalking a bird. There is a specialized class for older Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar. This arrangement is beneficial because it allows senior practitioners to share similar thoughts, preferences, and experiences. Otherwise, if they were in the same class with children and young people, these seniors might inadvertently be knocked to the ground by the energetic youths after class.

The other day, I happened to see the elderly finishing their class, and each of them appeared quite happy. One class member asked, "What did the Dharma teacher teach today?" Another member replied, "I do not know. I cannot hear well. I just sat in the class doing nothing."

In old age, our arm and leg joints may be so severely arthritic that we cannot lower ourselves into a seat gently. Instead, we collapse all at once under our own weight, like a sack dropping when its sling gives way. When the elderly sit, they may struggle to do so gently due to unbearable pain in their joints. Sometimes they attempt to sit slowly with the aid of a walking stick, but in the end, they can

no longer support their body weight and fall to the ground like a heavy sack being dropped.

However, some children also sit in this manner. During the 2004 teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, at the moment I was teaching this paragraph, a young nun named Sherab Tsok came and sat down close to me, resembling a heavy sack being dropped on the floor. My Dharma seat vibrated when she sat down. Now she sits gracefully, and I no longer see her settle down like a heavy sack.

Milarepa also says:

One, from the outside, your skin sags and wrinkles;
Two, from the inside, your bones protrude where flesh and
blood have diminished;
Three, in between, you become dull, deaf, blind, and dazed.
When these three things come together, Granny,
Your face frowns with unsightly furrows.

As our bodies deteriorate, our skin loses its firmness, becoming loose, while wrinkles spread across our faces and bodies. With reduced flesh and blood, our joints become more pronounced, and our cheekbones and other contours become visible beneath the skin. Our memory fades, leaving us forgetful and slow in thought. We struggle with hearing, sight, and mental clarity, often feeling lightheaded and disoriented.

Many elderly people feel distressed when they notice changes in their physical appearance and cognitive abilities. In fact, they do not need to feel this way, as these changes are simply a part of nature. It is similar to autumn; no matter how much water and fertilizer we provide, a plant's flowers will inevitably wither. The same is true as a person ages. Therefore, we should allow nature to take its course, and there is no need for plastic surgery to restore youth.

A few years ago, a woman in her 60s wanted to undergo breast plastic surgery, but the doctor was concerned that the procedure might be risky given her physical condition. The woman insisted on going through with the surgery regardless. When asked about her decision by a journalist, she stated, "I am willing to take the risk for the sake of looking pretty. The surgery will help me feel young and happy. Being pretty is not just for young people!"

Another man in his 80s underwent a cosmetic procedure to remove wrinkles.

He told the journalist, “I like to work out and am in good health. The only issue is that I have too many wrinkles on my face, which does not look good, so I decided to seek help from a plastic surgeon. After all, everyone likes to look good!”

In 2007, a sixty-two-year-old woman struggled to accept the reality of aging, so she opted for several cosmetic procedures, including breast augmentation and a facelift. Unfortunately, she died as a result of these surgeries. She did not inform her family about her plans; she told her husband that she would undergo a minor surgery costing 6,000 yuan, when in fact it had cost her 250,000 yuan.

In 2008, a sixty-five-year-old woman from Nanjing requested a cosmetic procedure. She told the plastic surgeon that her husband looked much younger after dyeing his hair black, and that when they went out together, she felt quite awkward and uncomfortable because she appeared older. After a long discussion with her husband, she decided to undergo a procedure to remove wrinkles. The surgeon was concerned that her body could not endure the medical procedure, but she insisted, stating that she was willing to take the risk.

Many elderly individuals today do not understand the natural cycle of birth, aging, sickness, and death, and instead engage in futile pursuits, which is unwise. In fact, once old age arrives, there is nothing one can do to evade it. I know a wealthy elderly woman who was very pleased when those around her flattered her for appearing younger and prettier. In reality, those compliments were merely insincere praise. Nevertheless, this woman was willing to endure many painful cosmetic procedures in order to receive such compliments. Therefore, those who do not grasp the natural law of all phenomena often act in pitiable ways.

As practitioners, we should deeply understand the realities of aging. When old age arrives and we experience its associated suffering, we will recognize it as simply the law of nature, which no one can escape. Regarding the suffering of old age, the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* offers this description:

When oppressed by old age,
One's body weakens, and the mind becomes impaired;
One creeps along, relying on a cane.
The suffering is beyond verbal description.

Therefore, as our five sense faculties gradually decline, the best course of action as a Buddhist is to recite the name of Amitabha and engage in virtuous deeds.

If you refuse to face impermanence and insist on undergoing plastic surgery to restore your youth, your efforts will ultimately be in vain. While it is understandable for a young person to seek plastic surgery, it is noteworthy that one-fourth of plastic surgery clients in China are elderly individuals. This is something worth contemplating.

Milarepa continues:

One, your clothes are tattered and cumbersome;
 Two, your food and drink are bland and cold;
 Three, you sit on your mat, propped up on all four sides with
 skins.
 When these three things come together, Granny,
 You resemble a realized yogi, trampled by men and dogs.

As our physical vitality diminishes, we often lack the motivation to present ourselves at our best, leading us to wear clothing that is often worn out and shabby. Generally, as people age, they tend to lose interest in maintaining their appearance. However, it is worth noting that many elderly individuals today still enjoy dressing stylishly.

Today, I met two of my middle school classmates. When we reminisced about the old days, I remarked, “We are getting old!”

One classmate named Nyingma Tsering, who always enjoys joking, responded to me, “Yes, indeed. In the past, you were quite fond of dressing up!”

I asked in surprise, “You mean I liked dressing up?”

He replied, “Yes, you did! You used to look at yourself in a small mirror during class.”

I protested, “No way! I was not a little girl!”

We debated this for a long time. I cannot recall doing that in the past, but it is hard to say (*the audience laughs*).

It is a bit embarrassing! But now I do not even want to check myself in a mirror after class, let alone during class.

This classmate of mine liked to talk during class to make everyone laugh, which the teachers really disliked. It seems he has not changed a bit. While we were having a meal together, he kept talking incessantly.

In old age, we eat leftovers without any sense of flavor; all the food we consume feels cold and tasteless. Our bodies feel sluggish and heavy, making even simple tasks seem impossible. We lean on support from all sides of the bed, unable to rise.

The physical condition of an elderly person is incomparable to that of a young person. Therefore, if there are elderly individuals around us, we should take good care of them. For instance, we can provide better living facilities, allowing them to use the toilet or get out of bed more easily.

These days, many elderly people experience not only physical degeneration but also mental distress. When I visited some retirement homes, I noticed that the living conditions were quite good, but the seniors seemed lonely. If you find it hard to reflect on the challenges of old age, you can visit a retirement home to observe how the elderly eat and sleep. Then you will realize, “Oh! One day I will be like this too!” Therefore, this practice is not difficult.

In old age, our physical decline can lead to deep depression and immense mental anguish. The radiance and charm of our faces fade, our skin becomes marked with wrinkles, and our foreheads bear the unattractive creases of irritation and discontent. Some elderly individuals like to boast about how beautiful or handsome they used to be, but no matter how much they brag, there is no longer any sign of beauty on their faces. Furthermore, they may begin to speak unclearly and walk unsteadily, which is quite different from when they were young.

Additionally, it is stated in the *Sutra on the Eight Teachers*:

Think of this: as one ages, a hundred illnesses will arise.

As people age, they often suffer from various illnesses, low spirits, and mental distress. If someone helps them, they will be truly grateful. Therefore, I hope that if you can, you will provide various conveniences for the elderly.

I have heard that the Dharma teachers in charge of senior classes at Larung Gar are very kind. They understand the needs of the elderly Dharma friends and fulfill their requests accordingly. When appointing Dharma teachers to senior classes, we intentionally choose individuals who possess qualities such as patience, perseverance, and compassion to ensure they can provide exceptional care for these senior Dharma friends and assist them in leading longer lives.

The reason the Chong Yang Festival is observed on the ninth day of the ninth month in the lunar calendar is that “nine,” when pronounced in Chinese, sounds

like “forever.” This festival, which honors the elderly, is also known as the Double Ninth Festival.

Thus, the Double Ninth Festival conveys the idea of “forever,” symbolizing health and longevity. However, regardless of how positive this wish may be, the essential focus is to support the elderly in all aspects of life.

At the same time, the elderly should recognize that their time in this world is limited. They should engage in the practice of transferring consciousness to prepare for the next life. Unfortunately, many individuals fail to grasp this reality and continue to lead deluded lives. They spend their days arguing with family members and complaining about everything and everyone. They express meaningless sentiments such as “My son no longer cares about me” or “My daughter-in-law does not treat me well.” It is truly a pitiful existence they lead.

When we grow old, everyone looks down on us, and even if others trample on us, we cannot rise. We can no longer respond or resist. It is as though we have become realized yogis for whom there is no distinction between pure and impure. If a young person were to have someone step over their head, they would undoubtedly be furious and curse the person for their lack of attention. But as people age, they often lack the energy to argue, even when insulted; it seems they no longer distinguish between good and bad.

However, before reaching that point, like the old ladies and the old man mentioned earlier, some individuals desperately cling to their youth, unaware that death is approaching, which is truly sad. Therefore, as practitioners, when we grow old, we must accept our age and not foolishly attempt to defy this natural law.

If we can meditate on what has been said above, we are actually engaging in a very profound practice. In fact, a person’s entire life, including youth, middle age, old age, and death, is filled with valuable material for our practice. If we can contemplate everything in this text, eventually recognizing principles such as impermanence and developing a firm and unwavering understanding of them, that is true Dharma practice!

Treatise on the Foundation for Yoga Practitioners addresses five types of suffering of old age:

- 1) Physical appearance declines: The curves of the body and the glamour of the face fade, and the youthful appearance is lost.

2) Physical strength weakens: The body, once full of vigor, becomes weak and frail with age.

3) Sense organs deteriorate: The eyes, ears, nose, and other senses no longer function as they once did.

4) Capacity to enjoy life diminishes: In the past, one could freely indulge in various pleasures; however, as one ages, the energy for enjoyment gradually wanes.

5) Lifespan decreases: The end of life approaches, and each day the length of life shortens. Except for realized practitioners and masters, no one can extend their lifespan by even a single day.

In facing old age, practitioners respond very differently from worldly people. They can even use old age as a means to guide others onto the virtuous path. Japanese Zen Master Ryokan (1758–1831) dedicated himself to Dharma practice with unwavering diligence throughout his life. In his later years, a relative from his hometown approached him, expressing concern that the master's nephew was leading a reckless lifestyle of drinking and idleness. The relative asked Master Ryokan to help the nephew with Dharma, and he agreed.

The Zen master returned to his hometown. The nephew suspected that the master's unexpected arrival was meant to discipline him, but he still welcomed the master with great hospitality and invited him to stay overnight. To the nephew's surprise, the master did not scold him at all, as if he were unaware of his misdeeds.

The next day, as the master was about to leave, he said to the nephew, "I am old. My hands always shake. Can you help me tie my shoelaces?" The nephew gladly obliged.

Then the master said sincerely, "Thank you! Alas! I am so old that I can no longer do anything. I cannot even tie my shoelaces. Take good care of yourself. While you are still young, you should behave properly and lay a solid foundation for your career."

With that, the master departed, without mentioning a word about his nephew's wrongdoings. But from that day on, the nephew ceased his misdeeds and never indulged recklessly again.

As you can see, some old Zen masters, due to a lifetime of practice, can inspire

others with even their smallest actions. Thus, when you, senior sangha members of Larung Gar, return to your hometowns, you should also avoid frequently getting angry when interacting with worldly people. You are old and may already resemble a “wrathful deity,” and you will seem even more “wrathful” when you become upset. Therefore, approach others with the smile of a “wrathful deity.” Do not assume that everyone should respect you simply because of your age.

Sometimes, elderly individuals can be ill-tempered. Even if they were once adept at managing their emotions, they may still lose their temper and frequently nag others as they age. As a result, people may hesitate to approach them. Therefore, senior practitioners should be mindful of this issue. If we wish to guide others along the path of Dharma in our later years, it is advisable to employ alternative methods rather than surrendering to a bad temper.

In *The Just King*, Mipham Rinpoche stated:

No matter how prosperous a kingdom may be,
old age, sickness, and death
are experienced by everyone in common.
How can anyone escape them?

The suffering of old age often feels unbearable, leading some of us to long for death as an escape. Yet, as death approaches, fear overtakes us, revealing a deep-seated dread of the very thing we once wished for. In this way, the anguish of old age mirrors the torment experienced by beings in the lower realms.

In fact, once we begin to age, we should calmly accept old age. Do not be like those individuals who are eighty years old but yearn to reclaim the life of a forty-year-old. This is simply impossible.

Sakya Pandita also says:

People desire long life but hate old age,
They fear old age and crave longevity;
Such thoughts are nothing but the delusions of fools.⁸⁹

Constantly desiring longevity and fearing aging are the delusions of fools.

⁸⁹ Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice*. Translated by John Davenport, Sallie D. Davenport, and Losang Thonden, Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 243.

Therefore, one should not be overly foolish; fearing old age is fundamentally futile. Instead, we should emulate those Tibetan practitioners who find joy in aging. Even if we cannot be like them, we should not cling to the vain hope of prolonging our lifespan by pleading with the doctor, “Please, doctor, do not let me die. Do something so I can live to one hundred years!” This is unrealistic. Doctors cannot fulfill all our requests.

Of course, everyone can pay lip service to aging. How will you actually confront old age as it approaches? It will depend on your state of practice. If you have attained certain states through Dharma practice, you will be able to handle it in real life.



Lesson 52

“When the four elements that... ones, is, if you think about it, a great mistake.” [page 83–85]

Let us continue to study the suffering of sickness in the human realm.

2.1.3.2.4.2.3. The Suffering of Sickness

The human body is fundamentally composed of the four elements. When the four elements that constitute our body fall out of balance, various illnesses arise—such as those caused by wind, bile, and phlegm—bringing with them sensations of pain and suffering.

According to tantras related to Tibetan medicine, since beginningless time, our three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance have led to the three fundamental illnesses of wind, bile, and phlegm.

Regarding the number of illnesses, some Buddhist scriptures indicate 84,000, while others state 404. For example, the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says:

Prajnaparamita can also dispel 84,000 illnesses...

There are 21,000 types of illnesses caused by lust,

21,000 types of illnesses caused by hatred,

21,000 types of illnesses caused by ignorance,

And 21,000 types of illnesses caused by similar factors.

*The Great Canon of Monastic Rules*⁹⁰ states:

There are 404 types of illnesses:
 Illnesses of wind consist of 101 types,
 Illnesses of fire consist of 101 types,
 Illnesses of water consist of 101 types,
 And other illnesses consist of 101 types.

Regarding the causes of illnesses, Chinese medicine categorizes them into three groups:

- 1) External causes, which include the six pathogenic factors: wind, cold, summer heat, dampness, dryness, and fire.
- 2) Internal causes, comprising the seven emotional factors: joy, anger, worry, overthinking, sadness, fear, and being startled.
- 3) Causes that are neither external nor internal, such as improper diet, accidents, and injuries caused by animals.

These factors correspond to the three pathogenic elements mentioned in the *Golden Light Sutra*. The sutra also states:

When the four great elements and all sense organs
 Have weakened metabolism,
 One contracts all diseases.

Consequently, traditional Chinese medicine, Western medicine, and Tibetan medicine offer different descriptions and analyses regarding the origins, nature, and associated suffering of diseases. From a Buddhist perspective, some illnesses arise from harmful actions toward other living beings in previous lives, while others are induced by seasonal changes and imbalances in the four great elements. In terms of treatment, some illnesses can be cured through medication or by reciting the mantras of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, while others remain incurable.

The World Health Organization has identified approximately 17,000 human illnesses. Of these, only one-third can be effectively treated, while the remainder have no known cure in modern medicine. Therefore, it is quite common for a

⁹⁰ Skt. Mahasangha Vinaya

patient's disease to be incurable, regardless of the hospital visited, the doctor consulted, or the medication taken.

However, even if your disease is incurable, there is no need to feel particularly distressed, because the resolution of a disease depends on two types of causes: remote causes and proximate causes. In this context, remote causes refer to negative actions arising from the three poisons in your previous life or lives, or even countless kalpas ago, which have been stored in the *alaya* consciousness and manifest as disease in this life. Proximate causes refer to imbalances in your body's wind, bile, and phlegm, resulting in various diseases that damage both body and mind.

Therefore, when you suffer from illnesses caused by imbalances in the four great elements, it is crucial to examine and contemplate the law of causes and effects. This, in itself, is a practice.

With such a state of practice, whether you face physical or mental suffering, obstacles in practice, or hardships in life, you can remain composed and undisturbed. Without this practice, it is nearly impossible to eliminate the suffering of illness by relying solely on external factors like medical procedures and medications.

Moreover, even if a patient fervently prays for the blessings of all buddhas and bodhisattvas, this may not have an immediate effect on their illness if they carry heavy karmic debts. Even the Buddha could not directly help some severely ill patients who were dying, except by bestowing blessings. Of course, there are also many instances where fortunate patients recovered from illness through the blessings of buddhas, bodhisattvas, or eminent masters. Therefore, we should analyze these cases individually.

What exactly happens after a person falls ill? When we fall ill, everything changes in an instant. No matter how young, strong, or healthy we appear, even the slightest pain can bring us down completely. Like a bird struck mid-flight, we lose all our strength and collapse. Just getting out of bed feels like an enormous effort, and every small movement becomes a challenge.

Even a headache, a cold, heartburn, or discomfort in the liver can sap your strength and courage, not to mention the impact of severe diseases.

Recently, I visited an esteemed master who was once in good health but is now very ill. His condition illustrates that illnesses are truly devastating, something I felt deeply when I saw him. In the face of particularly severe diseases, it is indeed challenging for ordinary people to cope, unless they are individuals of exception-

ally high spiritual attainment who can transform everything into a path of practice. Nevertheless, even those with the highest level of realization, including Buddha Shakyamuni, also appear to experience birth, old age, sickness, and death. Therefore, we must understand these truths in Buddhism and genuinely resonate with them in our minds.

Being sick can drain all our energy, making even simple tasks like answering a question feel exhausting. We speak in a weak, barely audible voice. Regardless of how we position ourselves—on our side, back, or stomach—comfort remains elusive. We lose any desire to eat or drink, and sleep becomes difficult to attain. The days drag on endlessly, and the nights feel unbearably long.

Some patients are overly delicate in their approach to illness; their conditions may not be serious, yet they exaggerate their ailments, causing those around them to feel worried and anxious. If you ask such a person to work, they will cite ill health to avoid the task. However, if you ask them to eat, they will open their eyes and devour the food with enthusiasm.

The Buddha extensively explained the suffering of sickness in the sutras, which we should be mindful of. If you have not learned these teachings, it will be challenging to face the suffering of illness when it arises. Only by thoroughly understanding the Mahayana teachings and gaining genuine benefit from them will you be able to clearly comprehend the suffering of sickness and manage it with ease.

Therefore, it is crucial for everyone to understand the fundamental nature of human existence. Without this understanding, you will find it difficult to practice the Dharma.

When we are sick, we often lose our appetite for food and drink. Even though we may be reluctant, we must endure various unpleasant treatments, from taking bitter, hot, or sour medicines to undergoing procedures like bloodletting and cauterization.

During my medical stay in Xiamen, I had to undergo a procedure called “the small needle knife” every day, during which small needles were inserted into my spinal column. Each time a needle was inserted, it felt as though it went directly into my bone marrow, and I could not help but let out an “Ah!” sound. As a result, I chose to have my treatment alone during each visit to the doctor. I did not want to bring anyone with me because I feared they would remember my timidity during the treatment, even long after I was cured (*the audience laughs*).

Later, while receiving inpatient care in Chengdu, I also underwent several of these procedures. Although I was very reluctant, I had no choice but to accept the treatment in order to recover quickly.

Thus, everything in samsara has the nature of suffering. We should all deeply contemplate this and strive to put it into long-term practice. Only in this way, when illness befalls us, can we face suffering with ease and calm, and even transform illness into a path of enlightenment.

The Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma says:

The suffering of sickness harms one's life,
Illnesses are the heralds of the Lord of Death,
All living beings experience this suffering,
And the suffering is beyond verbal description.

Indeed, the suffering of sickness is unbearable, although we do not feel it when we are healthy. When we unfortunately become ill and go to a hospital, we realize that both we and others are experiencing the excruciating pain of sickness. Therefore, the best place for practitioners to recognize the suffering of sickness is in a hospital.

I once saw an elderly man in his 80s in a Chengdu hospital who insisted on being operated on by the doctor. The doctor shook his head and refused, saying, "Your physical condition is poor, so it is better not to have the operation! Just go back home and rest." But the old man protested, "I must have the operation! I must live to ninety years old!"

Although I was not a doctor but merely a bystander, given the old man's physical appearance, I felt there was little hope for his recovery. However, he remained hopeful and expected to live for a long time. In comparison, we practitioners can handle such situations much better than worldly people.

Falling ill can instill fear in us, especially when we worry it might lead to death. Overwhelmed by negative thoughts and losing our sense of stability, we may lose control of our body and mind. This can further distort our perception, leading to hallucinations. In extreme cases, some may even choose to end their own lives.

In fact, we humans endure various sufferings of sickness, which are often connected to negative actions committed in previous lives. For instance, if you struck a living being's head in a past life, you may frequently experience headaches

in this life that medication cannot alleviate. If you harmed a specific body part of a living being in a previous life, when the karmic effect manifests in this life, you will feel similar pain in the corresponding part of your own body. Therefore, the *Sutra on Cause and Effect* states that a short lifespan results from killing living beings and that chronic illness stems from harming them.

The *Dhammapada* recounts a story about an old monk:

The old monk had been ill for a long time and received no care from others, becoming filthy and foul-smelling. The Buddha noticed him and brought five monks to visit the old monk at his residence. Upon seeing the filth and mess in his room, all the monks covered their noses and frowned, eager to leave as soon as possible. The Buddha, however, asked Indra to bring some fragrant warm water and personally cleaned the sick monk's body.

The sangha asked the Buddha why he did this. The Buddha replied, "Sick beings are very pitiable, and we should take care of them. This will generate great merit and virtue. Additionally, this old monk had a karmic connection with me in a past life. Back then, he was an executioner who used to whip prisoners so harshly that they suffered greatly.

I was falsely accused at that time, and before being whipped, I told the executioner I was innocent and asked him for mercy. He listened and refrained from whipping me during the execution. Later, when he died, his misdeeds led him to a lower realm where he suffered for many kalpas. Even though he was reborn as a human in this life, he was continually plagued by a grave illness..."

Therefore, while we are still alive, we must repent for our past misdeeds of harming other living beings in previous and current lives. Otherwise, we may face lifetimes of unceasing illness. The fact that some individuals are chronically ill and cannot be cured by either Chinese or Western medicine is undoubtedly related to their karmas from past lives.

Although the karmic effect is self-inflicted, seriously ill patients are nonetheless very pitiable. In the past, those with illnesses such as leprosy or epilepsy were often shunned by those around them, left to face their struggles alone. Though they were still alive, their existence felt no different from death.

In 1986, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited many Tibetan areas to propagate the Dharma. In Dawu County, he encountered a group of leprosy

patients and performed a puja for them. They appeared almost as lifeless as the deceased, except that they could still move around.

Recently, I read the book *Times Gone By* by Cheng Xiangyang. The author holds only a junior high school diploma, yet he has been collecting data on AIDS for over ten years. Drawing from his own experiences, he documented the tragedies of the “AIDS village” in Henan Province.

In the book, the author describes the number of villagers who contracted AIDS, including his wife and seventeen immediate family members, some of whom have already passed away. He provides a candid portrayal of the tragic situation.

I spoke with him on the phone, and during our conversation, he emphasized that outsiders have no understanding of the true suffering in the AIDS village. While attending the International Philanthropy Forum, I also met a volunteer who offered medical treatment to the villagers. I was invited to visit the AIDS village, which I agreed to do. However, due to scheduling conflicts, I had to cancel the trip. I asked some Dharma friends in Beijing to visit and assist the villagers on my behalf.

Patients with terminal illnesses may sometimes feel hopeless and desperate. However, if you are a practitioner, you should strive to face illness with composure and calm. When your test results are available and the doctor tells you, “Oh! You need neither medicine nor inpatient care. You may go home,” or “It is fine. Nothing is wrong with you,” it may indicate that you are terminally ill.

Therefore, after receiving your test reports, you should also observe the doctor’s facial expression. If he asks you to go home first and then requests a meeting with your family, there may be something amiss. At that point, you might want to eavesdrop on their conversation (*the audience laughs*).

When people are sick, they often struggle to take care of themselves. Their frustration with their illness makes them irritable, leading them to complain about everything others do for them. Over time, they can become increasingly demanding and difficult to please. If their illness persists, those caring for them may grow weary and stop responding to their requests. Meanwhile, the ongoing discomfort of their condition continues to trouble them.

Once there was such a patient at Larung Gar. The Dharma teachers and monastery overseers organized a team to take turns caring for him, but he was constantly bad-tempered. Many Dharma friends grew weary of looking after him, and some even became frustrated and stopped attending to his needs.

Of course, a caregiver should understand that a patient may become irritable due to the discomfort caused by an imbalance of the four elements. However, the patient should not become overly demanding. I heard of a patient who requested three or four dishes per meal, which can be challenging for a caregiver. In fact, one is quite fortunate to have someone willing to care for them when they are sick. As a patient, you should avoid making excessive demands; otherwise, your caregiver may become frustrated and will not be able to continue looking after you with the same patience.

When we fall ill, we should be like those Kadampa masters who aspire to take on the suffering of sickness for the benefit of all living beings. For a true practitioner, being sick can be a valuable opportunity to put illness into real practice. The more severe the illness and the greater the pain, the more successful his practice will be.

In contrast, if a patient is an average individual or an inexperienced practitioner, they may inadvertently create difficulties for those around them. A bedridden patient who constantly requires assistance might even wish for an early death to avoid burdening their family.

In summary, we must recognize that patients continually endure the suffering of sickness, both physically and mentally. Many patients deeply comprehend this from their own experiences. If you wish to explore the suffering of sickness further, you may consult other Buddhist texts such as the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, the *Precious Garland of the Middle Way*, and *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, which provide more detailed explanations.

2.1.3.2.4.2.4. The Suffering of Death

When death is near, you become too weak to leave your bed, unable even to sit up. Food and drink no longer interest you, no matter how delicious they appear. The process of dying overwhelms you with discomfort, draining your spirit and leaving you anxious and hopeless. Your mind fills with unsettling visions and fears of what lies ahead.

I once read an article written by a graduate student who said he used to be an optimist, but his reflections on death had eroded his optimism. He believed he would be gone forever after death and that all his current happiness would vanish as well, which left him feeling extremely frightened and depressed. Meanwhile, he realized that his grandparents and parents would die sooner or later, and that no

one could escape death. Whenever he contemplated this, he felt deep sadness, but he could not stop thinking about it. So, he asked, “Who in the world can dispel my worry and suffering?”

I really want to tell him, “Had you studied the Dharma, you would have known that consciousness does not disappear after death. Instead, it wanders from life to life in samsara, according to your good and bad actions.”

Of course, he is doing relatively well because at least he has the courage to confront death, unlike many people who shy away from the topic and immediately change the subject. Unfortunately, the graduate student has not been exposed to the Dharma, so I fear that when he ultimately faces death, he will not be able to dispel his fear.

The moment of your passing has arrived. Surrounded by family and friends, you may feel their love, but no one can delay your time of death. Ultimately, the pain of dying is something you confront entirely on your own. As stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

There I will be, prostrate upon my bed,
And all around, my family and friends.
But I alone shall be the one to feel
The cutting of the thread of life.⁹¹

At the moment of death, even the guru with thousands of disciples or the president of a country with hundreds of millions of people will have to face the suffering of death alone. No one can replace them in that experience. *The Infinite Life Sutra* states:

In the midst of worldly desires and attachments,
One is born alone and dies alone,
One goes alone and comes alone.

Others cannot assist you in your sickness, let alone during your birth and death. I have observed government officials with prestige and power being transported in luxury cars to the hospital for inpatient care. However, once hospitalized, only a few bodyguards remained to help them with luggage, bags, and laptops. Beyond

⁹¹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

that, no one could experience the suffering of illness on their behalf. If this is true during illness, it will be even more so at the time of death.

No matter how much you own, you cannot take any of it with you when you die. Even though you struggle to let go, deep down, you know it is impossible to hold on. As stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

And when the heralds of the Deadly King have gripped me,
What help to me will be my friends and kin?⁹²

When the heralds of the Deadly King come to capture you, no matter how abundant and powerful your friends and family may be, they cannot help you. Therefore, while we are still alive, we must strive to perform virtuous deeds and avoid becoming attached to friends, family, status, and wealth, which ultimately hold no meaning.

You may have heard this often during your study of the Dharma, but if you have not internalized it, it will remain just a literal statement that does not resonate with you. Only on the day of your death will you finally realize that you cannot take your possessions with you and that your family and friends cannot aid you. At most, they will mourn for two or three days after your passing and organize a funeral for you. However, once your physical body is gone, their grief will eventually fade.

I watched a documentary about the remarkable life of former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. He received numerous awards from around the world, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. In his sixties, Arafat married a woman thirty-four years his junior. However, his wife showed little care for him during their marriage, choosing to live an extravagant life alone in France. When Arafat's health deteriorated, his wife insisted on sending him from the Palestinian city of Ramallah to France for medical treatment.

Arafat later died in a military hospital in a suburb of Paris. The documentary footage revealed that when Arafat was on the brink of death, his senior Palestinian officials could do nothing but let medical staff resuscitate him. Nurses provided oxygen and chest compressions in hopes of reviving his heartbeat, but their efforts were in vain.

As death approaches, fear grips you at the thought of the pain and suffering in

⁹² Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

the lower realms. Regret floods your mind as you recall the wrongdoings you have committed. Death is suddenly here, as the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* states:

The henchmen of Impermanence come unexpectedly.

You feel consumed by fear as the warmth of life fades, your senses dull, and your body gradually grows cold.

However, some practitioners are truly remarkable. As I mentioned before, there was an old lama at Larung Gar who was ill, so I took him to the hospital in Barkam⁹³ for a medical checkup. The doctor examined his test results and informed me that the old lama had reached the terminal stage of lung cancer.

The old lama did not understand Chinese, but from the doctor's expression, he sensed what was happening. He asked me, "What did the doctor say?" I replied, "Nothing special. You are fine. Perhaps some Chinese medicine can make you feel better." He said, "Really? For us practitioners, death is nothing to worry about. Just tell me the truth."

On our way back to Larung Gar, I still did not tell him, but he had already guessed correctly. His reaction was completely different from that of ordinary people. He remained calm and showed no emotional fluctuations. An ordinary person would have been devastated and heartbroken by the same news, feeling as though their life prospects had vanished like soap bubbles.

As an evildoer faces death, fear grips them as they recall their wrongdoings and dread the possibility of being reborn in the lower realms. They feel deep regret for having squandered the chance to practice the Dharma, the only thing that could have helped them in this crucial moment. This realization fills them with such anguish that they clutch their chest in despair, leaving marks on their skin with their own fingernails.

I once witnessed the death of such a person. He had enjoyed hunting and had killed many animals in his life. Now, he appeared horrified before his death, yelling, "I have killed so many living beings! Now they are all here, wanting to take my life." Hearing his words, we were all horrified.

Milarepa once spoke about the death of an evildoer:

⁹³ Barkam or Markang or Muerkvua is a county-level city in Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, in the northwest of Sichuan province, People's Republic of China.

Watch as an evil man dies;
He serves as a teacher, demonstrating the effects of actions.

Indeed, you do not necessarily need a guru to teach you daily from *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* or the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*. If a wise person witnesses the horror of an evildoer's death, he will deeply understand that one must not commit too many misdeeds in life. Otherwise, the suffering of death in this life is unbearable, let alone the suffering of falling into the lower realms in a future life.

For an evildoer, the torment of the lower realms begins even before death. Everything around them feels threatening, and every sensation brings pain. Their body weakens as its elements break down—their breathing becomes labored, their limbs grow lifeless, and their mind begins to hallucinate. Their eyes roll back, and as they leave this life, they face death alone. In the intermediate state, frightening visions appear, but they have no one to turn to for help or protection.

When their family and friends notice their death, they will start to recite, “*Om Mani Padme Hum*,” while weeping.

Of course, each of us must confront the suffering of death. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

Humans are constrained by death,
From this life to the next life,
Death is the great suffering.

When a practitioner who has the state of practice notices the signs of approaching death, such as the dissolution of the four elements and the arising of hallucinations, he will recall the tantric instructions on the intermediate state. He will be aware of how the four elements degenerate and dissolve into consciousness in sequential order.⁹⁴ Having gained understanding and prepared for the moment of death, the practitioner can seize the opportunity and attain liberation when the signs of death manifest.

Here is an analogy: If you ask an honest man who is about to travel to deliver an oral message, he will keep the message firmly in mind. Similarly, when we are about to leave this world for the next, the key instructions from the guru will naturally arise in our minds.

⁹⁴ Detailed information can be found in *Lama Yangtik*, or *The Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru*.

Here is another analogy: A person is about to take a train to a new destination. Having never been on a train before, his parents tell him, “When you arrive at the train station, do this or that to obtain a ticket, board the train, and find your seat.” Having received these instructions in advance, this person will remember his parents’ words as the situations arise one by one.

Therefore, while we are still alive, we should keep in mind the instructions from qualified teachers. Then, as the signs of death emerge, we’ll recognize them and engage in the corresponding practices.

Regarding practices related to death, the Pure Land School has supreme instructions centered around the practice of Amitabha, with few instructions offered about the intermediate state. However, beings differ in their faculties, so at the moment of death, what appears before them may not necessarily be Amitabha.

In contrast, Vajrayana provides various instructions on the intermediate state that cater to people with different faculties. Learning these instructions while still alive can greatly assist a person at the moment of death. Otherwise, when the heralds of the Lord of Death arrive and the apparitions of the intermediate state manifest, those who have never practiced these instructions will have no choice but to leave this world alone, without any protector or refuge.

Of course, enlightened beings are fundamentally different from worldly individuals, as they have attained mastery over birth and death. For example, Master Baofu, a Chan master in the later Tang dynasty, once told his disciples, “I have been feeling weak recently, and I think my time of death is approaching.”

Upon hearing this, the disciples became anxious. Some said, “Dear Master, you are still in good health. Please don’t worry too much!” Others pleaded, “Please continue living in this world so you can guide us!” Some exclaimed, “Please take care of yourself, so you can live long in this world to teach the Dharma!”

In an instant, the temple was filled with the noise of the crowd. While the disciples were still talking, one disciple suddenly said, “It is all right to live; it is all right to die. It’s all right to just let it be as it is.”

Hearing this, Master Baofu burst into laughter and said with contentment, “When did you overhear the thoughts in my mind?” Then the Chan Master peacefully passed into parinirvana. Thus, an enlightened being is not constrained by afflictions, so whenever death arrives, he has no fear.

However, for most of us ordinary people, there’s no certainty that today will

not be the day we leave this life behind, taking nothing with us. When that moment comes, only the Dharma can truly help us—there is no other refuge. As the saying goes:

While still in your mother's womb, direct your mind toward
the Dharma;
From the moment of birth, keep the Dharma in mind for death.

We must always remember and practice the Dharma, which is best started when we are still in our mother's womb.

People nowadays place great importance on fetal education, which refers to various practices and activities aimed at stimulating the development of a fetus during pregnancy. Most fetal education involves listening to soft music or visiting pleasant places, which does not carry much meaning. In fact, the fetal education that is truly meaningful is when a pregnant mother frequently visits temples or engages in virtuous actions after conceiving. These external virtuous causes and conditions can greatly benefit a fetus. Additionally, once a child enters this world, they should also be introduced to the principle of impermanence. They should understand that death can come without warning, whether one is young or old, and in that final moment, only the Dharma will truly be of help. The *Samyukta Agama* says:

Old age and death will destroy our body and sensations;
Only the merits of generosity are the accumulations that follow
us.

Therefore, the Buddha often says that it is our merit that can assist us at the moment of our death. Shantideva also states:

For then life's virtue is my one defense,
And this, alas, is what I shrugged away.⁹⁵

However, many worldly individuals are unaware of this. In particular, many urban dwellers are preoccupied with life's daily tasks and procrastinate on the most meaningful Dharma practice. To these individuals, the most meaningful practice appears trivial, while trivial pursuits are viewed as ultimately important.

⁹⁵ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

They seem to forget about death because they are so focused on competing with others, helping their friends, managing their homes and possessions, and spending time with loved ones. However, living this way—driven by attachment, ignorance, and anger for the sake of those they care about—can, upon reflection, be a serious mistake.

Here is an inspiring verse from the *Dhammapada*:

Our lifetime is gone day and night,
So we shall practice diligently in time.
Knowing the truth in this worldly life is impermanence,
Do not be deceived and fall into darkness.

Therefore, now that we have the opportunity to study the Dharma, we must recognize that guidance from a qualified teacher is more important than anything else. An unschooled child remains illiterate without education; thus, formal schooling is essential for this child. Similarly, living in a world of delusion, we will leave this life as “Dharma illiterate” if we do not pursue the Dharma.

Now that we have encountered the luminous Dharma that teaches us what to do and what not to do, we must choose to engage in the most meaningful actions so we can attain great bliss in this life and in many lives yet to come.

By doing so, when we face death, we will reflect on our entire life and realize, “Although I committed many misdeeds in the past, I have managed to accomplish some virtuous acts during the second half of my life. I recognized my mistakes while there was still time, so it is all right if I have to die now. I will be happy whenever I must leave this world.” This is the mindset of a practitioner—detaching oneself from worldly attachments such as material gain, loss, fame, and status, among others. In this way, when departing from this world, having accumulated numerous virtuous deeds for liberation, the practitioner can feel confident and assured about their next life.

You should contemplate these teachings repeatedly, as this in itself is meditation. I have emphasized that meditation practice on the common preliminaries is very important. I hope you keep this advice close to your heart.



Lesson 53

“We could spend all our time looking... yourself entirely to the practice of Dharma.” [page 85–86]

Regarding suffering in the human realm, we have covered three fundamental types of suffering: the suffering of change, the suffering upon suffering, and the suffering of everything composite. We have also studied the four great streams of suffering: birth, old age, sickness, and death.

We now turn to the four other human sufferings. In today’s teaching, I will address the fear of meeting hated enemies.

2.1.3.2.4.2.5. The Fear of Meeting Hated Enemies

The fear of meeting hated enemies refers to the suffering of wanting to be away from people or things you detest but having no choice but to confront them. For example, you cannot encounter the lover you long to meet, yet you constantly encounter the enemy you resent. You do not receive the good news you desire but often hear the bad news you wish to avoid. You wish to be healthy, but you continually fall ill, with no moments of freedom or joy.

It is the nature of samsara that undesirable external circumstances frequently arise, while desirable ones rarely manifest, resulting in intense distress. The *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* states:

When unpleasant circumstances meet with our being,
It brings a variety of sufferings.

Therefore, it is called the fear of meeting unpleasant circumstances.

Unpleasant external circumstances often confront us or appear in front of us, bringing various forms of suffering. This is referred to as the fear of meeting hated enemies. Of course, there are other interpretations of this specific type of suffering.

When can we uproot this suffering? It is only when we realize emptiness and fully actualize that the self of the individual and the self of phenomena do not inherently exist. At that time, all our sufferings will be completely gone, and none will remain with us.

Before that, wherever you are reborn in samsara, you will inevitably experience this type of suffering. Even if you are born in the three higher realms, you will still often encounter things or people you detest, not to mention the hell beings, animals, and hungry ghosts of the lower realms. Therefore, in order to be free from such suffering, it is very important to realize emptiness.

It says in the *Records of the Source-Mirror*:

Without realizing the non-arising,
Anywhere you are born,
There is nothing but hatred,
And there is nothing but suffering.

If you have not fully realized emptiness—the nature of all phenomena—then no matter which of the six realms you are reborn into, all you experience in that realm is nothing but hatred and suffering.

People often complain, “Everything is too complicated here. I have to go somewhere pure and simple.” Those who say this do not understand the truth of samsara. If you grasp the reality of samsara, you will know that no matter where you go, there will always be something undesirable occurring. If you are overly attached to these occurrences, you will suffer greatly. It is only when you recognize the nature of samsara that you realize it is not worth feeling distressed about these occurrences.

Here is a statement from a book: “I used to be extremely attached to something ten years ago, which seems quite laughable today. It will be the same ten years from now when I recall the things I am so attached to today. Therefore, we should always

understand the nature of the things to which we are attached during each stage of our lives.”

This indeed makes a lot of sense. Unfortunately, most people do not realize this while they are becoming attached to something. It is only when they look back many years later that they suddenly recognize how laughable the attachment was and begin to feel deeply regretful.

According to accounts from some elderly Chinese who served as Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, they now find their actions at that time to be so crazy, and they do not understand why they did what they did. Although we may not share the same experience, some of our actions may be just as ridiculous as theirs.

For example, we were attached to toys in our childhoods and clung to relationships, fame, and wealth in our youth. Only now do we realize the foolishness of our actions, as we have become completely entangled and inflicted unnecessary suffering upon ourselves.

Additionally, many of us are especially attached to our bodies and external circumstances, believing this is perfectly normal. However, as time passes, our perceptions constantly change as well. In particular, if we correctly understand emptiness, we will find our past actions and thoughts truly laughable because, in fact, nothing inherently exists in this world.

Therefore, it is very important to reflect on our own lives to understand the sufferings of the human realm. Many people experience tremendous mental suffering and even plunge themselves into the abyss of despair when they fail to achieve their goals because they have not yet grasped the fundamental nature of life. In fact, such reactions are not necessary at all.

Even if you have not fully realized emptiness, as long as you have a basic understanding of the principles of impermanence and human history, along with your own life experiences, you will recognize that the things to which worldly people are particularly attached are nothing but illusions. Of course, before realizing the ultimate truth of all phenomena, we cannot completely abandon our attachments to pain and pleasure. It is only when we eliminate our afflictive obscurations and cognitive obscurations that we will stop clinging to the “I” and “suffering,” and we will not be driven to the three lower realms by our karma.

We Buddhists must understand this truth very well. However, it is not enough

to merely understand it; we should contemplate it word by word, line by line, until we gain practical experience. This process is what is referred to as “practicing the Dharma.”

Many people often say they do not want to engage in hearing and contemplation, and they only want to meditate. In fact, engaging in intensive meditation without sufficient hearing and contemplation is very dangerous. Without a foundation built on hearing and contemplation, how do you know how to meditate and what to meditate on? Some individuals believe that “meditation” means having no attachment to anything and simply sitting still with eyes closed on a daily basis. Others think they can skip the preceding steps and directly meditate on the most profound teachings in the Vajrayana or Chan schools. While this may work for a few practitioners with exceptional faculties, most practitioners still need to follow a practical sequence.

A sequential order is necessary even when we receive a worldly education. In the school system, we start with elementary school, then progress to secondary school, and finally attend university. It is not possible for us to enter a university directly. Spiritual practice is similar, unless you are a practitioner with superior five spiritual faculties,⁹⁶ allowing you to attain sudden realization upon hearing a simple pith instruction from your guru.

But if, through careful self-examination, you realize that you do not possess superior faculties, the most suitable approach for your practice is to begin by studying the doctrines. As you gradually develop intellectual understanding, you can then apply the teachings in practice. By doing so, your mind will gradually transform, and your afflictions will diminish day by day.

Many eminent masters of the past also followed this practical sequence and eventually realized the nature of the mind. Therefore, now that the teaching focuses on the common preliminaries, we should carefully meditate on the sufferings in the six realms. In particular, the sufferings in the human realm are extensively covered in the sutras. Eminent masters also described these sufferings in great depth in shastras. Nevertheless, have we, as subsequent practitioners, contemplated and meditated on those teachings thoroughly? You will find the answer through self-reflection.

When it comes to the fear of meeting hated enemies, as Patrul Rinpoche

⁹⁶ The five spiritual faculties are: faith, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

points out, we may spend all our time safeguarding our money and possessions, watching over them day and night. However, eventually, there's no way to prevent losing them to our enemies.

For example, in recent years, as Argentina's public security situation has deteriorated, people have become so guarded that many have installed electric grids around their houses to prevent burglary, resembling a prison. They do not wish to do this, but given the social situation, they feel they have no choice but to adopt this extreme measure to protect themselves.

The same is true in many cities in the Han region. To safeguard their possessions or even their lives, many households install anti-theft doors and windows. Otherwise, they do not feel safe. Thus, through in-depth contemplation, we realize that wealth and property can be the cause of suffering. When we possess wealth and property, suffering tends to arise.

When discussing “the fear of meeting hated enemies,” Patrul Rinpoche primarily addresses the drawbacks of having wealth and property. From a broader perspective, any unpleasant circumstance, such as encountering troubles or experiencing afflictions, is related to “the fear of meeting hated enemies.” However, the emphasis here is on wealth and property, as we practitioners should be content with what we have and reduce our desires, while wealth and property can create significant obstacles to our Dharma practice.

In pursuit of a livelihood, many of us dedicate our entire lives to work and do not have the opportunity to practice. Even if we guard our wealth day and night, we cannot prevent it from eventually ending up in the hands of our enemies. Thieves during the day, burglars at night, or even wild animals like dogs and wolves can appear unexpectedly and take it from us.

The situation can be worse in big cities. According to a news report, in December 2009, a woman was about to make a deposit at an ATM when a man suddenly appeared, pointed a gun at her, and demanded, “Give me the money or I'll kill you!” Stunned and terrified, the woman handed over her money—more than 10,000 yuan. This incident occurred around 8 p.m., and the man quickly vanished after receiving the cash.

As you can see, safety is a significant concern nowadays, and people's money, homes, cars, and other belongings can be taken by robbers at any time.

Recently, I hosted a guest from my hometown who works as a janitor for

a company in Sertar. According to him, fifteen households in the small county of Sertar experienced burglaries in the past month. In some cases, burglars entered homes by prying doors open, while in others, they broke windows. Some households lost between 70,000 to 80,000 yuan, while others lost only a few small items.

Such security issues clearly indicate that people are becoming greedier and less moral. Even if we implement various anti-theft measures, burglars can easily circumvent them with more advanced tools. As the old adage goes: As virtue rises one foot, evil rises ten. Thus, the world is becoming increasingly dangerous. We may not notice this unless we take a closer look. However, upon careful scrutiny, we find that qualities such as compassion, altruism, and contentment with fewer desires are diminishing, while external desires, ambitions, and malice are growing stronger. As a result, no matter how many law enforcement officers the Public Security Bureau recruits each year, changing the situation remains difficult. Worse yet, sometimes those officers themselves become corrupt and engage in misconduct.

In contrast, we practitioners living in remote areas have no worldly goals beyond simple food and clothing. While others may find such a life miserable, our spiritual fulfillment far surpasses that of the millions living in big cities. Therefore, practitioners should regularly engage in self-reflection: “What is my life’s goal? Why do others act the way they do? What choices should I make and remain committed to?” After such reflection, you may easily arrive at the right conclusion.

Obviously, the more wealth and possessions we have, the more effort it takes to acquire, protect, and grow them. Nagarjuna states:

Gathering wealth, guarding it, and trying to grow it will exhaust
you.

Realize that riches only lead to endless problems and harm.

Many individuals today are constantly racking their brains, day and night, hoping to become wealthy through their entrepreneurial endeavors. While their intentions seem admirable, only a small fraction of them succeed in amassing wealth. Once they have accumulated some wealth and property, they must guard it against theft. Yet, they are not satisfied with merely protecting their wealth; they also seek to grow it, viewing it as the key to a happy life. Consequently, people toil, dedicating all their time and effort to their wealth and property, unaware that

this accumulation holds no real meaning. Instead, it becomes the source of all misfortunes and suffering.

Millard Fuller, an American, built significant wealth and property from scratch. By the time he was nearly thirty, he had already earned a million dollars. He felt his business journey had just begun, and his next goal was to become a multimillionaire.

However, as his wealth continued to increase, he did not feel happy at all. Instead, his health was deteriorating day by day, and his marriage was on the brink of collapse. After careful consideration, he decided to sell his properties and donate the proceeds to churches, schools, and charities. Additionally, he and his wife established a non-profit organization called Habitat for Humanity International, which has built more than sixty thousand homes worldwide and provided shelter for over three hundred thousand people in need. Although Fuller gave up all his wealth and property, he felt he was the richest man in the world.

Therefore, even worldly individuals can appear to renounce the pursuit of wealth. However, their renunciation is not based on a complete understanding of the nature of wealth and property. Instead, it is inspired by certain causes and conditions that lead them to realize that wealth cannot bring genuine happiness, prompting them to stop pursuing it. If worldly individuals can renounce wealth, we practitioners, even more so than they, should not become obsessed with wealth and property.

A person once told me, “When people discuss the faults of money, I do not really understand. Money is a genuine wish-fulfilling jewel. With money in hand, we can eat and travel... these days, whatever we do requires the support of money, so money truly is the wish-fulfilling jewel that grants us everything!”

According to Buddhism, a practitioner should live a life that avoids both extreme poverty and extreme extravagance. This is the so-called Middle Way. Therefore, we should often make an aspiration like this:

I will be born neither into a super-rich
Nor a very poor family,
But into a middling family,
So that I can always take my ordination.

Regarding the drawbacks of wealth, Milarepa says:

At first, wealth brings happiness and envy from others;
 Yet, no matter how much you possess, it never feels like enough.
 In the middle, miserliness tightens its grip:
 You hesitate to spend on offerings or charity.
 Your wealth attracts enemies and evil forces.
 And everything you have accumulated is consumed by others.
 In the end, wealth becomes a demon that jeopardizes your life.
 How frustrating it is to protect your riches only to benefit your
 enemies!
 I have discarded this lure that drags us down into samsara.
 I desire no more of this devil's temptation.

In the beginning, you are happy with your wealth, believing it can fulfill all your needs. Meanwhile, others admire you, saying, "Ah! This person is rich; he can afford to buy a house and a car!" Many urban dwellers are busy keeping up with the Joneses. But no matter how much you have, it never seems enough.

In the middle, having amassed a certain amount of wealth, you may become so constrained by miserliness that you are unwilling to spend your riches on offerings or charity. Your wealth attracts enemies and negative forces, so when unfavorable circumstances arise, the wealth you have accumulated will be consumed by others. In fact, many people with material affluence spend very little on virtuous causes but much more on meaningless things. There is always a crowd surrounding these individuals, using their money, and the crowd grows greedier day by day, while these individuals themselves enjoy very little of their wealth.

In the end, due to your insatiable greed—you may even covet the wealth and property of your enemies—wealth transforms into a demon that endangers your life. Therefore, we must cast off this lure that drags us down into samsara and desire no more of this devil's temptation.

When Venerable Atisha first came to Tibet, to show their respect for the great master, the monks dressed in fine clothes and jewelry to greet him. Upon seeing the monks, Atisha immediately covered his head.

The disciples beside him were puzzled and asked why he had done that. Venerable Atisha answered, "The Tibetan devils come to welcome me!"

The monks felt very ashamed upon hearing Atisha's response, so they quickly

removed their magnificent jewelry and put on their monk robes to properly welcome him. Then Atisha happily accepted their veneration.

Atisha did this not because he was afraid of coral or agate, but because he was concerned that those monks placed too much importance on wealth. In many sutras, the Buddha describes wealth using similes of poison, fierce fire, and negative forces, warning practitioners not to seek it. Otherwise, he said, it will be like the sharp blade of our enemy, capable of stabbing through our hearts. Therefore, we beings still wandering in samsara must not be tempted by wealth. Otherwise, we will never be liberated from samsara.

In fact, whether one can practice well or not is closely tied to one's wealth and possessions. If you do not have much wealth, at least you will have time to practice the Dharma. Conversely, if you are busy managing your wealth, you will not seek liberation at all.

I have encountered many wealthy individuals who wish to propagate the Dharma or engage in practice. However, their abundant wealth often leads to numerous responsibilities, causing them to brood during the day and suffer from insomnia at night. Even when they meditate on "the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages" during a retreat, they may close their eyes but cannot stop thinking, "What should I do with this money? How much will the company make this year? Should I send my car for maintenance next month?"

Their thoughts revolve entirely around wealth and possessions. In contrast, practitioners living in caves or mountains hardly have to think about worldly matters. Their minds are focused solely on the Dharma and liberation. How wonderful!

Thus, it can be very challenging for someone with great material abundance to practice the Dharma. Here is a story I heard: A wealthy man went to a secluded place for a three-week retreat. However, during those twenty-one days, he was unable to practice the Dharma and instead continued working on his business projects, juggling three mobile phones. If he was so busy in a hermitage, imagine how much more distracted he would be outside of the retreat. I believe you all understand the meager merit such "retreat practice" yields. Therefore, when a practitioner possesses more, they will inevitably become distracted.

Shantideva also says:

The pain of gaining, keeping, and of losing all!

See the endless hardships brought on us by property!
 For those distracted by their love of wealth
 There is no chance for freedom from the sorrows of existence.⁹⁷

The process of accumulating, preserving, and losing wealth is fraught with immense suffering. Therefore, we must recognize that wealth is the primary source of all afflictions. Those who obsess over trivial pursuits for the sake of financial gain are unable to attain the enlightened mind of the Buddha or achieve the highest level of concentration. When these individuals attempt to meditate and close their eyes, their thoughts are often consumed solely by money. They cannot reach a spiritual state in alignment with the Dharma. Consequently, their liberation remains distant. It may be that, due to their merit from previous lives, some people lead lives that are neither poor nor rich, which is conducive to their Dharma practice. I rejoice in some Dharma friends at Larung Gar who enjoy sufficient provisions without excess. Their monthly stipend is just enough, isn't it?

A person's suffering increases as their possessions increase. As stated in Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*,

Kind Sir, to own a lot brings so much misery,
 There's no such grief for those with few desires.
 The more the naga lords possess of heads,
 The more their headaches, the more they have of cares.⁹⁸

For example, if you owned a horse, you would constantly worry about it being stolen or taken by an enemy or whether it had enough hay to eat. A single horse can cause a great deal of stress. If you had a sheep, you would face the troubles that come with owning a sheep. Even if all you owned was a bag of tea, you would still encounter the issues associated with a bag of tea.

Therefore, our sufferings have a direct correlation to the extent of our wealth and possessions. If you have one bag of tea, you may not experience much misery. But if you own a house, a car, or a plane, things are quite different. Many wealthy Americans have private jets, yet the misery in their minds often seems even greater than the jets.

⁹⁷ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

⁹⁸ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited America, he once flew in a private jet owned by a well-off elderly couple. Their daughter had married a tulku. The husband frequently bragged about his jet, saying, “My plane is this or that...” His wife grew impatient and would respond, “You are so old now. Your hair is all gray, and you are still talking about the plane!”

The husband retorted, “What about our cars and our plane?” It is said that the couple often quarreled over their wealth and possessions.

Worldly people lead very stressful lives. If you have an ordinary car, you typically do not spend much on repairs and maintenance, and you do not normally worry too much about it. But if you have a million-dollar car, even a small scratch can cost a fortune to repair. Adding expenses such as gas and tolls, your monthly spending on the car can be quite significant.

In addition to luxury cars, people also enjoy purchasing luxury homes. However, the more expensive the house, the more money one must spend on it, and the greater the financial burdens one has to bear. Unfortunately, many people fail to recognize this. Instead, they perceive the suffering caused by accumulating wealth as happiness. How absurd!

On the other hand, true practitioners have few desires in life. The only thing they value is a carefree and peaceful mind. Patrul Rinpoche used to travel everywhere with two of his gurus, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu and Jigme Ngotsar Gyatso. They dressed in rags and begged along the road, like vagabonds. Once, when a herdsman living in a remote area died, his family could not find any monks nearby. Noticing that the three of them were wearing monastic robes, the family invited them to their home to offer the deliverance service for the deceased.

The three great masters arrived at the home of the deceased and began preparing for the deliverance service. At that time, the young daughter of the family returned. When she saw Patrul Rinpoche making *tormas*⁹⁹ in front of the stove, she thought, “My family is so unfortunate that we invite these vagabonds to conduct the deliverance service.” Then the daughter kicked him hard and said angrily, “Get

⁹⁹ Torma (Skt: Balingta, Tib: Tor-ma, Wylie: gtor ma) are ritual objects used in Tibetan Buddhist practices, often crafted from flour and butter. They can be dyed in various colors, typically featuring white or red for the main body. Torma come in specific shapes according to their purpose, usually resembling cones. They vary in size, from large central figures used in festivals to smaller ones placed on shrines, which can be set on plates, mounted on leather, or positioned on special bases such as skulls.

out!” Patrul Rinpoche simply smiled at her rudeness, as if nothing had happened, and continued making tormas.

After making the tormas, they began to chant the deliverance liturgy with compassion. Once the service was over, the Brahma Aperture of the deceased opened, and an auspicious sign for the transference of consciousness appeared. Seeing this, the family was so delighted that they offered three horses and a yak to the great masters. Patrul Rinpoche replied, “We do not need any offerings. If we have three horses, we will have three horses’ worth of trouble.”

The head of the family suddenly realized that the three monks were quite extraordinary, so he asked for their names. Patrul Rinpoche mentioned the names of his two gurus but did not reveal his own name. This story can be found in the *Brief Biography of Patrul Rinpoche*, which you can read at your convenience.

From Patrul Rinpoche’s own life, we can see that he not only encouraged others to be content with few desires but also engaged in ascetic practices himself. In fact, many can talk about “being content with few desires,” but very few can truly live by that principle. Therefore, we should follow in the footsteps of the lineage masters and simplify our lives to become genuine Dharma practitioners.

In his book *The World as I See It*, Albert Einstein states:

I am strongly drawn to the simple life.....I also consider that plain living is good for everybody, physically and mentally.

It is truly remarkable that a scientist like him could possess this understanding and strive to lead as simple a life as possible.

Recently, a wealthy businessman in Austria donated his substantial fortune of three million euros to charity and moved to a small mountain chalet, embracing a simple lifestyle. This change occurred because he realized that wealth could no longer bring him happiness. Some worldly individuals like him have never received the Dharma teaching on being content with few desires, yet through self-reflection and their own wisdom, they recognized the true nature of wealth. President George Washington once remarked that wealth and fame can only bring us pain, not happiness. Many people grasp this concept and ultimately relinquish everything they own.

However, many urban dwellers do not share this understanding. They are completely convinced that greater material affluence and a more luxurious lifestyle

lead to increased happiness. If you tell such a person about the drawbacks of money, they may think you are disparaging the “wish-fulfilling jewel” and respond, “You mean money is not good? No, no. It is money!”

They fail to recognize that if a person owns nothing, they will not be troubled by enemies and can live carefree wherever they go. They can simply leave their door open and be away for as long as they wish. As an old adage states:

Without wealth, there are no enemies. It is a great happiness to be in such a state.

According to the accounts in *The Record of the Exalted Acts of Buddhist Monks*, Chan Master Xuanlang of the Tang dynasty lived in a small room, wore a monastic robe for over forty years, and had only one piece of furniture for sitting and sleeping throughout his life. He would not light a candle unless he needed to read scriptures, and he would not take a single step unless it was to venerate the Buddha. Aside from chanting prayers and mantras, he did not engage in any unnecessary gossip.

As stated in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*:

There are six ways to train in what is by nature excellent:
 By eliminating physical actions that are based on confusion;
 By eliminating meaningless talk;
 By eliminating the thoughts proliferating and dissolving in your mind;
 By eliminating your impulsive fascination with sense pleasures;
 By eliminating associations that cause distraction, and [instead] dissipating busyness;
 By eliminating attempts to win over others' minds.
 Whoever trains in these ways will put the sacred Dharma into practice as is intended.¹⁰⁰

How wonderful it would be if we could rid ourselves of all misdeeds related to body, speech, and mind and if all our actions were centered around the Dharma instead of worldly, meaningless deeds.

However, many people find this difficult. Eighty percent of what they say is meaningless and even harmful; 80 percent of what they do is meritless and even

¹⁰⁰ Longchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006.

ill-intended; 80 percent of what they think consists of deluded thoughts involving either inward or outward distractions.

Thus, ordinary people face many problems that need solving, so we should not expect to attain realization after practicing for just a few days. Often, someone complains, “I have been practicing refuge for one hundred days, so why haven’t I attained any realization?”

Such a thought is quite naive. Dharma practice is a long journey, so do not rush for accomplishment.

Although I do not wish to proclaim myself as a highly skilled practitioner, I have nonetheless gained some experience in my Dharma practice over the years. A teacher becomes familiar with their students’ mindsets after twenty or thirty years of teaching. I completely understand that a novice monastic or a new refuge taker is eager to attain realization, but you cannot expect too much by saying, “I chanted the Vajrasattva mantra all night, yet I neither received any dream signs nor had a vision of Vajrasattva. Why? Is it because I have heavy karmic debts, or I haven’t acted properly? Could you please give me some guidance, my dear guru?”

Do not be too hasty!

To summarize, there are many kinds of suffering related to the fear of encountering hated enemies. The *Sutra of Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

The fear of encountering what one hates
Is like fierce fire and poisons.
The suffering that arises from it
Is beyond verbal expression.

The fear of meeting hated enemies is a type of suffering associated with experiences you truly wish to avoid. For example, although it is unwished for, a house may burn down, the body may be poisoned, or you may encounter an enemy you do not want to see. What often occurs is the opposite of what we truly desire. This is the nature of samsara.

Knowing this, we do not need to complain or even criticize the law of karma by saying, “What bad luck! Why do I always get a bump on the head and bleed after doing something good, while others receive no punishment for doing something bad? Who says that causes lead to corresponding effects? The law of karma doesn’t exist at all!”

This argument is particularly concerning. As you should know, natural law underlies all phenomena, and it is only when causes and conditions ripen that the effects arise. Therefore, you should not focus solely on the momentary experiences of happiness and pain. While reflecting on our own thoughts, we practitioners should also understand how causes and conditions operate in this world. Otherwise, it is easy for us to develop wrong views about the authentic Dharma.

Of course, wrong views arise from ignorance. The *Sutra on the Question of Maitreya* states:

You shouldn't hate the Dharma because of your hatred for
someone;
You should not blame the Dharma for the faults of someone;
You shouldn't resent the Dharma because of your resentment
toward someone.

In fact, the Dharma is completely correct. It is just that sometimes the practitioner has not fully assimilated this yet. Similarly, if we do not acknowledge the supreme teachings of the Buddha, we may be merely monastics or lay practitioners in name but not in reality. You may think you are doing well, but your path may already be diverging in another direction.

Now we stand at the crossroads of life, with one path leading to eternal darkness and the other to bright happiness. It is entirely up to us to choose which way to go. All the Dharma friends present here have generated bodhicitta. Monastics surely do not cling to worldly life, and their sole task is to study and practice the authentic Dharma. Lay practitioner should also reduce their attachments to worldly life.

After studying the Buddha's teachings, one lay practitioner told me, "I am now a pure layman without concerns, clinging, obstacles, or attachment. I do not say this to praise myself carelessly. I possess a few good qualities. First, since I embarked on the path, I have never quarreled with my family, including my parents and my son. Second, since I began this journey, I have not watched TV, films, soap operas, or even the news. Third, since I started on this path, I have never engaged in meaningless activities, such as wandering in a shopping mall. Because of these choices, I feel I am doing quite well!"

If an urban dweller can achieve this, we monastics living in a secluded place should be even more capable. It is no small feat for you, the members of the sangha

at Larung Gar, to forgo everything, including your families, and come here to practice the Dharma.

When I look at you, I often think, “These people truly have the root of merit. They are remarkable!”

Before your ordination, each of you was a cherished child to your parents. For years, your parents placed their hopes in you, but when you grew up, you chose ordination and shaved your head. In this situation, your parents will probably shed tears in their hearts, which gradually dissolve into their bloodstream. However, the teardrops are virtuous. As you progress on the path, your parents will undoubtedly receive the benefits.

Therefore, regardless of whether you are a monastic or a lay practitioner, I hope you will not live a conflicting lifestyle. The opportunity to study the Dharma is extremely rare. If you stand at a crossroads in a city, you will see crowds of people coming and going, of whom not even one in ten thousand studies the Dharma. Even fewer generate a virtuous thought that lasts as briefly as a lightning bolt and can ultimately forgo everything to devote themselves to the practice of Mahayana Buddhism in a pure Buddhist center.

Take time to reflect on the importance of living peacefully, remembering the saying, “Without wealth, there are no enemies.” Let the stories of the past buddhas inspire you, and work on letting go of your attachment to money and possessions. Live simply, like the birds that rely on what they find, and dedicate yourself fully to practicing the Dharma.

Of course, it is not entirely realistic for a practitioner to be like a bird that only searches for food to sustain one day of living. However, practitioners should emulate their predecessors, who prepared food for winter in the summer, engaged in retreat practice during winter, and then asked for alms again the following year.

The *Gateway to Training the Mind* states that faithful practitioners will not have great difficulty making a living. Therefore, you should be content with few desires and strive to live a simple life, as expressed in Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*:

Of all great wealth, contentment is supreme,
Said he who taught and guided gods and men.
So always be content; if you know this

Yet have no wealth, true riches you will have found.¹⁰¹

You should contemplate and meditate repeatedly on this teaching.

¹⁰¹ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.



Lesson 54

“We who live in this world of samsara ... I don’t want any worldly friends.” [page 86–89]

Today we continue with the sixth of the eight streams of suffering: the fear of losing loved ones.

The fear of losing loved ones refers to the suffering that arises when one cannot be with one’s loved ones and must part from them, which brings excruciating pain. The *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* says:

When pleasant circumstances
Are parted from us,
It leads to many sufferings.
Thus, it is called the suffering of being separated from what one
loves.

This occurs everywhere in the world. Sometimes, a couple deeply in love must separate when their bond has worn thin. If one of them cannot accept this, they may become overwhelmed with despair, leading to irrational actions, including suicide.

In fact, when we understand the nature of this type of suffering, we will not be affected as deeply. As you should know, there is universal love and partial love. The former refers to unconditional love for all sentient beings, while the latter refers to romantic love or lust, which brings suffering and only leads to pain until one

recognizes its nature. It is only when the attachment to an individual is eliminated that sorrow, fear, and anger cease to arise. The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says:

From love arises worry,
From love arises fear;
If one is free from love,
What worry and what fear can there be?

Many people live with worries about gain and loss, often due to their attachment to loved ones. Because of this strong obsession, they lead perplexed lives, become completely lost, and waste their time. Those who understand the nature of this suffering will redefine their pursuits in life. Therefore, when studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you should also learn about the world to better guide beings onto the path.

Many people today feel disoriented. It is challenging for them to detach from the things they are obsessed with, further perpetuated by social trends. Some young people are particularly fixated on relationships, money, and possessions, which is concerning. Although this attachment can be tormenting, they are unable to free themselves and instead hold on tighter. To be free from these attachments, one can only rely on the power of Dharma. If one can recognize the nature of the mind or fully understand the illusory and impermanent nature of everything in this world, one can easily transform all suffering into a means for the path of enlightenment.

In fact, spiritual wealth is far more important than material wealth for each of us. While material wealth can alleviate poverty, it cannot dispel mental pain. On the other hand, spiritual wealth—particularly the Buddha’s teachings on renunciation, letting go of self-attachment, realizing emptiness, understanding impermanence, and more—can make a person who embraces these teachings the happiest in the world. This holds true for everyone, regardless of identity, ethnic group, or nationality.

Many of you may look similar in terms of attire and appearance, but some of you are able to assimilate and embrace the Buddha’s great compassion and the wisdom of emptiness. This is a result of your faith from previous lives, diligent effort in this life, and favorable circumstances. Those who have internalized the Buddha’s teachings will always remain carefree and live happily, regardless of where they are and what they do—whether propagating the Dharma, benefiting sentient beings, or confronting the inevitable challenges of aging, illness, and death.

Of course, before reaching the first bodhisattva stage, ordinary people will inevitably experience certain suffering, both physically and mentally. Those who have studied the Dharma will not be as attached to their pain as those who have not.

Once, a fellow villager from my hometown visited me and spent a considerable amount of time sharing family matters with deep emotion. After he left, a khenpo who was also present remarked, “These worldly people are clinging too much!” Indeed, they believe that fame, wealth, and relationships are inherently real, leading them to hold onto them tightly. As a result, their attachment to what they perceive as real brings genuine harm and obstacles.

Many people are wandering at the crossroads of their lives, unsure of which direction to take. Therefore, we must guide them to study the Dharma so they can pursue the bright path of life from the depths of their hearts.

The most meaningful and valuable path, without question, is the Mahayana path. If you have already embarked on this journey, you should proceed with unwavering determination until you reach your destination. Throughout this journey, even if you encounter various obstacles and difficulties, do not give up!

2.1.3.2.4.2.6. The Fear of Losing Loved Ones

In this world of samsara, we feel attached to those we relate to and hostile toward others. For the sake of our family, friends, partners, and community, we are often willing to endure significant hardship. Yet, none of these relationships last forever. Eventually, we are separated—whether through death, distance, or threats from enemies or other dangers. The pain they experience often affects us even more deeply than our own.

Parents, in particular, worry endlessly about their children—fearing they might be cold, hungry, sick, or even die. Why should we repay the immense kindness of our parents? It is because they have done so much for us that they are set apart from others.

The *Sutra on the Profound Kindness of Parents and the Difficulties in Repaying Them*, translated by Kumarajiva, introduces ten kinds of parental kindness, each explained in two verses. One of the verses goes like this:

A one-hundred-year-old mother still constantly

Worries about her eighty-year-old son.
When will her love and care cease?
It will only be when her life comes to an end
And she is separated from her son by death.

Even when a mother is one hundred years old, she still worries about her son, who is eighty, wondering, “Is he in good health? Will he face any obstacles? Will he not come back again?” Unless she dies and leaves this world, no matter how old or sick she becomes, she will not stop caring about her son. Parents love their children so deeply that they would rather face death themselves than see their kids suffer, enduring a great deal of pain because of this.

However, even though we experience deep suffering from the fear of being separated from our loved ones, we should reflect on this carefully. Therefore, we do not need to analyze interpersonal relationships through the logical arguments of the Middle Way, such as “neither one nor many” or “refuting existent or non-existent results.” A simple investigation using reasoning alone can reveal that relationships are a cause of our suffering. Yet, due to clinging that has existed since beginningless time, sentient beings are often unaware that attachment to loved ones may stem from unwholesome connections in previous lives. As a result, it becomes difficult for beings to free themselves from these attachments.

Here is a story from the *Dhammapada*:

A brahmin had a son who died of illness at the age of seven. The brahmin was so heartbroken that he decided to retrieve his son from Yama, the Lord of Death. He inquired about how to reach the underworld. A group of brahmins told him, “When a person is still alive, he usually cannot see Yama. However, if you insist, you may travel two hundred miles westward until you reach a great river. The city by the river is where divine spirits stay during their inspections of the human realm. On the eighth day of every month, Yama passes through that city. As long as you adhere to the fasting prescriptions, you should be able to see Yama.”

The brahmin endured many hardships and finally encountered Yama. He pleaded with Yama to bring his son back to life, and Yama replied, “Your son is playing in the East Garden. If he wishes, you can take him back with you.”

The brahmin was so overjoyed that he rushed to the East Garden. But when his son saw him, he did not even bother to greet him; instead, he scolded the brahmin, “You foolish old man! I merely lived in your house temporarily as your son. Now

that I have other parents here, you'd better abandon your unrealistic wish and leave at once!" Overcome with grief, the brahmin departed in tears.

After returning home, the brahmin could not understand why this was happening, so he sought an answer from the Buddha. The Buddha said, "You are truly foolish. When someone dies, their spirit departs and takes on a new form. Father and mother, wife and child come together due to certain circumstances, much like a guest who arrives and then leaves."

The Buddha continued with teachings on the fear of losing loved ones, and the brahmin immediately understood. He became a monk following the Buddha and eventually attained arhathood.

The sutras offer many profound insights about life. If we can grasp them, we will be free from experiencing excruciating suffering. Otherwise, when we are parted from a loved one, we will struggle to bear the loss, feeling as if it is the end of the world. Even when such a loss occurs to others, we still find it challenging to come to terms with it personally. The reason many stories and films are so poignant and popular is that their plots are heart-wrenching, which is directly tied to the fear of losing loved ones.

Take, for example, the story of Lady Meng Jiang. During the reign of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, people were forcibly recruited from everywhere to work on the construction of the Great Wall. Shortly after getting married, Lady Meng Jiang's husband was also taken away, leaving them separated with no means of communication.

Lady Meng Jiang missed her husband day and night, so she prepared some winter clothes and set out to find him herself. When she reached the Great Wall, she inquired about her husband at each station, and finally received the devastating news that he had died of hunger and fatigue, and that his corpse was buried beneath the wall.

[Based on historical accounts, many people died of fatigue while building the Great Wall, and their corpses were buried on the spot. Therefore, I kept chanting the mani mantra when I visited the Great Wall. As I looked at the bricks, I wondered, "Are there corpses buried beneath here?"]

Lady Meng Jiang wept for three days and three nights, and her tears even touched heaven and earth. Then, suddenly, a section of the Great Wall collapsed, revealing her husband's corpse.

There is a similar Tibetan story. Once, there was a woman in Golog whose husband went to war and never returned. She wept every day and eventually became mentally ill. In her sorrow, she began to sing many elegiac songs spontaneously. Each song had deeply touching lyrics, perhaps because they came from the depths of her heart. This story is very popular in the Tibetan region. When I was a child, many elders shared it with me. Upon hearing the story, I felt her attachment was a great misery.

A few years ago, a popular film called *The Knot* was released. I did not watch the film, but someone shared the plot with me:

In the 1940s, two young Taiwanese fell in love and married. Later, due to political turmoil, the husband went to mainland China and enlisted as a soldier in the Korean War under a different name. During that time, he met a battlefield nurse and eventually married her for various reasons.

His Taiwanese wife remained faithful to him and cared for his mother as her daughter-in-law. Meanwhile, she began a long and hopeless wait for her husband. Eventually, she managed to hold an exhibition of her paintings in mainland China. With the help of her foster daughter, she learned that her husband had died many years earlier in an avalanche in the Tibetan region. By that time, she had been waiting for nearly sixty years.

This film was based on the novel *Stories in Taiwan*, and several well-known actors and actresses from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong portrayed the characters. In 2006, it ranked eighth on the list of highest-grossing films in China. It is said that many viewers were moved to tears while watching it.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche briefly stayed in Hong Kong during his trip to India in the early 1990s. At that time, several lay practitioners in Hong Kong praised the film *My Beloved*. It was about a psychiatrist who returned to his homeland after studying abroad and encountered a patient who turned out to be the mother he had lost eighteen years earlier. The main theme glorified the idea that a mother is the best in the world. It depicted the profound kindness and love of a mother. It was a very touching film that brought many viewers to tears.

The most poignant parts of the film were the scenes depicting the reunion and separation of the mother and son. From a Buddhist perspective, this reflects the fear of losing loved ones, as described in the sutras.

There are many other similar stories, such as that of the cowherd and the

weaver girl, among others. Many of these tales explore attachment in romantic relationships. Because they have not realized the concept of emptiness, these individuals do not understand that all gatherings and separations are subject to causes and conditions; thus, when they experience the loss of a loved one, they suffer tremendously.

When their suffering is portrayed in films, the audience feels a strong sense of empathy. However, from the perspective of those well-versed in Dharma, these stories simply illustrate circumstances linked to karma, which are not worth clinging to.

Here is a story from *A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden*, a Buddhist encyclopedia in Chinese. A woman's husband died from a venomous snake bite, yet she appeared indifferent and showed no signs of grief. People found this strange and asked her, "Why aren't you crying out of sadness?" She replied, "Husband and wife are like birds in the forest. They come together when affinity is present and part ways when it is exhausted; therefore, I do not feel sad." Later, her words became a popular adage in the Han region, stating:

Husband and wife are birds of the same forest,
But when disaster strikes, they fly separately.

As you can see, a couple's union is a result of temporary affinity. Due to the differences in their karmas, once disaster strikes, they will part ways. The *Vinaya* also states:

All care and love are with you for a long time;
They must leave at the end of your life.
Those who stay under a tree for the night will eventually fly away,
So will your wife, children, followers, and friends.

The guru-disciple or teacher-student relationship is the same. When I was at the teacher training school, we had nine classmates from Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Their duration of study was only two years, while ours was four years. So, when they left two years later, our class of over thirty students hugged them tightly and could not bear to let them go. When we saw them off early in the morning, we embraced them while weeping loudly.

Later, our teacher scolded us, saying, "The bus is arriving soon. They already

have their tickets. You all have to let them go!” Then the rest of us had to send them to the train station in tears, attracting a lot of attention from other passengers. Why did we feel so sad? Because we had not yet studied the Buddha’s teachings on the fear of losing loved ones (*the audience laughs*).

As Patrul Rinpoche says, are we really sure that our loved ones care for us as much as we think they do? Take our parents, for example—they say they love us, but their love can often be misguided and end up causing harm. By focusing on giving us wealth, property, or arranging our marriage, they only deepen our attachment to samsara and make it harder for us to break free.

Often, a senior layperson would approach me and ask, “Dear lama, please bestow your blessings. My child is nearly thirty years old and will expire¹⁰² soon.” Recently, someone called me, saying, “Dear lama, what should I do? My family’s ‘transmission’ has broken!”

Because she began by discussing her study of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, I initially thought her transmission of the text was broken.¹⁰³ It took me a while to understand that what she really meant was that her family line was broken.

Parents teach us various things—how to outsmart our rivals, care for our friends, make money, and pursue paths that keep us trapped in endless suffering in the lower realms. It could not be more harmful.

For instance, many parents teach their children how to hunt and eat animals such as snakes, shrimp, frogs, and so forth. When I witness such scenes in a restaurant, I feel deeply saddened. While parents undoubtedly have good intentions for their children, what they are teaching may actually cause harm rather than benefit to their children’s present and future lives. The unwholesome actions they impart can potentially trap their children in the lower realms of samsara.

To inflict real harm upon a person, it is not necessary to physically hurt them with weapons. In fact, the misguidance they experience over the years can have lasting and devastating effects on their present lives and many lives yet to come. It goes without saying that parents do not intend to cause harm to their children. However, due to their ignorance and the influences of the external environment, worldly education, and other factors, parents often engage in negative behaviors that bring harm to their children.

¹⁰² This means the child will soon be too old to get married.

¹⁰³ This means the woman will have no grandchild to carry on the family line.

Children raised in such circumstances learn only to commit misdeeds. In addition to these behaviors, they fail to develop virtuous values such as compassion. Sometimes, when a child expresses a desire to study the Dharma, take ordination, or engage in virtuous actions because their merit roots have sprouted, the parents become unhappy and do everything in their power to prevent the child from pursuing these goals. Alas! The parents' mindsets and actions are unwholesome and misguided; as a result, they not only fail to benefit their children but may even harm them.

Many people claim that parents are the best, a sentiment with which we Buddhists do not disagree. As stated in the sutras, parents have done so much for their children, and therefore, children should repay their kindness.

However, we should not be overly attached to our parents either. Once, someone told me, "If my mother were to die, I would not want to live another day. I would definitely commit suicide. Whenever I think of my mother's death, I feel mentally overwhelmed!" That being said, when his mother actually dies, it is uncertain whether he will truly commit suicide. Nevertheless, his thoughts reveal that he does not understand the nature of samsara.

Similarly, parents should not become too attached to their children, believing that their children are completely devoted to them. You should know that genuinely filial children are few and far between—so how do many others treat their parents? As Patrul Rinpoche says: Many children, whether boys or girls, seem to take everything from their parents. In the beginning, they suck the essence out of their parents' bodies. As they grow, they take their parents' food and later, their money. Despite their parents' love, they often rebel against them.

Many parents work hard throughout their lives to save money, enduring challenges and criticism, only to give it all to their children without hesitation. Yet, they rarely show gratitude. Even when parents provide their children with a fortune, the children appreciate it less than a stranger would value a small gift, like a pinch of tea. They assume that everything their parents own is automatically theirs.

Siblings often fight and compete with each other just to get a bigger share of the inheritance, unwilling to give an inch. No matter how much their parents give, they show no gratitude. And even if the parents have already given everything they have, the children still keep demanding more. Sometimes, even a single fake turquoise used for counting on a rosary is shamelessly taken by them.

Normally, children do not care about their parents. Once the parents are dying, they come back one by one to ensure their parents' property will not be taken away by others. Even if the parents give their property to their children, the children will not feel grateful and instead will still want more.

Such situations occur in both Tibetan and Han regions. I was told of a wealthy individual who placed his parents in a very shabby house. Even worse, when someone gifted his parents a television, he remarked, "Your eyesight is too poor to watch TV, so I will take the television with me. We young people enjoy watching TV." His parents had no choice but to let him take the television away.

In fact, parents often become angry when treated unkindly by their children. Recently, I visited several nursing homes for seniors with various conditions, both good and bad. One common observation was that many seniors were unsociable. When I knocked on some residents' doors, they initially refused to come out, and when they finally opened the door, they only complained about everything. They believed that everyone was dishonest and untrustworthy. Even when we offered them gifts with loving-kindness, they still did not trust us. Why were they like this? It is likely because their children, whom they once trusted the most, have abandoned them. So, who else is worthy of their trust?

Understanding this, parents do not have to become too attached to their children. As Patrul Rinpoche says, at best, children might contribute to others' success but bring nothing to their parents. If things go wrong, they may return home, bringing shame and sorrow to the family.¹⁰⁴

As for other relatives and friends, they treat us like we are gods as long as we are doing well. They offer help and give us things we do not even need. But when life takes a turn for the worse, even though we have done them no harm, they turn against us, treating us like enemies and responding to kindness with hostility.

Thus, we should not become too attached to our children, family, or friends. *Jataka Stories of the Bodhisattva* states:

Wealth and prosperity are the source of many sufferings;
Having a family and affection is akin to being in a prison.

Wealth and prosperity are impermanent, and if we cling to them, they will

¹⁰⁴ In traditional Asian cultures, a bride, accompanied by her dowry, joins her husband's family. If the marriage fails, she will return to her parents' house.

lead to various sufferings. Kinship and affection are also illusory, and if we cling to them, we will only trap ourselves in the prison of samsara.

People's attitudes toward relationships in society are quite pragmatic. A person may have had many people around them before retirement, but no one is there afterward. Someone who once had numerous supporters before retirement may find no one offering help afterward. The morality in our society is deteriorating. Many people, after leaving their official positions, often lament that "once a person departs, the tea cools down." Therefore, if you can understand the relevant teachings of the Buddha, you will not become overly attached to many people and things.

Here is a story from *Sutralankara*:

A man named Samkhabhatta was born into a wealthy family, but as he grew up, the family's financial situation deteriorated, and they eventually became destitute. After this, all his relatives and friends neglected and even disparaged him, failing to treat him properly. Feeling dejected, Samkhabhatta left his hometown for another country in search of a livelihood. After years of hard work, he amassed a large fortune and set out to return to his hometown.

When his relatives and friends heard the news, they immediately changed their attitude and waited along the road with food and flowers. Aware of this, Samkhabhatta deliberately dressed in rags and mingled with the servants walking in front. During his time of great poverty, he was a young man; by the time he had acquired his wealth, he was already an old man, so nobody from his hometown could recognize him.

His relatives and friends asked him, "Where is Samkhabhatta, the rich man returning to his hometown with a fortune?"

He replied, "He is behind."

They then asked those walking behind him, "Which one is Samkhabhatta?"

"The one in front whom you just spoke to."

The relatives and friends returned to him and asked, "Why did you do this?"

He replied, "The Samkhabhatta you wish to see is on the camel behind me. When I was poor, you turned your backs on me. But now you come to welcome me in haste. In fact, you are not here to welcome me, but to welcome my wealth and property, which are on the back of the camel."

Thus, compliments and respect from your relatives and friends may not be sincere; there may be a hidden agenda. A tulku went to America and lived there for fifty or sixty years before returning to his hometown. When he finally managed to come back, his relatives and friends were so excited that they made a great effort to welcome him. However, when the tulku returned, perhaps because he was a Dharma practitioner, he did not give any money to the crowd. He simply had a casual meeting with them. Then, when the tulku left, no one saw him off.

Therefore, it is difficult to discern who is a friend and who is a foe in real life. Here is a story from the *Tales of Effendi*:

When Effendi was governor, many people visited him regularly. One day, his neighbor asked, “You always have so many guests. How many friends do you have?” Effendi replied, “I will tell you the answer when I am no longer the governor.” He was well aware that once he stepped down, he would not have as many so-called friends anymore. Consequently, Effendi felt there was no meaning whatsoever in clinging to family and friends.

Milarepa offers valuable advice about severing attachments to family and friends. During his retreat practice in a hermitage cave, Milarepa once asked for alms and was invited to an elderly couple’s home to accept their offerings. The couple noticed Milarepa was a practitioner and asked him, “Where are you from? Do you have a family?” Milarepa answered, “I left my hometown, so I do not have any family. I am just a beggar now.” Upon hearing this, the couple said, “We do not have children either, so you can be our foster son! We have a piece of good land that you can work on. You can marry a good woman and then have a lovely son. By doing so, you’ll soon have a family, relatives, and friends.”

Milarepa replied, “I need none of them. I cannot wait to forsake them!” Then, Milarepa said:

At first, your son is like a delightful little god;
You love him so deeply that it feels unbearable.
In the middle, he fiercely demands his due;
You give him everything you have, yet he is never satisfied.
One day, he brings home another man’s daughter,
Pushing his loving parents out of the house.
When his father calls him, he does not bother to respond.
When his mother calls him, he does not even hear her.

In the end, he becomes like a stranger next door.
 You sacrifice yourself to nourish a swindler like him.
 How disheartening it is to raise your own enemies!
 I have shed this harness that binds us to samsara.
 I have no desire to have any of these worldly sons.

The old couple continued, “It is true that a son may become an enemy, so you should have a daughter instead.” Milarepa also continued to sing:

At first, your daughter is like an enchanting little goddess,
 Imperiously claiming all your best possessions.
 In the middle, she constantly demands her due:
 She openly requests things from her father,
 While secretly taking from her mother.
 Never content with what she receives,
 She becomes a source of anguish for her kindly parents.
 In the end, she is like a red-faced ogress:
 At best, she becomes an asset to someone else,
 At worst, she brings misfortune upon her own family.
 How exasperating she is, this ravaging monster!
 I have abandoned this incurable sorrow.
 I do not wish for a daughter who would lead me to ruin.

The old couple did not give up, so they continued trying to persuade Milarepa, saying, “It does not matter if you have no children, but if you do not even have a relative, you will be bullied everywhere.”

Milarepa shook his head and sang:

At first, friends greet you with joyful smiles,
 Filling the whole valley with cheerful invitations: “Come in!”
 and “Sit down!”
 In the middle, they repay your hospitality with meat and beer,
 Item for item, perfectly tit for tat.
 In the end, they bring conflict, driven by hatred or attachment.
 How vexing are such evil friends with all their quarrels!
 I have chosen to forgo dining companions from those carefree

days.

I no longer desire any worldly friends.

This occurs in both Tibetan and Han regions. Initially, relatives and friends welcome you with immense joy and hospitality. However, as time goes on, they invoke the principle of reciprocity, expecting you to repay what you have received. Eventually, the relationship deteriorates, and conflicts may arise. Such is the nature of our worldly relatives and friends, so there is no need to yearn for them.

In short, we should not cling to sons, daughters, relatives, friends, and the like. This non-attachment is called “renouncing this life.” Although it is difficult to achieve, we practitioners must gradually detach ourselves from our attachment to loved ones, especially after understanding the fear of losing them. Otherwise, if you spend each day fixated on your children, parents, and friends, you will not have enough time to practice the Dharma. Consequently, loving-kindness and great compassion will not emerge in your mind.

Of course, it is unrealistic for lay practitioners to renounce everything and abandon their children, family, and relatives. Nevertheless, you should avoid excessive attachment. After all, gathering, dispersing, separating, and reuniting are constants in samsara.

Understanding this, your practice will undoubtedly progress well. Otherwise, if, after practicing for a long time, you still feel such pain or even prefer to die upon losing a loved one, it indicates that you are not a true practitioner.

So please, meditate diligently on the fear of losing loved ones.



Lesson 55

“There is not one of us in the world ... You will destroy the delusion of clinging to any of it as real.” [page 89–92]

Now we continue with the seventh of the eight streams of suffering: the suffering of not getting what one wants.

Worldly people have unlimited desires and pursue various goals in accordance with their careers, social status, hobbies, identities, and so on. They suffer when they do not attain what they want, including wealth, position, beauty, and more. Their suffering is known as “the suffering of not getting what one wants.” The *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* states:

You want to attain something pleasant,
But you fail to achieve what you desire—
This results in various forms of suffering,
Which is referred to as the suffering of not getting what one
wants.

In my daily interactions with people, I often encounter individuals who are experiencing various pains, troubles, and worries. These issues typically stem from their inability to obtain what they desire. In today’s world, where people are exposed to a wealth of information and experiences, it is common for them to have numerous desires and wants. Some feel quite sad when they see others with luxury clothing, gourmet food, extravagant houses, and expensive cars that they themselves do not possess.

In contrast, Buddhists—especially those who have meditated on the sufferings of samsara—differ significantly because they are not particularly attached to worldly pursuits. If causes and conditions permit and a Buddhist possesses such items, they may enjoy them. However, if a Buddhist is unable to acquire them, they simply accept reality and do not insist on obtaining them.

In this era, we truly need spiritual wealth that provides us with the strength to confront the challenges we encounter in life. Otherwise, if a person's desires remain unfulfilled, they are likely to feel profoundly unhappy and worthless, resulting in increased mental pressure and disorientation.

As you may know, there is often a gap between what you want and what you actually receive, so it is normal for many wishes to go unfulfilled. The *Commentary on the Benevolent King Sutra*¹⁰⁵ states:

When things go against one's will,
One experiences the suffering of not getting what one wants.

When worldly individuals cannot achieve their goals, they often feel sad, as expressed in the *Sutra of the Collection of the Six Perfections*:

When things go against one's will,
One is troubled by worries and sadness.

Such worries and sadness are unnecessary. If you have studied the Mahayana doctrines, your mind will become broad and open. You will not be excessively joyful when you attain what you desire, nor will you be disheartened when you fail to achieve it. This is because you understand that everything is subject to causes and conditions. When causes and conditions come together, you can effortlessly reach your goals; when they do not, you cannot achieve your goals no matter how hard you try.

Therefore, for those who feel disheartened, Dharma is the healing elixir that can mend emotional wounds and protect them from further hurt. As long as we are mentally healthy, even if we are physically unhealthy, things will not go too badly. Of course, the happiest person enjoys both mental and physical health. With both types of health, even without wealth, social status, or material possessions, we can still lead a happy life.

¹⁰⁵ The commentary is by Master Jizang (549–623), a Persian-Chinese Buddhist monk and scholar who is often regarded as the founder of East Asian Mādhyamaka.

Conversely, even if we have good accommodations, eat well, and dress nicely every day, if we constantly experience mental torment, our external conditions will not bring us happiness. This is why many dedication prayers focus on “having mental and physical health,” which is an essential supportive condition for our Dharma practice.

In fact, adopting Buddhist perspectives on compassion and the value of life can significantly improve one’s mental health. Some individuals once led chaotic lives, plagued by challenges and difficult relationships. However, after studying the Dharma, they came to understand that everything is subject to causes and conditions. With this insight, they can easily let go of attachments to many things.

2.1.3.2.4.2.7. The Suffering of Not Getting What One Wants

Every one of us in this world wants to be happy, yet none of us truly get what we want. For example, a family striving for comfort may build a house, only for it to collapse and claim their lives. Similarly, someone may eat to satisfy their hunger, but the food could make them sick and even threaten their life. A patient might take medicine to recover from illness, but the side effects could be fatal. Soldiers march into battle with hopes of victory, only to be swiftly killed. A group of merchants embarks on a trading journey with high expectations of profit, only to be ambushed and left destitute.

People all have their own goals. For example, farmers seek a bountiful harvest, students strive for academic success, and civil servants aim for promotions. Among these goals, I find the goal of a Mahayanist to be the most extraordinary. Why is that? First, it takes a long time to achieve this goal—from the moment of generating the initial aspiration to the moment of attaining Buddhahood. Second, its scope is immense—it encompasses all beings in the three realms. In comparison, those who are considered “the greatest men of the world” have only assisted a limited number of individuals, so their motivation cannot be compared to that of a true Mahayanist.

A Dharma master once said:

The greater the aspiration, the stronger the power.

That saying really resonates with me. Indeed, driven by such belief and determination, the scale of her Dharma activities is incredibly vast. Therefore, to

assess whether a person can achieve something, the key is to examine whether that person has a great aspiration.

If it is a great aspiration, such as a desire to help all beings who are suffering in this world, then their capacity and opportunities will eventually arise. In a short time, the relevant causes and conditions will also ripen. In contrast, if a person's thoughts are solely focused on living a comfortable life for themselves, then their actions will be centered only around this goal.

In fact, the suffering of not getting what one wants often stems from narrow-minded thinking. When a person is solely focused on themselves, they become distressed when they fail to attain what they want, such as wealth and social status. With the exception of enlightened individuals, most of us shed tears primarily for our own sake and seldom for others. It is our intense attachment to ourselves that leads to the suffering of not getting what we want.

No matter how much effort and energy people invest in seeking happiness and wealth in this life, they cannot even fulfill their basic needs, such as satisfying immediate hunger, if the potential for such outcomes has not been created through actions in their past lives.

I have a relative who has been striving for success his entire life. Recently, I encountered him in a monastery, and it appears he still has not attained the happiness and wealth he has been pursuing. As you can see, even fulfilling a small wish requires causes and conditions from previous lives.

This applies to both monastics and laypeople. Even if people share the same opportunities and external circumstances, what ultimately happens to them can be very different due to their varying merits. Even students taught by the same teacher and children born to the same parents lead vastly different lives. Therefore, we must acknowledge that, in order to get what we want, causes and conditions from past lives are essential, in addition to hard work.

Here is a story from a sutra:

Once upon a time, there were many wealthy men living in the Indian city of Rajgir. Among them, those who possessed fortunes of one hundred million units of currency resided in a prestigious district known as "One Hundred Million Units." In order to be included in the district, one businessman worked tirelessly, lived frugally, and dedicated his entire life to amassing wealth.

After decades of hard work, his wealth was nearing one hundred million units,

but the businessman fell ill from overwork. Before his death, he expressed to his wife his hope that their young son would inherit his determination and become a wealthy man with a fortune of one hundred million units.

After her husband's death, his wife shared his wish with their son, tears in her eyes. Upon hearing his mother's words, the son asked her to transfer the businessman's wealth and property to him, promising that he would soon reside in the district of "One Hundred Million Units." Trusting him, his mother gave him all the wealth and property.

However, it turned out that the son used his wealth and property to make generous offerings to the Three Jewels and to help the poor. Within six months, he had given away everything he once owned. Even worse, the son became seriously ill and died a few days later. When the businessman's wife learned that she had lost both her wealth and her son, she was heartbroken.

However, thanks to his generous nature, the son was soon reborn into the family of the wealthiest man in the "one hundred million units" district. The richest man, who had previously been childless and was now eighty years old, was overjoyed to finally have a son. However, the newborn son exhibited some peculiar behavior: he refused to eat, regardless of who was feeding him. Concerned for their newborn's well-being, the parents searched diligently for a solution.

Word of the newborn spread quickly. When the late businessman's wife heard the news, she visited the richest man's house out of curiosity to try feeding the child. It turned out that as soon as the newborn was in her arms, he began to eat. The richest man was so happy that, after discussing it with his wife, he decided to have the businessman's wife live with them so she could care for the newborn son.

One day, while in the arms of the businessman's wife, the newborn suddenly spoke to her, saying, "Don't you know me?" This startled her. The newborn continued, "Do not be afraid. I was your son. Because of my merit in making offerings, I was reborn into the richest family in this district. The merit of generosity is incredible!"

Thus, each of us must acknowledge the significance of the aspirations and causes from previous lives. Some Buddhists' speech and actions suggest that they solely prioritize happiness in this life and are indifferent to future lives, which aligns with materialistic views. Their way of living is as detrimental as that of those who prioritize only today and disregard tomorrow. Of course, this is also related to

one's worldly education and upbringing. In this context, many individuals claim to accept the existence of rebirth, but they merely talk the talk. They do not truly take action to accumulate merit for future lives, which is unreasonable.

Eminent masters of the past tell us repeatedly:

A single spark of merit is worth more than a mountain of effort.

If one lacks merit, no matter how much great effort they exert in doing something, it will not have a significant effect. It would be better to accumulate some merit. Therefore, hard work alone may not lead to great accomplishments. While working hard, you may request a chanting service or engage in virtuous deeds as a way to accumulate merits. By doing so, the power of favorable circumstances will grow stronger.

What, then, is the point of engaging in endless samsaric pursuits? The countless efforts we have made in samsara since beginningless time, striving to fulfill our desires, have only resulted in suffering. If we had directed even a fraction of the energy spent on worldly goals during just one lifetime toward practicing the Dharma, we would already have attained Buddhahood. Even if not fully enlightened, we would at least have ensured freedom from the sufferings of the lower realms.

Many taxi drivers at Larung Gar rise at three or four a.m. every morning and continue working until eleven or twelve at night. Their daily focus is on making money. Sometimes they do not even return home at night, instead sleeping in their cars.

When they wake up in the morning, they promptly dive into work, asking, "Dear Lama, do you need a ride to Trango?" or "Dear Lama, would you like to go to Barkam?" Just imagine if they were to wake up at three or four every morning to engage in bodhicitta practice and diligently work for the benefit of all sentient beings. Within just a decade or so, they would attain high levels of realization. Even if they had not achieved Buddhahood, they would at least gain insight into the nature of life.

However, worldly people devote all their minds and energy to meaningless pursuits. In particular, they become most attached to romantic relationships, which, as noted in a book, are like a magic trick that squanders their time, youth, and wealth, ultimately leaving them with nothing.

In the end, when you face death, what have you really gained? Nothing! Even if you are a billionaire, you will not carry a single penny with you upon your death. Even if you are the president of a country governing millions of people, you cannot bring anyone with you when you pass away. Hence, the Buddha's teachings on birth, aging, sickness, death, and more are logically persuasive. These teachings are not merely imposed on us. A wise person should be able to embrace the teachings of Buddhism simply because they recognize that these teachings convey the truth.

To put these teachings into practice, we should meditate in this way: now that we understand the distinction between what is beneficial and what is not, let us abandon high expectations for samsaric pursuits that are destined to fail. Instead, we should devote ourselves to practicing the true Dharma, where success is assured.

Of course, we may not be able to devote one hundred percent of our energy to practicing the Dharma as past Kadampa and Nyingma masters did. It is already commendable for an urban dweller to spend half a day or one day each week studying the Dharma. Some urban dwellers surprise themselves, saying, "I used to spend all my spare time eating, drinking, and playing, but now I dedicate half a day each week to the Dharma. How wonderful!"

Indeed, you have improved significantly compared to your past habits. However, you only spend half a day out of seven on the Dharma, and you are still wasting time during the remaining six and a half days. Additionally, your "half a day on the Dharma" might only refer to listening to two classes that last a total of two hours. In this way, you are still far from being a true practitioner.

In comparison, monastics at Larung Gar engage in hearing, contemplation, and meditation from morning to evening, rarely wasting their time. Most of them have a rigorous schedule.

Yesterday, a Dharma student told me, "Ah! We need to listen to teachings, recite Buddhist texts, give presentations, and attend tutoring sessions... My ears are so busy!"

It is perfectly fine to be busy like this. After all, everything this person engages in is related to the Dharma. If he can continue doing such activities and study the Dharma for as long as he lives, he will not be overly attached to worldly concerns and will feel more confident about death.

Therefore, we should cherish our time. Although it is challenging to completely

forgo worldly concerns, it is still better to spend more time on Dharma practice. This is very important for everyone!

2.1.3.2.4.2.8. The Suffering of Encountering What One does Not Want

None of us in this world wish to encounter suffering, yet it is an unavoidable part of our experience, whether we want it or not. For example, we do not want to get sick or be constrained by others. But when karmic retribution is at play, except for enlightened beings who are beyond life and death, none of us can escape. Even if we do not want to experience pain, we have no choice.

Some people, due to their past actions, find themselves under the control of a particular ruler or enslaved by a wealthy individual. In today's world, this manifests as being employees of certain entrepreneurs. Against their will, these individuals are entirely subject to the authority of their superiors, with no freedom at all. Even minor mistakes could lead to severe punishment, leaving them powerless to resist. Even if they were being taken to their execution at this very moment, they would know there is no way to escape.

Some individuals do not want to commit crimes or break rules, but due to the force of karma, they often find themselves unable to avoid wrongdoing. Some monastics strive to adhere to pure precepts throughout their lives, but in the presence of karmic retribution, it seems they have little control over their actions.

Through these examples, we can understand the so-called “suffering of encountering what one does not want.”

Take Su Dongpo, for example. Many people know that he was a famous poet, writer, and calligrapher of the Song dynasty, appointed by the Hanlin Academy,¹⁰⁶ and served as the minister of the Ministry of Rites. What is less known is that he was a monk in his previous life. In fact, he himself mentioned this in his poem *The Nanhua Temple*:

I, a practitioner,
Had accumulated merits and practiced diligently in three
lifetimes,

¹⁰⁶ The Hanlin Academy was a prestigious institution established in the 8th century AD in China. Its main functions were to handle secretarial, archival, and literary duties for the court, as well as to provide authoritative interpretations of the Confucian Classics. These classics formed the basis for the civil-service examinations, which were required to enter the upper echelons of the official bureaucracy. The academy remained in operation until 1911.

But let a thought go uncontrolled,
So now I must endure karmic retribution for a hundred years.

It is said that in his previous life, Su Dongpo was a monk named Wujie (the literal meaning of this name is “five precepts”), who had one blind eye and was an abbot. One day, the monk found an abandoned baby girl outside the temple entrance, brought her back, had a monk take care of her, and named her Honglian (which literally means “red lotus”).

Honglian grew up to be a beautiful girl. Once, Wujie saw her and felt lustful thoughts, which eventually led to sexual misconduct. Thus, he broke his precepts. Wujie had a Dharma brother named Mingwu, who, while meditating, recognized that Wujie had broken his precepts. Mingwu then wrote a poem reminding Wujie of his misconduct.

In great shame, Wujie chose to leave the world during a meditation practice. Seeing this, Mingwu thought, “My Dharma brother made a mistake. By doing so, he may become someone who slanders the Dharma in the next life, and then he will never be liberated!”

So Mingwu ended his own life in a sitting posture and followed Wujie to be reborn. Mingwu’s rebirth was as the Chan Master Foyin.

Su Dongpo was said to be the reincarnation of Monk Wujie because there were many suggestive signs in his life. For example, when his mother was pregnant, she dreamed that a monk came to ask for a place to sleep; the monk was quite handsome but had one blind eye. Additionally, before Su Dongpo arrived in Yunzhou,¹⁰⁷ monks Yun’an, Su Zhe, and Cong shared the same dream, in which the three of them went out of town together to welcome Monk Wujie.

According to his personal accounts, when he was eight or nine years old, Su Dongpo dreamed that he was a monk living in Shanxi Province in a previous life. Furthermore, although Su Dongpo was a householder, he liked to wear monastic robes, perhaps as a habit from his previous life. Very often, he wore a monk’s robe under his court clothes.

[People often ask, “Why are there no tulkus in the mainland area of China?” Well, in fact, there are! Su Dongpo is one such example.]

From this story, we learn that Wujie initially upheld pure precepts and was

¹⁰⁷ Su Dongpo was banished to the prefecture of Yunzhou in 1080.

a dedicated practitioner. However, due to negative circumstances, he had to endure suffering in samsara, which adversely impacted his pursuit of liberation. Of course, having been a practicing monk in his past life set Su Dongpo apart from ordinary people. He was well-versed in poetry and Buddhist studies, and he also demonstrated great altruism. As shown, Wujie's life experiences reflected the law of karma.

We constantly encounter what we do not want. As Longchenpa states in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*:

We wish to remain with family and loved ones forever,
Yet, it is inevitable that we will part from them.
We wish to keep our beautiful home forever,
Yet, it is inevitable that we will leave it behind.
We wish to enjoy happiness, wealth, and comfort forever,
Yet, it is inevitable that we will lose them.

As mentioned, we wish to stay with our family and friends forever. However, when impermanence strikes, they may die, or we may have to part from them. Driven by our own karmic forces, we have no choice but to disperse to different places. What remains in the end is only memory. As the poet Li Bai expresses in his *Quiet Night Thought*:

Moonlight before my bed,
Perhaps frost on the ground.
I lift my head and see the moon,
I lower my head and I miss my home.

A monastic may become deeply attached to their monastery, retreat cabin, or Buddhist institute, wishing never to leave. But this thought is unrealistic. From the standpoint of both collective and individual karma, when causes and conditions are exhausted, one cannot stay any longer, let alone indefinitely. The same applies to ordinary people. When a worldly person buys a house, they may feel that it is theirs forever. However, this is not necessarily the case. When impermanence strikes, regardless of how unwilling they may be, they must accept the harsh reality and move out of the house.

Everyone desires a happy life and abundant provisions forever, but when

impermanence arrives, they are bound to lose everything. The *Garland of Examples Adorned by Poetic Fancy* states:

The property in your house is shared by five parties.¹⁰⁸

You may believe it is your property, but over time it may no longer belong to you; someone else could take it away. One might think, “This is my wallet,” but if they accidentally drop it, it will belong to someone else.

Yesterday, a person told me, “I lost my mobile. When I called my number, no one answered at first. Then I called again, and someone picked it up but did not say a word. I called one more time, but the phone was turned off. Why is this happening?”

I replied, “It means your phone is now someone else’s property.” Therefore, even if we do not want to lose our belongings, in the end, we will. These pith instructions from Longchenpa are very profound. Please contemplate them carefully.

Regarding the suffering of encountering what we do not want, Longchenpa continues:

We wish to hold on to this precious human life with its freedoms
and advantages forever,

Yet, it is inevitable that we will die.

We wish to study the Dharma with our qualified teacher forever,

Yet, it is inevitable that we will part from them.

We wish to be with our cherished spiritual friends forever,

Yet, it is inevitable that we will separate from them.

Having a precious human life with freedoms and advantages provides us the opportunity to practice the Dharma. We desire to live forever, but life is short and impermanent, and we have only a few years to truly hear, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma.

The *Samyukta Agama* states:

Realizing that all phenomena are impermanent,

And one’s life is uncertain.

¹⁰⁸ “Five parties” refer to water, fire, thieves, government officials, and the end of one’s life.

Therefore, we practitioners must cherish the opportunity to study the Dharma. Once, a person who developed wrong views toward Buddhism kept telling others, “I quit studying the Dharma!” Although we are not like him, even if we wish to study the Dharma, it is difficult to say how long our precious human life will last.

Disciples wish to remain with their compassionate and altruistic great teacher, but this is impossible. Sometimes it is the teacher who passes into parinirvana, sometimes it is the disciple who passes away, and sometimes, even though both the teacher and disciple are still alive, they must part for various reasons.

Therefore, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted this verse, saying:

We, the teacher and disciples, are gathering together to enjoy
Mahayana Buddhism, but eventually, this will merely be a memory.
Beyond this, everything will be gone.

Indeed, we all want to listen to Dharma teachings in front of our teacher for as long as possible, but this is impossible. Throughout history, there has been no teacher and disciple who were never separated from each other. Therefore, when we have the opportunity to listen to teachings, we must cherish it.

It is so precious to be with good Dharma peers who have renunciation, compassion, and bodhicitta. Although we wish to be with them forever and support each other on the path to enlightenment, it is simply impossible.

Then, Longchenpa offers us a valuable piece of advice:

O my friends who are profoundly disillusioned with samsara,
I, the Dharmaless beggar,¹⁰⁹ urge you:
From this day forward, put on the armor of diligence, for the
moment has arrived
To journey to the Land of Great Bliss where there is no separation.

Understanding the principle of impermanence, we should make a firm aspiration: “From now on, I must put on the armor of diligence and practice the authentic Dharma, so I can reach the Land of Great Bliss, the fruition of Buddhahood.”

Longchenpa also humbly stated:

¹⁰⁹ Tibetan authors often refer to themselves with extreme modesty in this way.

O my Dharma friends who are profoundly disillusioned with samsara, although I am merely a beggar who has not attained realization¹¹⁰, I offer you these sincere instructions.

To summarize, all phenomena arise from causes and conditions. Wealth, material possessions, good health, happiness, and popularity are all the results of positive actions taken in the past. If you have previously cultivated virtuous actions, these benefits will naturally manifest in your life, whether or not you actively seek them.

Khenpo Kyiwang from Nubzur Monastery often said:

Those who have accumulated positive actions in the past can naturally attain happiness no matter where they go, even if they find themselves in prison.

For example, during the Cultural Revolution, many Tibetan Buddhist masters were imprisoned for over ten or twenty years. Some masters with merit lived comfortably in prison with abundant food, while those without merit faced starvation. Thus, those with merit are like King Punyabala, who consistently experienced favorable circumstances anywhere and at any time.

However, without the merit gained through virtuous actions, no amount of effort will yield what you desire; instead, you will end up with what you least want. Therefore, when practicing the Dharma, embrace the boundless wealth of contentment with whatever comes your way. Otherwise, pursuing worldly ambitions while on the spiritual path will only lead to difficulties and reproach from sublime beings.

You should strive to live a simple life filled with contentment. Otherwise, if you have forsaken everything and chosen to engage in Dharma practice, yet remain distracted by worldly pursuits and waste your time idling, you will encounter difficulties and displease the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Dharma protectors. Your vajra peers may also scold you, saying, “This person signed up for the Dharma study group but still gets caught up in other activities. He makes all kinds of excuses and never joins the study.”

Some Dharma students outside Larung Gar study diligently. They have not

¹¹⁰ Dharmaless beggar can also be interpreted as “an effortless yogi without clinging to anything.”

missed a single class in the past two or three years. No matter how busy they are, they manage to keep up with the progress. Bravo!

In contrast, some other Dharma students make various excuses to avoid attending the teachings, such as, “My friend is getting married today,” “My boss is taking us on vacation,” “My father is sick,” or “I have a stomachache.” In doing so, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to study the Dharma. In fact, deceiving others is a form of self-deception!

Perhaps because he witnessed such occurrences during the degenerate age, Milarepa composed a song about this. Here is the story explaining why the song was composed:

There were two geshe named Lodun and Dhar Lho. Dhar Lho did not practice the Dharma well and often spoke of others’ faults using methods of Buddhist logic. Once, he debated Milarepa and was defeated. Consumed by his failure, he died in anger.

Lodun witnessed Dhar Lho’s death. On one hand, he felt afraid and ashamed; on the other, he developed faith in Milarepa. With great reverence, he sought teachings from Milarepa. Consequently, Milarepa provided him with instructions and, while reprimanding him, urged him not to engage in Dharma practice superficially. As Lodun became more capable, Milarepa imparted to him the most profound Vajrayana pith instructions. Lodun then committed to genuine practice and eventually became a great practitioner himself. This story is from *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, which you should read.

Here is what Milarepa told Lodun:

The Buddha, the World-Honored One, imparted teachings
 To let go of the eight worldly concerns.
 But today, those who claim to be learned—
 Haven’t their worldly concerns only increased?
 The Tathagata established the precepts to uphold discipline,
 So that one could sever ties with mundane affairs.
 But today, those monks who observe the precepts—
 Haven’t their worldly matters only grown?
 The Buddha taught how to live like the rishis of old
 So that one could cut ties with family and friends.

But today, those who emulate the rishis—
 Don't they care about how people see them even more than
 before?
 In short, practice without the awareness of death renders any
 Dharma useless.

The Buddha offered 84,000 teachings to help sentient beings eliminate the eight ordinary concerns. However, those who self-claim to be “wise men” often chase after fame, wealth, and honor under the guise of teaching the Dharma. Haven't their ordinary concerns grown even greater than before? Their actions are completely contrary to the Buddha's teachings.

Once, a government official told me, “Some of your monastics go to teahouses, which is against the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni.” I replied, “It should be acceptable for a monastic to visit a teahouse. The Buddha never forbade monastics from drinking tea. However, if one goes to a teahouse to engage in inappropriate behavior, then that is not acceptable.”

Perhaps the official was too demanding of monastics. He viewed the mere sight of a monk outside the monastery as contrary to the Buddha's teachings. He may need to reconsider his perspective. In my opinion, when a monastic engages in self-promotion, pursues the eight ordinary concerns, including fame and wealth, and fails to think of benefiting others, that monastic is acting against the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha established various precepts in the Vinaya so that Buddhist practitioners could generate renunciation and withdraw from worldly trivialities. However, isn't it true that today's practitioners who uphold precepts, whether lay practitioners or monastics, have even more worldly responsibilities than before?

The Buddha set rules regarding monastic deportment to assist monastics in detaching from their friends and family. Yet today's monastics who follow these rules still seem to cling too tightly to their relationships. A monastic may call home every day and, in tears, ask, “May I talk to my mother? May I talk to my sister-in-law? May I talk to my sister?” If a monastic becomes more attached to their family and friends than a worldly person does, this is unreasonable.

After studying the three fundamental types of suffering and the eight streams of suffering, we should all understand the following:

Human beings in these degenerate times, across all four continents—especially here in Jambudvīpa—are completely devoid of even the slightest chance for happiness. Their lives are consumed by suffering.

However, due to their ignorance, many people do not recognize that samsara is filled with suffering. Instead, they believe they are living happy lives because of improved living conditions. As Shantideva says:

Alas indeed that living beings,
Carried on the flood of bitter pain,
However terrible their plight may be,
Do not perceive they suffer so!¹¹¹

They are unaware that behind all these advanced technologies, morality and ethics are declining, while afflictions such as greed, anger, and ignorance are on the rise, causing humans to suffer significantly more than before.

Nowadays, degeneration progresses faster with each passing year, month, day, and even with each meal, morning, and evening. The kalpa continues to deteriorate, bringing increasing decay to the Buddha's teachings and the happiness of beings. Reflect on this deeply and cultivate a sense of disillusionment.

Furthermore, this continent of Jambudvīpa amplifies the effects of actions, making everything—whether good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, noble or trivial, Dharma or otherwise—highly unpredictable. We should closely examine the reality around us and gain clarity about what should be pursued and what should be avoided. We should reflect on the following advice from Longchenpa:

Sometimes, reflect on what you perceive as favorable;
By recognizing them as mere perception, everything you
encounter will become beneficial (to your practice).
Sometimes, reflect on what you perceive as unfavorable;
By doing so, you will understand that they are essential for
cutting through your deluded attachment.
Sometimes, reflect on our Dharma friends and the teachers of
others;
By distinguishing the good from the bad, you will be inspired

¹¹¹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

to practice.

Sometimes, reflect on the miraculous display of the four elements;

By doing so, you will recognize the effortless essence of the mind's true nature.

Sometimes, reflect on your homeland, home, and possessions;

By recognizing them as illusory, you will evoke a sense of disillusionment with your previous perceptions.

Sometimes, reflect on the wealth and possessions of others;

By seeing how pitiful they are, you will abandon samsaric desires.

In short, by examining the nature of all phenomena in all its multiplicity,

You will shatter the delusion of clinging to anything as real.

Now every class at Larung Gar is studying Longchenpa's *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*. During the group study, you should carefully contemplate these supreme instructions and put them into practice, following Longchenpa's guidance.



Lesson 56

“The pleasures and abundance enjoyed ... As fuel for the fires of the Hell of Ultimate Torment.” [page 92–94]

Today we continue with the sufferings in the higher realms, which include humans, asuras, and gods. Beings in the three higher realms are happier than their counterparts in the three lower realms; however, they are not free from suffering. Next, we’ll explain the sufferings of the asuras.

Asuras are also referred to as “the demigods.” According to the *Shurangama Sutra*, four types of asuras are classified based on their mode of birth: from womb, egg, heat and moisture, and miraculous birth. Those asuras born from a womb reside in the human realm; those born from eggs inhabit the realm of pretas; those born from heat and moisture exist in the realm of animals; and those born through miraculous birth dwell in the realm of gods.

According to Master Zhiyi’s *Commentary on the Lotus Sutra*, there are two kinds of asuras:

Those (asuras) in the realm of pretas live near the sea;
Those (asuras) in the realm of animals reside at the bottom of
the sea.

As you can see, descriptions of the asuras vary in Buddhist scriptures.

By studying the sufferings of the asuras, you will understand that they do not possess true happiness, even though they belong to the higher realms. They

far surpass humans in terms of resources, appearances, and abilities, yet they still endure physical and mental torments.

This is similar to wealthy, wise, and powerful humans who, despite being admired by the poor, less intelligent, and powerless, are not exempt from the physical and mental afflictions of the three fundamental sufferings.

Therefore, after studying Mahayana Buddhism, we should know that nowhere in the three worlds is there real happiness. At this very moment, some sentient beings are experiencing the negative effects of their actions; some others are not experiencing suffering but are committing misdeeds that are the causes of suffering. The latter are constantly in the suffering of everything composite; thus, the negative effects of their actions will arise soon. Therefore, by studying the Buddha's teachings, a wise person will deeply understand this verse in the *Lotus Sutra*:

There is no peace in the three worlds,
And (everywhere) is like a house on fire.

2.1.3.2.5. The Asuras

The asuras, or demigods, enjoy pleasures and abundance comparable to those of the gods. However, due to their strong tendencies toward envy, conflict, and aggression carried over from past lives, they experience intense jealousy as soon as they take their current form, driven by the consequences of those past negative actions.

Some individuals on the earth live lives akin to those of an asura. Although they possess both wealth and power, they are consumed by anger, jealousy, and ignorance. They are deeply ensnared by their afflictions and unable to escape suffering, rendering their money and power incapable of bringing them happiness.

As for asuras, even in their own realms, they are constantly embroiled in territorial and provincial disputes, endlessly fighting and arguing among themselves over these conflicts. Some areas in our world have been in conflict for over a decade, leaving the people there in a perpetual state of panic. This is likely due to the fact that their karmic consequences, which would have led to their rebirth as asuras, have instead manifested earlier in the human realm. Speaking of conflict, it is inevitable that ordinary beings experience interpersonal disputes. However, for the sake of this life and future lives, we should strive to get along well with others.

Today's society is vastly different from ancient times. Regardless of whether you are a monastic or a householder, collaboration is essential. If an individual lacks team spirit and refuses to work together, it will be challenging for them to be accepted within a group. Therefore, one's character plays a crucial role. If you possess a forgiving nature and are kind-hearted, you will not only experience fewer negative emotions but also make others feel at ease.

Conversely, if a person has a poor character, a bad temper, and poor practices, they will bring unease and trouble to those around them. We may encounter someone like this—they may appear human, but their inner nature resembles that of an asura. Perhaps they were a soldier in an asura troop in a previous life and have temporarily come to the human realm in this life. Once their task here is complete, they may return to the asura world on Mount Meru to resume their “duties.”

Of course, asuras do possess great karmic merit. *The Sutra of Rebirth in the Six Realms of Samsara* states:

One often engages in acts of insincerity and falsehood,
And favors hatred, boasting, and aggression;
Because one made offerings in the previous life,
One is reborn as an asura.

Thus, only if one practiced generosity in past lives does one have the chance to be born as an asura in this life. We practitioners must carefully observe our minds. If we engage in virtuous actions to accumulate merit while simultaneously harboring intense jealousy and competitiveness, it indicates that we have not tamed our minds despite studying the Dharma. In such cases, we may easily be reborn as asuras in the next life and often find ourselves in conflict with the gods.

Why do asuras make war on the gods? The reason is that when asuras gaze up at the realm of the gods, they see the gods enjoying unmatched wealth and possessions. They also observe that every desire of the gods is fulfilled by a wish-fulfilling tree—whose roots, however, lie in the realm of the asuras. Consumed by unbearable jealousy, they arm themselves and march off to battle against the gods. When the gods realize what is happening, they head to the Forest of Aggression,¹¹² where they too prepare for battle by donning armor and taking up arms.

¹¹² The realm of the gods is characterized in part by the absence of anger and hatred. Here, in order to fight, the gods of the Heaven of the Thirty-three go to a magical forest that incites aggression.

The gods are preoccupied with indulgence and are not aggressive at all. However, upon arriving at the Forest of Aggression, they immediately become aggressive. Some Dharma friends are usually easygoing, but the moment a certain person is mentioned, their expression changes, and they become overwhelmed with anger.

The gods have an elephant named Supremely Steady, who has thirty-three heads. Whenever Indra, the king of the gods, thinks of the elephant, the creature knows it and arrives promptly. Their king, Indra, sits atop the central head of the elephant, surrounded by his ministers positioned on the thirty-two other heads. Around them, countless divine armies of unimaginable brilliance gather, echoing their powerful battle cries.

As the battle begins, a torrent of weapons—vajras, wheels, spears, massive arrows, and more—is unleashed by the gods. Through their magical power, they summon the strength to lift enormous mountains onto their laps and hurl them as missiles. Due to their past karma, the gods are seven times taller than humans, while demigods are significantly smaller. The gods can only be killed by decapitation, as any other injuries they sustain are instantly healed by their divine ambrosia. In contrast, demigods perish like humans when a vital organ is struck, making them inevitably destined to lose the frequent battles they fight.

When the gods, employing one of their many strategies, unleash the elephant called All-Protector, maddened by liquor and wielding a wheel of swords on its trunk, it slaughters hundreds of thousands of demigods. Their bodies cascade down the slopes of Mount Meru, plunging into the Great Exuberant Lakes below, staining the waters a deep red with blood.

The description of how the asuras fight against the gods over the wish-fulfilling tree can be found in many sutras. Additionally, the *Sutra on the Ocean-like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha* offers another reason for the asura-god war:

The ancestor king of the asuras married the daughter of Gandharva¹¹³ (the goddess of music), who soon became pregnant, and eight thousand years later, a baby girl was born. The girl was exceptionally beautiful, her beauty unmatched by anyone. Indra fell in love with her and proposed marriage. The king of the asuras was delighted and readily agreed to the union.

¹¹³ Gandharva is a class of celestial beings whose males are divine singers and females are divine dancers.

Indra married the asura king's daughter and bestowed upon her the name "Pleasant Wish." He lavished her with affection in every way. One day, Indra visited the Joyful Garden and played with many palace maids in a pool.

Seeing this, Pleasant Wish was consumed by jealousy and secretly sent five Yakshas to deliver her complaint to her father. The message they carried was, "Indra does not love your daughter anymore. He has abandoned me to play with palace maids in a pool. Please help me!"

The asura king was furious, so he immediately led his army to the god realm. After a fierce battle, the asuras defeated Indra.

Indra had to hide in various places and was in a difficult situation. Then a god reminded him, "You are a lay disciple of the Buddha. The Buddha once said that in times of great difficulty, you can chant the Prajnaparamita mantra, which can dispel all obstacles." Indra then began to chant, "*Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha.*"

Suddenly, four great wheels of blades flew through the air and severed the asura king's nose, ears, hands, and feet. The severed body parts fell into the sea, staining the water with blood. The asura king was horrified. With no other options, he had to hide himself in the hole of a lotus root. The first asura-god war was over.

However, the war did not end there. It is said that many years later, Indra fell in love with another daughter of the asura king, so he sent a goddess of music to propose marriage on his behalf. The asura king felt that Indra had insulted him beyond measure, so he immediately sent his troops to attack the gods again. As the asuras were about to overtake the palace of the gods, Indra remembered to use the mantra once more. Due to the power of the mantra, the asura troops were defeated again, and the asura king had to hide himself once more in the hole of a lotus root.

[When eating a dish of lotus roots, make sure to check the holes! An asura king might be hiding inside. According to some Buddhist scriptures, the asura king can be taller than Mount Meru, but through his magical powers, he can sometimes shrink to the size of an ant.]

Indra took over the city of the asuras but did not find the asura king. Noticing the many asura girls in the city, Indra took all of them away. Subsequently, the asura king sent an ambassador to negotiate a truce. The ambassador mentioned that Indra was the Buddha's disciple and should not break the precept against stealing.

Indra thought about it and realized he needed to do the right thing, so he

promised to release all the asura girls and also offered divine ambrosia as compensation. The asura king, in turn, offered his daughter to Indra and voluntarily took refuge, becoming a disciple of the Buddha. Thus, the asura-god war came to an end.

As you can see, the asura king possesses incredible power. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* presents two accounts in which the asura king covers the moon and the sun with his hands, resulting in a lunar eclipse and a solar eclipse.

The reason the asura king is so powerful is that in a previous life, when he was a brahmin, he successfully extinguished a fire in a stupa to protect it from damage. Due to this virtuous act, he desired a formidable physique in his next life. However, because of this ambition and his fondness for combat, he was reborn as the asura king in the realm of asuras.

From this story, we understand that mantras possess incredible power. For instance, mantras can help gods turn defeat into victory and conquer the asuras. Speaking of the power of mantra, a lama from Qinghai Province comes to mind.

Once, Khenpo Munsel Rinpoche of Qinghai fell seriously ill. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche sent a few Dharma masters, myself included, to visit Munsel Rinpoche and extend well wishes for his long life on behalf of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and Larung Gar Buddhist Academy.

Conditions at Larung Gar were not as favorable as they are today. There was a Jeep, but no one could drive it. We searched around and finally found a Qinghai lama who could drive. He then took us to visit Munsel Rinpoche.

On the way back, before we reached Sertar, it snowed, and the road became slippery. The Qinghai lama was not an experienced driver; he often forgot to brake and drove the Jeep into potholes.

However, he had great faith in the Three Jewels. Whenever a road situation arose and we asked him to brake, he would fervently chant the Padmasambhava mantra for blessings instead of braking the Jeep. Eventually, the Jeep got stuck in a pothole. Although it did not roll over, it tilted significantly. It took us a while to pull the Jeep out of the pothole, but we finally managed to arrive at the town of Nubzig, the site of the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy.

At that time, it was not easy to drive along the uphill road at Larung Gar. So, this time, the Qinghai lama was hesitant to drive, saying, "Ah! The lives of my passengers are more important. I'd better ask the driver of the great Jigme Phuntsok

Rinpoche to replace me.” We encouraged him, saying, “You’ve driven such a long distance; just go uphill.”

But he replied, “No way, no way, this uphill road is too steep. I’d better find someone else.” So, he walked up and found Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s driver to take over the Jeep.

This Qinghai lama is still at Larung Gar. During our trip, he had poor visibility, so whenever he saw large rocks on the road, he would scream “Ah!” and brake suddenly. He drove not based on his skills, but through the power of prayers (*the audience laughs*).

Let’s return to the text. The fundamental cause of being reborn as asuras is jealousy. As mentioned before, if you cannot bear to see others doing better than you and become worried and upset, that negative emotion is jealousy.

During the reign of Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing dynasty, there was a palace provisioner named Bai, who was responsible for managing ritual offerings. Bai was one of the eight great martial artists of that time. Once, on his way back to his hometown, he happened to see a boy practicing martial arts before a large rock. Where the boy’s palm struck the rock, sparks of fire were emitted.

“What great *kungfu*!” Bai thought, “There is such a boy living in my hometown! His kung fu is already so impressive. He will easily surpass me when he grows up!”

Driven by unbearable jealousy, Bai struck the boy dead with a single blow. Before he stopped breathing, the boy glared and gnashed his teeth, saying, “You killed me, but my father, the palace provisioner Bai, will avenge me!” Hearing this, Bai felt as if struck by a thunderclap. He then realized he had killed his own son, but it was too late.

Therefore, if you harm others out of jealousy, it will ultimately harm yourself. Shakespeare said, “O beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.” Indeed, when a person is consumed by jealousy, they act without proper consideration, as if possessed by a demon. Thus, when competition arises among classmates, colleagues, or Dharma peers, we must examine our minds. Otherwise, if one’s jealousy is too strong, they can easily be reborn as an asura in the next life.

In the celestial realm, if the power of the asuras increases, the power of the gods will decrease. If the gods are defeated in an asura-god war, all kinds of unfortunate events will occur in the human realm, such as natural and man-made disasters.

The strength of the gods also depends on the extent of virtuous actions performed by humans. If humans engage in more virtuous deeds, not only will everything in the human realm be smooth and auspicious, but the gods' power will increase, enabling them to defeat the asuras. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

If humans practice according to the Dharma,
The gods will triumph, and the asura troops will retreat and be
defeated.

As practitioners, if we do not want to be reborn as asuras, we should frequently contemplate the sufferings of samsara and refrain from aggressive behavior. Some individuals are drawn to themes related to war and weapons and enjoy kung fu stories and films, which is not a healthy habit. Monastics should avoid such interests; otherwise, there is little point in shaving their heads and taking ordination. For lay practitioners, it is not beneficial to frequently watch war-related films or TV shows or to read books about war.

In fact, it is not difficult to be reborn as an asura. According to the *Sutra of Parables*, the asura king was once a poor man in his previous life. He lived by a large river and often crossed it to gather firewood. Because the river was deep with strong waves, he was submerged several times but was fortunate to survive.

One day, he happened to make food offerings to a pratyekabuddha. After the pratyekabuddha finished the meal, he threw his bowl into the air and flew away. Seeing this, the poor man was filled with joy and made an aspiration: "Through this merit, may I be very tall in the next life, so that no deep water can reach my knees." Because of this, he was reborn as one of the four asura kings. Therefore, we should not make aspirations carelessly.

In summary, we should reflect deeply on this: in the realm of asuras, where conflict and strife are unending, true freedom from suffering cannot be found.

2.1.3.2.6. The Gods

The gods live their entire lives in perfect health, comfort, wealth, and happiness. However, they are so preoccupied with distractions that the thought

of practicing the Dharma never crosses their minds. The *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings*¹¹⁴ states:

The gods are often indulgent, attached to pleasures, and deluded
by ignorance.
They do not realize the great suffering that awaits them and will
inevitably experience it.

Some government officials and many millionaires are similar; they either indulge in clubs or occupy themselves with sightseeing, eating, and drinking. Their actions bring no benefit to themselves or others. Alas!

Gods live their long lives, which can span an entire kalpa, without ever considering the practice of Dharma, even for a moment. They spend their entire existence caught up in distractions, only to suddenly confront death unprepared.

As for us humans, during this precious human life, we should not act like the gods, who squander their lives in distraction. Otherwise, when death arrives, we will certainly feel lost and regretful. As stated in the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, the happiness that the gods enjoy is like this:

Just like honey mixed with poison,
It is not edible;
The same is true for celestial happiness,
For at the time of death, great sufferings will follow.

When honey is mixed with poison, although it tastes good, the mixture is not safe to consume. The same applies to celestial happiness; when death arrives, gods will undoubtedly experience excruciating suffering. While celestial happiness is greater than human happiness, its nature and causes render it unworthy of attachment.

Let's now elaborate on this:

All gods residing in the six heavens of the desire realm, from the Heaven of the Four Great Kings up to the one known as Enjoying the Emanations of Others, must eventually face the suffering of death and transmigration. Five signs indicate that a god's death is approaching:

¹¹⁴ Skt. Dharmasamuccaya

First, the radiant glow of his body, which once shone visibly from a great distance, begins to fade.

Second, the throne that once brought him endless comfort now fails to satisfy him; he feels restless and uneasy sitting upon it. Some practitioners experience similar restlessness. They dine here today and there tomorrow, never wanting to stay at home. They are as restless as those gods.

Third, the flower garlands that once remained fresh and vibrant, no matter how much time passed, now wither.

Fourth, the garments that always stayed clean and fresh, no matter how long he wore them, become worn out, dirty, and begin to emit an odor.

Finally, his body, which had never perspired before, starts to sweat.

[There are various descriptions in Buddhist scriptures regarding the five signs that foreshadow the death of a god.]

When these five signs of impending death manifest, the god is tormented by the painful realization that his life is nearing its end. His celestial companions and beloved consorts, aware of his fate, can no longer approach him. Instead, they maintain their distance, scattering flowers and offering their parting wishes: “May you be reborn as a human after you depart from this realm. May you perform virtuous deeds and once again attain rebirth among the gods.” With these words, they leave him behind. Left completely alone, the dying god is overwhelmed with sorrow.

These celestial companions and beloved consorts are not kind! They resemble undutiful children in today’s society who do not even bother to make a call or visit the hospital when their parent dies.

Moreover, most gods are likely to fall into the lower realms in their next life. This is primarily attributed to their adoption of wrong views at the moment of death or their indulgent and excessive lifestyles as gods. With his divine vision, he perceives where he will be reborn. If it is in a place of suffering, the fear and anguish of his downfall consume him even before his current life has fully ended. As his suffering intensifies, doubling and tripling in severity, he is overwhelmed with despair and spends seven days grieving. However, in the realm of the gods of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, seven days feel like seven hundred years to humans.

The Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings says:

Gods indulge in sensory pleasures,
(Their happiness) swiftly disappears like a waterfall;
Their lifespan is but a fleeting moment,
Yet they are too ignorant to know it.

Gods continuously indulge in sensory pleasures, which vanish as swiftly as a waterfall. However, they remain unaware of this. It is only as they approach death that they finally realize, “How ignorant I am! I wasted my life indulging myself and never engaged in any virtuous deeds.”

It is difficult for gods to perform virtuous acts. Except for those divine beings who are actual emanations of bodhisattvas, most gods are unable to even recite the mani mantra once. Therefore, the *Sutra of Individual Liberation* states that a human life is far superior to a god life.

In the human realm, regardless of how busy and distracted a person may be, they can still find ways to make offerings, engage in charitable activities, practice the Dharma, and more. These actions lay the foundation for a fortunate next life. However, the situation is quite different in the god realm. Gods squander their lives on distractions and neglect the practice of Dharma. As a result, they will eventually be consumed by immense remorse at the moment of death.

Therefore, the Buddha urges us to internalize the principle of impermanence. The *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings* states:

All sentient beings should realize the principle of impermanence:
Living beings will be devoured by death,
Prosperity will be overshadowed by decay.

Why is this? Because every living being, whether from the god realm or the human realm, will eventually be devoured by death. Prosperity and wealth will inevitably diminish to nothing, and nothing will remain.

During that time, the god reflects on the happiness and comfort he once had, realizing he cannot hold onto it. This brings deep sorrow as he experiences the suffering of transmigration. Simultaneously, he looks ahead and sees the painful future that awaits him, filling him with fear and despair. The combined pain of losing everything and dreading what is to come is even worse than the suffering in the hell realms.

We may think that the gods live in the celestial realm, so they must be happy. However, this is not the case. When gods undergo transmigration and approach death, they endure immense suffering, just like those corrupt officials in the human realm whose illicit deeds have been exposed. Even if these corrupt officials have not yet been imprisoned, they are filled with remorse, and some even commit suicide by jumping from high-rise buildings. They do this because they have lived excessively indulgent lives and cannot face the impending punishment and suffering.

Nevertheless, the reason corrupt officials commit suicide is also attributed to their lack of awareness of the Buddha's teachings. If they had studied Mahayana Buddhism, even if they ended up in prison, they would have understood that everything is impermanent; they would have known that being greatly respected in the past, but now being imprisoned and bad-mouthed, is completely normal. Thus, as long as we possess the power of the Dharma, we have the courage to face any challenges that come our way.

The suffering described above applies to gods in the desire realm. In the higher divine realms—the form realm and formless realm—there are no obvious sufferings of death and transmigration. However, once the good karma that brought them there runs out, these gods suddenly fall into lower realms, as if waking from a dream. This is their suffering, as Nagarjuna says in *Letter to a Friend*:

Understand that even Brahma himself,
After attaining happiness free from attachment,
Will still face unending suffering,
Serving as fuel for the fires of the Hell of Ultimate Torment.

The Mahasangha Vinaya (Great Canon of Monastic Rules) also states:

Gods and humans, and all sentient beings,
Are all constrained by afflictions, and
Will fall into lower realms after death.

Of course, it may be difficult for some to grasp the sufferings of the asuras and the gods. However, if we use the sufferings in the human realm as a reference point, it may be easier to comprehend their sufferings. For example, people today pursue material possessions such as houses and cars. On the surface, they seem to enjoy what they have, but in reality, they are not happy.

As I recently mentioned, the twentieth century was marked by numerous bloody conflicts between countries and peoples, while the twenty-first century is plagued by widespread afflictions. In this era, although material civilization is advancing rapidly, spiritual civilization is becoming barren and desolate. For instance, the construction of the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth ring roads around a major city exemplifies the increasing greed of humanity.

What people experience behind material development is often stress and pain, not happiness. For many, it has become imperative to raise a family and pay for cars, mobile phones, homes, and similar expenses. These necessities cannot be obtained without work and money. Take buying and owning a car, for example; not everyone can afford the associated costs.

According to a survey in Guangzhou, individuals with a monthly salary of 2,000 yuan fall into the category of “unable to afford a car.” Those earning 3,000 yuan are classified as “able to afford a car but not maintain it.” People with a monthly salary of 4,000 yuan can “afford to buy and keep a car worth 100,000 yuan,” while those earning 6,000 yuan can “buy and keep a car worth 150,000 yuan.” Last, individuals with a monthly salary exceeding 10,000 yuan can “buy and keep a car worth 200,000 yuan.” This survey highlights the challenges of car ownership.

Empirical data indicate that the overall cost of owning a car, from purchase to disposal, is approximately double the initial purchase price. For instance, if you invest 200,000 yuan in a car, you may incur additional expenses totaling 400,000 yuan over its use, including insurance, maintenance, tolls, and other costs. At times, the cost of purchasing a parking space alone can exceed that of buying the car itself.

Moreover, even if you can afford to buy and maintain a car, you often face traffic jams when driving in the city. Consequently, in 2009, the prototype of a “flying car” was first developed in the US. This vehicle is designed to function as both a personal road vehicle and an aircraft, intended to bypass traffic congestion on the road.

The vehicle attracted global attention and has already received many orders. The company announced that the flying car would be produced in large quantities for a formal launch in two years. If that really happens, then the “flying cars” will be buzzing around like bees and could potentially lead to midair collisions, causing people even greater suffering.

Consequently, those residing in urban areas encounter various challenges. In

the past, individuals lived in rural regions where their basic needs revolved solely around food and clothing. However, times have changed. Nowadays, people have responsibilities toward both living beings, such as their families, and non-living beings, such as their cars and houses. Looking ahead, one can only speculate about the circumstances humans will ultimately face.

The aforementioned sufferings of human beings are clearly visible, making them easy to understand. The sufferings of gods, asuras, and hell beings remain invisible to our naked eyes, but we can learn about them through scriptural evidence. Therefore, after studying these teachings, we should recognize that there is no true happiness in samsara. Thus, we should not develop any hope in samsara. It is akin to being a prisoner: no matter how pleasant the conditions in a prison cell may be, it is still a prison. It is better to return home and enjoy freedom.

Similarly, even if we, as living beings in samsara, possess wealth, houses, social status, power, family, and enjoyment at this moment, these will eventually leave us. Therefore, we should not cling to them. Instead, we should strive to be free from samsara and attain the fruition of a Buddha or a bodhisattva. If we can give rise to such genuine renunciation, our Dharma practice can be a perfect success.



Lesson 57

“Wherever we are born throughout the six realms ...as the disciple with the best control over the sense-doors.” [page 94–96]

We studied the sufferings in the six respective realms in the chapter “The Defects of Samsara.” Yesterday, we discussed the sufferings in the realm of gods, which is the last of the six realms. As mentioned in Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*, gods, despite experiencing temporary happiness, will ultimately fall into the lower realms and endure ceaseless suffering.

The *Sutra of the Parables* includes a story about a god being reborn in the animal realm.

Once, the Buddha and his disciples went out to beg for food. Along the way, they came across an old sow and her piglets lying in a filthy pit. Upon seeing this, the Buddha smiled, and light radiated from his teeth. The light circled around the Buddha three times before dissolving into his chest.

Ananda noticed the Buddha’s unexpected smile and approached him to ask its meaning. [The Buddha was unlike us, who giggle and cry for no reason. There was always a reason for the Buddha’s expressions of sadness or joy.]

The Buddha then shared this story with Ananda and the other monks:

Many kalpas ago, there was a wealthy man who had no son, only a daughter. His daughter was stately and intelligent, and her parents loved her dearly. As she grew up, she did not indulge in worldly pleasures like other women; instead, she sought the true nature of life, contemplating the issues of samsara.

Then she questioned her parents, saying, “Everything is like flowing water. Where do suffering and happiness in this world come from? When will they cease?” Hearing this, her parents were impressed by their daughter’s intelligence and wisdom, but they could not answer her questions.

Because her questions remained unanswered, the daughter felt unhappy. Her parents then made a generous offering on her behalf and invited brahmins and wise elders from various places. They filled a plate with seven types of treasures and announced they would give the plate to the person who could answer the questions.

At that time, a good-looking man with little wisdom, greedy for the treasures, recklessly declared, “I have the answer!” The daughter then repeated her questions: “Everything is like flowing water. Where do suffering and happiness in this world come from? When will they cease?”

This man didn’t understand the question at all, so he spoke gibberish, saying, “Everything is void and nothingness!”

The daughter contemplated this and immediately attained a state of nothingness.¹¹⁵ She then exclaimed, “You are a true master! Your answer benefits me greatly!”

Later, she was reborn in the perception sphere of Nothing Whatsoever in the formless realm and remained in this meditative state for forty great kalpas. After her merit in the celestial realm was exhausted, she was reborn in the lower realm and became this old sow.

Back then, she did not have the merit necessary to encounter a truly qualified teacher. Had she been guided by a great teacher, she might have swiftly attained realization and liberation. Nevertheless, although she practiced meditation, she lacked wisdom, and when the fruition of her meditation was depleted, she fell into a lower realm.

Therefore, it is crucial to encounter a qualified teacher. Otherwise, if you only come across an ordinary knowledgeable individual who teaches you the concept of emptiness and some worldly meditation techniques, the instruction may provide a temporary sense of satisfaction, but it will not genuinely guide you toward the path of liberation. Ultimately, this very teaching may even lead to your rebirth as an animal. How meaningless this would be!

¹¹⁵ Skt. ākīṃcanyāyatana; Tib. ཅི་ཡང་ཅེད་པ་

Thus, we must all understand that to attain liberation, we must study and realize emptiness. These days, some Dharma masters merely discuss texts related to traditional Chinese culture, such as *Di Zi Gui* (*The Principles of Disciples*) and the *Thousand Character Classic*. Others propagate simplistic doctrines that help accumulate merit in the human and god realms and suggest practices like releasing lives, adopting vegetarian diets, worshipping the Buddha, and reciting mantras. Without studying and realizing emptiness, it is impossible for sentient beings to be liberated from samsara.

Some people practice worldly yoga or various forms of meditation that can temporarily calm their restless thoughts. However, can these practices truly free them from samsara? It seems highly unlikely. Even if a person is reborn in the celestial realm, they remain trapped within the cycles of rebirth in samsara. Asvaghosa states in *Buddhacharita* or the *Acts of the Buddha*:

The cyclic life and death of beings in the five realms¹¹⁶
Are like stars rotating around;
Even celestial beings undergo change and decline,
So how can humans remain constant?

Thus, we should cultivate detachment from the cycle of rebirth, including in the celestial realms. Some religions encourage people to aspire to be reborn in a celestial realm like heaven, suggesting it is the highest attainable state. It is acceptable to temporarily hold such an aspiration, but one should not mistake ascending to the heavens as the ultimate liberation.

At present, many people advocate engagement in the ten virtues, which serve merely as a means for rebirth in the human and god realms. Even if you are reborn in the desire realm, the form realm, or the formless realm, you will nevertheless end up falling back into the lower realms. It is like a boulder rolling down a mountain; it will eventually reach the bottom of the slope and will not just stop halfway down.

Similarly, as long as our afflictive obscurations and cognitive obscurations are not eradicated by the illuminating flame of emptiness, when causes and conditions align, the karmic seeds will naturally sprout, having been “nourished” by our self-clinging and mental afflictions. This is akin to how a plant seed sprouts after

¹¹⁶ “Five realms” is an alternative classification of the six realms, with the gods and asuras grouped as one.

being nourished by water, earth, and sunshine. Thus, we continue to spin in the cycles of samsara and can never attain liberation.

Therefore, we should always aspire to attain liberation. The only path toward liberation begins with generating renunciation, abandoning attachment to and yearning for samsara, and vowing not to return to samsara in the next life. It is like a person who falls into a filthy cesspit and finally manages to escape; they will never want to go back again. Similarly, we should generate the same aversion toward samsara.

The best example comes from Patrul Rinpoche's root lama, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, who never experienced even a moment of envy toward fame and wealth. If we can nurture this kind of wisdom, there's hope for our own liberation. However, many people practice Buddhism superficially, with their actions remaining merely on the surface. In this way, it becomes impossible to sever the root of samsara.

Let's move to today's text:

No matter where we are born in the six realms, everything is tied to suffering—it creates suffering, increases suffering, and is driven by suffering. There is nothing beyond it. Life resembles being trapped in a pit of fire, stranded on an island full of murderous ogresses, sinking in a vast abyss, walking on the edge of a knife, or stuck in a filthy cesspool. There is never even a fleeting moment of true peace to be found.

The *Actse of the Buddha* also states:

Like cohabiting with venomous snakes,
Where can we find lasting happiness that extends beyond a
fleeting moment?
In the eyes of a wise individual,
The world is a fiery inferno that engulfs us all.

Samsara is devoid of any happiness, and beings are constantly in pain and horror. Therefore, who wouldn't want to be free from the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death and liberated from samsara?

According to the *Sutra of Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*:

Beings in hell endure the torment of hellfire,
Pretas are plagued by hunger and thirst,
Animals suffer from being preyed upon by one another,

Humans grapple with the brevity of life,
Asuras are tormented by endless wars and conflicts,
And even the gods struggle with their own mindlessness.
In samsara, true happiness remains elusive.

The entirety of samsara resembles the tip of a needle, where even a split second of happiness cannot exist. Samsara is perpetually engulfed by waves of suffering. Bodhisattva Maitreya says:

Just as there are no pleasant odors in a cesspool,
There is no happiness to be found among the five realms.

Padmasambhava says:

It is said that in this samsara, even the tiniest speck of true happiness cannot be found. And if one does come across a fleeting moment of joy, it will inevitably contain the suffering of change.

The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish says:

Everything is impermanent,
Whoever is born will eventually die;
Since the three worlds are full of suffering,
Who can find happiness?

Regardless of the unseen sufferings in the celestial realms, the world we live in is rife with various disasters, inevitably leading to our disenchantment with samsara. Not to mention the disasters from years past—even in just the past few months, natural and man-made calamities have occurred one after another.

For example, the recent drought in southwest China,¹¹⁷ which affected five provinces, including Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, and impacted more than fifty million people. Many lacked access to drinking water, and a large number of animals perished from dehydration. People did their utmost to mitigate the effects of the drought through various means, including digging wells.

However, I heard that out of one thousand newly dug wells, only twenty had water, which was merely a drop in the bucket. Additionally, the areas affected by

¹¹⁷ It refers to the drought in 2010.

drought are increasing, and now many other provinces are experiencing similar conditions.

Moreover, 153 people were trapped in a mining accident in Shanxi Province. Some miners were rescued, and the bodies of several victims were recovered.

Disasters are occurring around the world as well. On April 10, 2010, a Polish Air Force Tu-154 crashed near the Russian city of Smolensk, killing all ninety-six people on board. Among the victims were the president of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, and his wife, the president of the National Bank of Poland, the chief of the Polish General Staff, other senior Polish military officers, Polish government officials, and members of the Polish Parliament.

The aircraft was overhauled just a few months prior to the accident. Following this tragedy, the Polish government implemented a regulation prohibiting many key officials from traveling on the same plane in the future. Otherwise, the country could once again be paralyzed by such a tragedy.

On April 14, 2010, a 7.1-magnitude earthquake struck the town of Jiegu in Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province. This devastating event resulted in over two thousand fatalities and tens of thousands of injuries. After today's class, fellow sangha members will recite the mani mantra and the name of Amitabha for the victims. I hope that Dharma students who listen to today's class will also join in reciting the mantra and the Buddha's name for the deceased. Through the blessings of Avalokiteshvara and Amitabha, we pray that these individuals will soon find liberation from suffering and attain happiness. These victims deserve our utmost compassion, having been unexpectedly struck by this tragic disaster.

Many rumors are circulating on social media, suggesting that the current disasters are merely a prelude to doomsday. However, I believe this may be an exaggeration. There must be a rationale behind these ongoing calamities. In the twenty-first century, humanity has made significant advancements in material development, surpassing any previous century. Nevertheless, human desires and greed are boundless, and the alarming number of animals being killed is a testament to this. During my visit to Qinghai Province for a life release, I observed that locals have changed their methods of slaughtering animals. Previously, they would manually slaughter yaks and sheep, limiting the number to just a few per day. Nowadays, modern machinery is employed, enabling the killing of several hundred

animals in a very short span of time. As people become increasingly consumed by greed, it is inevitable that various disasters will continue to occur.

Therefore, aside from what happens in the realms of gods and asuras, which are invisible to us, we can understand that there is no true happiness in samsara simply by observing events in this world. Even if there is occasional happiness, it will vanish in an instant, like a dewdrop on a green leaf. Recognizing this, we should all cultivate genuine renunciation and reflect on the associated teachings.

The more we contemplate these and similar teachings, the clearer it becomes that no matter where we are reborn—whether in the highest realms or the depths of hell—there is not a single moment of true peace or happiness. Ultimately, it is all meaningless. So, what is the purpose of working endlessly just to make a living if we do not strive for liberation? We must reflect deeply on the suffering of samsara until we lose all desire for it, much like a person with a diseased liver turning away from rich, greasy food.

Simply hearing about these sufferings and understanding them on a surface level is not enough; we must internalize them. Many monastics and laypeople can say things like, “Samsara is an ocean of suffering,” and many worldly people can say, “Life is full of suffering, and the five aggregates are empty,” but do those individuals truly generate disenchantment with samsara?

Fully embrace these teachings in our minds and vividly visualize them until we genuinely believe in them. Once we reach that level of conviction, avoiding harmful actions and embracing positive ones will occur naturally, without feeling forced.

In samsara, even noble beings like some bodhisattvas may endure certain suffering, let alone ordinary people. In the past, many bodhisattvas have said, “As long as beings in this world are reborn, they must go through torment regardless.”

Take Dampa Deshek (1122–1192) of the Kathok lineage as an example. He acknowledged being a bodhisattva of the eighth bhumi upon his parinirvana. However, his biography revealed that he seemed to have experienced numerous sufferings while living in this world. Even noble beings must endure suffering, not to mention us ordinary people.

It is like when someone in prison cannot escape the fate of being beaten by prison guards, no matter how much others plead for them. Recently, a few young men from my hometown got into a fight and were apprehended. They reached

out to me for assistance through connections. I spoke with a government official in charge, who assured me that these young men would only be detained for fifteen days and would not suffer any physical harm. A few days ago, they were released from detention, so I asked them, “Did you get beaten?” “Yes!” they replied. “Anyone who is detained there will get beaten! We were certainly beaten! The guards are brutal!”

Similarly, as long as we remain trapped in samsara, we will experience immense suffering. From the god realms to the hells, happiness cannot be found anywhere. Even if some individuals may appear happy, they are merely concealing their suffering. In reality, there are countless afflictions and torments deeply rooted within their hearts.

Therefore, it is crucial for us to give rise to renunciation. If we have conviction about the sufferings of samsara, we will not need to force ourselves to avoid unwholesome deeds and engage in virtuous actions. We will naturally choose virtues over vices.

However, some individuals are pretentious; they pretend to meditate, recite sutras, or engage in virtuous deeds in front of others. Nevertheless, they behave recklessly behind others’ backs. Everything they do is driven by their attachment to this life, which clearly demonstrates their lack of renunciation.

When you truly have renunciation, you will diligently practice every day without oversleeping. Some Buddhists struggle to engage in virtuous actions. For instance, they may feel completely exhausted after just a few prostrations. Why is this the case? It is because they lack sufficient renunciation. If they possess it, engaging in virtuous deeds will become an essential and natural part of their lives.

For example, both the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* and the *Sutra of the Collection of the Original Acts of the Buddha*¹¹⁸ mention the story of Nanda’s ordination. Despite slight differences in plot, the stories convey the same message: without disenchantment with samsara, even if one takes ordination, upholds precepts, and practices Dharma, it remains merely a formality.

Here is the story:

Nanda, the Buddha’s cousin, was deeply attached to his wife, Pundarika, and was unwilling to leave his worldly life behind. Although the Buddha used skillful

¹¹⁸ Skt. Abhiniskramana

methods to convince him to enter the Dharma and become a monk, Nanda still struggled to adhere to the precepts.

One day, the Buddha knew that it was time to tame Nanda. He took Ananda to the city for alms and stopped by Nanda's house. Nanda was brushing his wife's hair when he spotted the Buddha from afar. He immediately got up and went downstairs to welcome him.

Nanda took the Buddha's bowl and filled it with honey as an offering. However, the Buddha did not take the bowl back and left instead. Nanda then handed the bowl to Ananda, who also refused to accept it. Ananda told Nanda, "Return the bowl to whomever you took it from." Nanda had no choice but to hold the bowl and follow the Buddha.

His wife Pundarika witnessed what had just happened and called out, "Nanda, where are you going?"

Nanda replied, "I am returning this bowl to the Buddha. I will be back as soon as I am done."

She said, "Please make haste! You must return soon."

Nanda went to the Buddha's residence, gave the bowl to a monk, and was ready to leave. However, the Buddha stopped him, explained the drawbacks of the five desires, and persuaded him to become ordained. Despite his strong reluctance, Nanda felt compelled to obey the Buddha's words. This was because, in his previous lives, while practicing the bodhisattva path, the Buddha had never disobeyed his parents. As a result, it created a karmic consequence that made it impossible for anyone, including Nanda, to disobey the Buddha.

The Buddha asked a barber to shave Nanda's hair. Nanda refused and threatened the barber, saying, "I will fight anyone who dares to shave my head!" Then the Buddha said, "Thus come" to Nanda. Instantly, Nanda's hair fell away, revealing the appearance of a monk. Other sutras say the Buddha approached Nanda, who was too afraid to fight back, leaving him no choice but to let the barber shave his head. Regardless, Nanda finally became a monk.

Nanda was a man born with great merits. He bore thirty marks of a great man, only two major marks fewer than the Buddha. After his ordination, Nanda felt that the Buddha was so solemn that he made his monastic robe exactly the same as that of the Buddha.

When Nanda donned the robe, several monks mistakenly identified him as the Buddha from a distance, only realizing he was actually Nanda when they got closer. The monks found his attire inappropriate, so they decided to inform the Buddha. The Buddha then established a rule that no monks should ever wear the same monastic robe as him.

One day, Nanda donned a fancy robe, eye shadow, and leather shoes. With an umbrella in his left hand and a begging bowl in his right, Nanda set out to beg for alms. The monks remarked, “Nanda doesn’t seem to be a monk of exemplary conduct.” The Buddha then decreed that monks should refrain from wearing fancy robes, holding umbrellas, or applying eye shadow while begging for alms.

Although the Buddha no longer permitted him to wear extravagant clothing, Nanda still could not forget the pleasures of the palace and his beautiful wife. Whenever he had a moment, he would draw images of her on tiles and wooden slabs, spending his days gazing at her image. When the monks noticed this, they were displeased and reported it to the Buddha. The Buddha then gathered Nanda and the monks, announcing, “From today onward, you shall not draw or look at the image of a woman.”

One day, it was Nanda’s turn to guard the temple while the others were away. He felt excited and thought to himself, “Finally, I can go home today! As soon as the Buddha goes out for alms, I will return home to see my wife!” The Buddha, aware of his thoughts, advised him, “If you want to go out, make sure you close all the doors.” After the Buddha and the sangha had left, Nanda reasoned, “I should first clean the floor and prepare the bathwater for the Buddha and the monks, and then I can go home.” So, he immediately began working. However, each time he finished sweeping one area, dust would reappear in another. Consequently, it took Nanda quite a while, and he still could not manage to clean the floor. The same issue arose when he was preparing the bathwater; as soon as he filled one bottle, the other would spill. In the end, Nanda simply could not fill the bath.

Nanda said to himself, “Forget it! Let them handle it when they return. I will just close the monastery’s doors and windows before I leave.” However, when he closed one window, another opened, and when he closed one door, another opened.

Then he thought, “Since it cannot be shut, I will just give up. Even if the sangha’s possessions are stolen, I can replace them because I am wealthy.”

After Nanda made up his mind, he immediately walked out of the monastery and set off to return home. He thought, “The Buddha will take the main street, so I will choose the side path.” But the Buddha knew what Nanda was thinking, so he deliberately returned by the side path. Seeing the Buddha from afar, Nanda hastily hid behind a large tree. However, through his divine power, the Buddha made the tree slowly rise into the air, leaving Nanda exposed. The Buddha then took Nanda back to the monastery.

On another occasion, Nanda again tried to escape, and when he saw the Buddha, he hurriedly hid behind a rock. Using his divine power, the Buddha transformed the rock into flat ground, exposing Nanda once more, and took him back again.

After these attempted escapes, Nanda’s attachment to his wife persisted. Despite being ordained, he continued to refuse to study the monastic disciplines and showed no interest in the Dharma. All he desired was to abandon the precepts and return home.

Just as he was about to flee, the Buddha used his miraculous powers to transport Nanda to the peak of a snowy mountain, where he showed him a one-eyed female monkey.

The Buddha then asked, “Which do you find more beautiful, this monkey or your wife, Pundarika?”

Without hesitation, Nanda replied, “My wife—by a hundred, even a thousand times more!”

“Very well,” said the Buddha. “Now, let’s visit the realm of the gods.”

The Buddha asked Nanda to take his robe, and they both ascended to the Thirty-Three Heaven.

Upon their arrival, the Buddha sat down and instructed Nanda to explore the surroundings. Nanda observed that each god resided in his own magnificent palace, surrounded by many young goddesses, indulging in unimaginable pleasure, joy, and abundance. However, one palace stood out—it was filled with goddesses but devoid of any god. Curious, Nanda inquired why. He was told, “Among humans, there is a man named Nanda, the Buddha’s cousin, who is living as a monk and following monastic discipline. Because of his actions, he will be reborn among the gods, and this palace is reserved for him.”

Nanda was overjoyed and said, “I am Nanda! Since I am here, I will stay.” Just as he was about to enter the palace, the goddesses stopped him, saying, “You have not perfected the monastic discipline, so you are not allowed to be here yet. You must return to the human realm and come back after your death.”

[To be reborn in the god realms, one must uphold precepts for a long time. Nanda arrived in the god realm due to the Buddha’s miraculous power, so he could not remain there for long. It is similar to tourists who wish to take ordination after visiting a monastery, but it is unrealistic because they need to settle their affairs at home.]

Although Nanda was not allowed to enter the palace, he was still filled with joy. When he returned to the Buddha, the Buddha asked, “Did you see the realm of the gods?”

“I certainly did!” Nanda replied.

“Good. Now tell me, who do you find more beautiful—your wife or the young goddesses?”

“The goddesses are far more beautiful,” Nanda admitted. “In fact, their beauty surpasses my wife’s just as much as hers surpasses that of the one-eyed monkey we saw earlier.”

After returning to the human world, Nanda lost his attachment to his wife and became fully devoted to practicing monastic discipline.

The Buddha then spoke to the monks, saying, “Nanda has renounced worldly life with the aim of being reborn in the divine realms. But you have all become monks to transcend suffering entirely. You and he are on different paths. Do not speak to him, do not grow close to him, and do not even share a seat with him.”

The monks followed the Buddha’s instructions, leaving Nanda deeply troubled. Hoping for some comfort, he thought, “At least my younger brother, Ananda, will still care for me.” But when he approached Ananda, his brother immediately stood up and moved away. Confused, Nanda asked why, and Ananda simply repeated the Buddha’s words. Nanda was heartbroken.

The monks stopped talking to Nanda because his motivation was impure. He had been greedy for a beautiful woman in the human realm, and now he was greedy for many beautiful goddesses in the god realm. His greed was intense. According to some Vinaya texts, among the Buddha’s disciples, Angulimala had the strongest

anger, and Nanda had the strongest greed. However, in the end, they both achieved arhathood.

For ordinary people, greed is indeed a significant problem. One lay practitioner told me, “I can handle almost everything in life well, except for my romantic relationship. I cannot let go of it. It has been detrimental to my spiritual practice. I truly despise it!”

One day, the Buddha approached Nanda and asked, “Would you like to see the hell realms?” Nanda agreed, and with his miraculous powers, the Buddha transported them there. “Go ahead and take a look,” he told him.

Nanda wandered through the different levels of hell, observing its various torments. Eventually, he came across an empty pot with flames roaring inside, surrounded by many of the Lord of Death’s henchmen. Curious, he asked why no one was inside.

They replied, “There is a young relative of the Buddha named Nanda, who is currently following monastic discipline in hopes of being reborn as a god. After enjoying the pleasures of the celestial realm, once his merit is exhausted, he will be reborn here.”

Hearing this, Nanda was horrified. He prepared to run away but was recognized by the henchmen, who stopped him, saying, “Since you are here, you can stay.” Nanda immediately replied, “No way, I must return to the human realm.” He then rushed to the Buddha.

Nanda wanted to remain in the god realm, but he was not allowed. The Lord of Death’s henchmen had desired him earlier in the hell realm, but he had been scared away.

The Buddha asked him, “Have you seen what is happening in hell?” Nanda was terrified and answered, “I have.”

The Buddha asked, “What do you think?”

Nanda replied, “It is horrible. When I go back, I won’t uphold precepts for the purpose of being reborn as a god!”

After his return, Nanda reflected deeply. He realized that being reborn among the gods only to eventually fall into the hell realms was meaningless. This understanding sparked a genuine resolve in him to break free from samsara.

This story carries profound meaning that everyone should understand. Many

novice monks and nuns may not have developed genuine renunciation. For those who have never studied the Dharma, their motivation for becoming monastics may solely be the pursuit of happiness.

When I first became a monk, I believed that monastics lived a pure and solemn life. I never really thought about the cyclic rebirths in the three realms, nor did I know that some people take ordination to be reborn as gods.

If a monastic lacks renunciation, can they still attain the entity of the precepts when they receive them? According to certain Vinaya masters, the answer is yes. Why is this? Nanda did not possess renunciation when he first became a monk; he took ordination due to the influence of the Buddha's majestic presence, and at one point, he observed the precepts with the intention of being reborn in the realm of the gods. It was only later that he truly cultivated strong renunciation. However, no one could deny the entity of his precepts.

After witnessing the hells firsthand, Nanda never transgressed the precepts, not even in the slightest. The Buddha praised him as the disciple with the greatest control over the sense-doors.¹¹⁹

Nanda used to excel in greed, but after visiting the hells, he underwent a fundamental change. Many Dharma practitioners are similar in this regard. They had strong afflictions prior to ordination, but after becoming monastics, their attitudes and behaviors underwent a drastic transformation, leading to the diminishment of many afflictions. This transformation is made possible by the power of the Dharma and is attainable by anyone. However, if a person is unaware that the three worlds are filled with suffering, they may struggle to achieve the same transformation.

It is, however, easy for a noble being to recognize that the three worlds are filled with suffering. As stated in the *Sutra on Cause and Effect in the Past and Present*:

Bodhisattvas observe the five realms
With their divine eyes,
And great compassion arises in them.
They then contemplate:
In the three worlds,
Happiness can be found nowhere.

¹¹⁹ Controlling the sense-doors means not allowing oneself to be seduced by the objects of the senses.

Yet many people do not know this. Like drunks, they mistake madness for pleasure. The *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* says:

The fools are attached and dwell in the six realms
Which resemble houses engulfed in flames of life and death.
Yet, they do not want to renounce it.

In the eyes of the wise, samsara resembles a house on fire, a whirlpool, or an armory—places they do not wish to inhabit. However, ordinary people are so attached to samsara that even though they are in the burning house of samsara, they perceive it as a garden and a source of joy. Consequently, they cling to samsara and resist leaving.

Thus, through studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time, I hope you can sincerely renounce this world from the depths of your hearts, enabling you to truly see through the nature of life, be free from attachments, and be at ease. What exactly should we see through? The nature of both this life and future lives. If you relinquish this life but still wish to be reborn in the celestial realm or to become more beautiful and wealthier in the next life, your aspiration remains superficial. It states in the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*:

Practice on the preciousness of human life,
And the impermanence of life,
So one can let go of this life;
Practice on the defects of samsara,
And the law of cause and effect,
So one can let go of future lives.

Therefore, it is only by understanding the nature of this life and future lives that you can genuinely cultivate renunciation. With renunciation, it becomes easy to engage in a successful Dharma practice.

However, for many individuals, the pursuit of the Dharma is not about renouncing samsara but rather about seeking blessings for their current lives. I heard a story about a government official who placed a bill of 100 Chinese yuan in front of a Buddha statue and whispered, “Buddha, please bless me. I offer you 100 yuan today. Please remember this! Wherever I go, please watch over me at all times and remove any obstacles from my path.”

Does such a person have renunciation? Of course not. He merely worships the Buddha to gain promotion, wealth, safety, and pleasure. Or worse yet, he might ask the Buddha to bless him so that his corrupt conduct remains concealed. Can I say this? I believe this could be the reason, considering the prevalent corruption today.

Therefore, the aspiration to be free from samsara is very important. However, most worldly people feel indifferent about it. Some Buddhists study the Dharma only superficially. They rarely engage deeply with the teachings and lack practical experience of the defects of samsara in common preliminary practices, let alone in the Great Perfection or the Great Middle Way.

Ironically, such Buddhists enjoy talking the talk, and sometimes they even consider themselves to be buddhas. They believe they have already attained Buddhahood the moment they sit on a lotus seat they have constructed. In their eyes, buddhas and bodhisattvas are equivalent to successful entrepreneurs or millionaires, and beyond that, they have no special qualities.

As for us Buddhists who aspire to delve deeply into the Dharma, we must have faith in the Buddha, cultivate renunciation toward samsara, and develop great compassion for sentient beings. By doing so, our practice can be meaningful. Otherwise, if we only study the Dharma briefly from a theoretical perspective, we remain far from the true path of the Dharma.

Simply speaking eloquently about these matters is meaningless. The crucial aspect is to engage in self-reflection by asking yourself, “Do I desire liberation?” Once you have studied Nanda’s story, you can clarify the objective of your Dharma pursuit, whether you are a monastic or a lay practitioner. By doing so, you will come to understand that true and lasting happiness can only be achieved by transcending samsara.

The *Ritual of Refuge and Reverence for the Disciples of Shakyas* states:

In heavens and on earth,
I alone am the honored one;
Everywhere in the three worlds, everything is full of suffering;
Happiness can be found nowhere.

In this world, the only honored noble being is the Buddha. Only the Buddha teaches the truth that “samsara is full of nothing but suffering.” No other religious leader, brahma, or brahmin has ever pointed this out.

Therefore, this truth is extremely profound. For most people, it is difficult to accept, except for those beings with the right karmic affinity.



Lesson 58

“We do not need to go so far as to see... That we may sincerely renounce the things of this life.” [page 96–99]

Today’s class is the final session covering the section on “The Defects of Samsara.”

We have already explored the sufferings of hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals. We also discussed the sufferings of humans, asuras, and gods. In short, the very nature of all six realms is suffering.

We cannot merely pay lip service to this suffering by saying, “Ah! Samsara is suffering. It is like a house on fire!” We must deeply understand that wherever we are reborn in samsara, we are not free from suffering.

In many Buddhist groups today, some practitioners appear to have taken refuge or ordination superficially. However, only a few truly see through the world from the depths of their hearts. The term “seeing through” refers to having no desire for worldly pleasures—not due to disillusionment from emotional torments or witnessing too much of the world’s darkness, but from a genuine recognition of the inherent suffering in all six realms. Only by developing a resolute determination about this can the foundation of their practice be deemed solid.

Unfortunately, it is this conviction regarding the nature of suffering in samsara that many people, including new Buddhists and some prominent masters, lack the most. Many say that samsara is suffering, but they merely echo others’ words, not a realization grounded in actual practice.

Therefore, you should regularly practice meditating on the nature of suffering

in samsara—do this every day and reflect on its meaning repeatedly. In fact, there are two types of meditation: calm-abiding meditation and analytical meditation. Here, you are encouraged to contemplate the teachings so that you can fully internalize them—this is analytical meditation. This is also considered a form of meditation. Otherwise, if you only listen to and contemplate the teachings without actual meditation, you are not yet a true Buddhist.

Of course, the most crucial step is to first hear and contemplate. Many Buddhists today lack a solid understanding of Buddhism. They are often unfamiliar with the Buddha's fundamental teachings, which is regrettable. This is similar to an individual insisting on doing something without the necessary knowledge. Similarly, it will be very challenging for a Buddhist without a solid understanding to achieve anything.

Things in Tibetan Buddhism seem somewhat better because the monasteries continue the tradition of hearing and contemplating the teachings. However, in Han Chinese Buddhism, while a few temples in mainland China do engage in hearing and contemplation, this tradition is not widely practiced, and many Buddhists have not yet studied the Dharma systematically. For example, on an auspicious Buddhist date, such as the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, the temples are crowded with people, but only a few of these individuals have actually studied Buddhism. As you may know, not many of those temple visitors understand the right views, such as those related to karma and rebirth, let alone the meaning of emptiness and no-self. Therefore, as Buddhists, it is very important that we engage in both study and contemplation alongside our practice—this is something we should persist in over the long term.

Let's continue with the text:

We do not need to witness the hell realms firsthand to understand their terror. Even a simple image is enough to instill fear and strengthen our desire for liberation. This is why the Buddha instructed that the fivefold wheel of samsara be depicted at the entrances of monastic assembly halls.

Regarding the origin of the fivefold wheel representing samsara, here is the account from the *Vinaya*:

After Anathapindika offered Jetavana Monastery to the Buddha, he found the structure lacked solemnity due to the absence of paintings. So, Anathapindika asked the Buddha what to paint. The Buddha suggested painting the fivefold

wheel of samsara on the doors of the monastery, an image of the Buddha caring for patients at the hospital [The Tzu Chi Hospital features such an image, likely based on this *Vinaya* text], and skeletons in the bedrooms to discourage desires for a physical body [This tradition exists in Thailand].

Additionally, here is another story from the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*:

Maudgalyayana visited the five realms and witnessed all kinds of suffering. When he returned to the human realm, he preached to the public about suffering. When the Buddha became aware of this, he told everyone, “Maudgalyayana is not always present with you, so you should draw the wheel of samsara at the doors of the monasteries. This drawing can help reinforce people’s aversion to samsara. Meanwhile, monks should sit at the gates of the monasteries so that when someone visits, they can explain the causes of cyclic rebirth to the visitors.”

In the Tibetan regions, almost all monasteries display the fivefold wheel of samsara at the entrances of the Dharma halls. Most temples in mainland China do not include such an illustration, except for a few temples on Mount Jiuhua and Mount Putuo, where terrifying depictions of the hells exist. When you become a temple abbot in the future, would you please consider adding the wheel of samsara to the entrances? It is of utmost importance. The *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* provides clear instructions on how to draw it.

As stated in Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*:

If merely seeing images of the hells
And hearing, thinking, or reading about them frightens us,
Or if creating sculpted figures does,
How difficult it will be to endure the ripened fruit? ¹²⁰

As you already know, the conditions in the prisons of the human realm are quite terrible, but those conditions in the hells are even worse. Therefore, individuals with right mindfulness and vigilance should certainly avoid wrongdoing after understanding the suffering in the hells.

Of course, some people remain indifferent to these teachings due to deeply ingrained misconceptions, limited merits from past lives, and the influence of worldly education. They dismiss the stories as fairy tales. However, whether you

¹²⁰ Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

believe it or not, the law of karma is unfailing. As long as you engage in wrongdoing, you will inevitably face corresponding karmic retribution. Therefore, Dharma students should cultivate a sense of fear regarding the hells. Such fear will encourage you to be cautious about your actions and choices in the future.

Therefore, you should reflect on the various forms of suffering in samsara, from the summit of existence right down to the deepest hell. From the depths of your heart, let go of all the ordinary goals of this life. You should find no meaning in the eight worldly concerns and take no interest in fame and wealth, for they are merely causes of samsara. Many esteemed masters of Chinese Buddhism emphasize the importance of letting go, releasing attachment, and being carefree, which is indeed crucial for our practice.

The *Gateway to Training the Mind* also addresses “renouncing this life” in the first chapter. This is not because Buddhists are too pessimistic to enjoy life, but rather because, through profound Dharma wisdom, we have examined worldly pleasures and found them to be devoid of true value, leading us not to cling to them.

If we do not completely let go of worldly pursuits, any Dharma practice we claim to follow will not be genuine.

Only when you renounce this life can you grasp the truth of everything in this world. At this point, even if you know only one verse of the Buddha’s teachings, you have the opportunity to attain liberation in this very life. The *Sutra of the Great Assembly* states:

If beings are free from pursuing five sensory desires,
And follow the Tathagata and listen to the Dharma,
By assimilating one verse wholeheartedly,
They can attain liberation as the previous buddhas did.

If sentient beings can distance themselves from worldly desires, follow a qualified teacher akin to the Buddha, and listen to his teachings of the Dharma, then even if they fully assimilate just one verse, they will be able to attain liberation as Buddha Kassapa, Buddha Krakucchanda, and other previous buddhas did.

Therefore, when you have the opportunity to listen to even a single class or one verse, and then contemplate it deeply, it may change your life and gradually set you on the path to liberation.

The content I just covered is fundamentally about renunciation, which is crucial

in all of Buddha's teachings. Some may think, "Renunciation and bodhicitta are too simple. What I truly aspire to is the highest teaching of Dzogchen." However, no matter how supreme Dzogchen is, without the foundation of renunciation and bodhicitta, you may face challenges in putting it into practice.

In fact, cultivating renunciation is quite demanding. Whether you are a lay practitioner or a monastic, you should reflect on the goal of your practice. Is it for liberation, for rebirth as a god, or solely for immediate benefits? Some religions aspire to reach heaven after death. If you lack even this intention and instead simply wish for a good life, a good job, and a good family, then you have not even begun the path toward rebirth as a human or a god.

Therefore, renunciation is a profound matter that deserves your utmost attention. Atisha once offered a pertinent piece of advice.

As Atisha neared the end of his life, a yogi approached him with a question: "After you pass away, should I focus on meditation?"

Atisha replied, "Even if you do, will it truly be the Dharma?"

The yogi then asked, "In that case, should I dedicate myself to teaching?"

Atisha responded with the same question.

Perplexed, the yogi asked, "Then what should I do?"

Atisha answered, "All of you should place your complete trust in Dromtönpa and sincerely renounce this life."

What Atisha wanted to convey to the yogi is the following:

Teaching is valuable, as is meditation. However, if you have not renounced this life, even if you seem to teach or meditate, you may eventually become no different from a worldly person, ultimately straying from the path to liberation. Therefore, the most crucial aspect is not teaching or meditating, but renouncing this life. You should rely entirely on Dromtönpa.

According to Atisha's biography, one of the reasons he came to Tibet was to guide the lay practitioner Dromtönpa. Consequently, Atisha instructed his disciples to depend on Dromtönpa after his passing. He advised them not to leave immediately after his death, as this could make them vulnerable to external challenges that might pull them back into worldly life.

Dromtönpa exemplified the renunciation of worldly life. Once, the people of Serton Valley invited him to give teachings. He instructed one of his disciples: “Please go in my place! I am currently focused on the practice of renouncing worldly concerns, so I should not engage in anything that contradicts my mindset.”

Dromtönpa wore old, patched robes throughout the year and practiced in the forest near Radreng Monastery. He frequently recited this verse:

As a renunciate, I am not bound by fame and wealth.

A true renunciate does not cling to fame, status, or wealth. Such a practitioner regards these worldly matters lightly and remains unaffected by them. However, in this degenerate age, true renunciates are exceedingly rare.

Once, a practitioner named Nyingmo visited Sakya Pandita and asked, “What is the cause for one to renounce this life?”

Sakya Pandita answered, “Knowing that everything in samsara is meaningless.”

The practitioner then asked, “What is the condition for one to renounce this life?”

Sakya Pandita replied, “Knowing that samsara is full of suffering.”

The practitioner continued, “How can one determine that they have renounced this life?”

“By having no interest in the eight worldly concerns.”

Last, the practitioner asked, “What is the sign that one has renounced this life?”

Sakya Pandita answered, “Not being affected by the eight worldly concerns.”

I also mentioned these four questions to you when teaching the *Gateway to Training the Mind*. Therefore, for practitioners, the most important thing is to remain unaffected by the eight worldly concerns.

There is another story about a monk who was circumambulating Radreng Monastery when he encountered Dromtönpa. Dromtönpa asked, “Venerable monk, circumambulating is good, but wouldn’t it be even better to truly practice the Dharma?”

The monk reflected on this and thought, “Perhaps studying the Mahayana

sutras is more important than circumambulating.” So, he began reading the sutras on a balcony overlooking the teaching courtyard.

After some time, Dromtönpa approached him again and said, “Reading the sutras is good, but wouldn’t it be better to truly practice the Dharma?”

The monk reconsidered. “Maybe meditation is more valuable than reading the sutras,” he thought. So, he set aside his sutras and began meditating, sitting on his bed with his eyes half-closed.

Once again, Dromtönpa came to him and said, “Meditating is good, too, but wouldn’t it be even better to practice a truly effective Dharma?”

[The practice of circumambulating with “body,” reciting with “speech,” and meditating with “mind,” has great merit, which is the consensus among both Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, but it is still not fully acknowledged by Dromtönpa.]

Feeling completely lost, the monk cried out, “Venerable Dromtönpa, what should I do to practice the Dharma?”

“Venerable monk,” Dromtönpa replied, “Renounce this life! Renounce this life!”

Therefore, renouncing this life is the most important practice of all. It is stated in the *Gateway to Training the Mind* and *Precious Garland of Mountain Practices* that one’s practice will not succeed without this renunciation. Some individuals are solely concerned with appearances. For example, after having their hair shaved and donning monastic robes, some newly ordained monastics ask, “Do I look good?” There are even those who are extremely eager to be ordained. For instance, one individual insisted on being ordained immediately upon arriving at Larung Gar. When I suggested a four-month probationary period, he refused, saying, “No way! I cannot even wait four more days. Can I have my hair shaved today? Look at the monastic robes I purchased! I will look quite elegant in these robes. I must wear them now!”

However, if you have not renounced this life, not to mention shaving your hair, it is futile for your practice—even if you were to shave off your ears (*the audience laughs*).

Past eminent masters have stated that a practitioner, whether a lay practitioner or a monastic, cannot succeed in their practice if driven by worldly desires, such as

the pursuit of fame and wealth. If we cling to these concerns, we will never attain liberation from the sufferings of samsara. Therefore, it is imperative that we fully let go of our attachment to this life and dedicate ourselves to studying and practicing for enlightenment in future lives. In particular, those of you who aspire to become monastic practitioners must renounce the five worldly desires. The *Ityuktaka* (*Thus Has it Been Said*) states:

When one disenchant and renounces worldly desires,
One can swiftly realize the utmost meaning.
Such a person is a true monastic,
Not merely taking a pretentious ordination.

If a person offers Dharma teachings for the sake of attaining wealth and fame in this life and is always self-centered, then even if they achieve something momentarily, ultimately, they will accomplish nothing. Therefore, whatever we do, we should do it to benefit others or to attain enlightenment, which are the two conditions of bodhicitta. To generate bodhicitta as such, we should first develop renunciation, and to cultivate renunciation, we must rely solely on a qualified teacher who embodies the authentic qualities of the Dharma.

Only a genuine teacher can truly guide us on how to break free from the attachments that bind us to this life and help us attain enlightenment in the future. Let go of all worldly concerns—family, friends, relationships, wealth, and material possessions—just as you would discard spit on the ground. Be content with whatever food and clothing come your way and dedicate yourself fully to practicing the Dharma.

Regarding renouncing this life, Padampa Sangye says:¹²¹

*Material things are as fleeting as clouds and mist, so never assume
they will endure.*

Everything in this world is like a dream or an illusion, rendering no meaning and soon disappearing. Possessions and clothes that we were once very attached to hold no significance for us today, while the things we cling to now will become

¹²¹ Padampa Sangye's advice consists of a series of verses. In his teachings, Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche provided explanations for each verse individually. Therefore, in this part of the commentary, we have italicized Padampa Sangye's verses, followed by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's commentary.

meaningless in a few years. Therefore, all phenomena are devoid of true meaning, and we should not think they will last forever.

Fame is like an echo; rather than chasing recognition, seek to understand its true essence.

Some people particularly love fame and popularity and are willing to sacrifice anything for it. In fact, this is a sign of poor Dharma practice. What is the point of being famous? Even if you are renowned throughout the world, when death arrives, what can your fame bring you? *The Dharma Wheel of Non-Regression Sutra* states:

If one values fame,
One is far from enlightenment;
Fame is like an echo,
A mere conception, and greatly overvalued.

Therefore, a practitioner, whether monastic or layperson, should renounce this life, seek liberation, and refrain from clinging to popularity.

In his *Record of the Exalted Acts of Buddhist Monastics*, Master Lianchi shared a story:

Master Hengchao of the Later Liang period during the Five Dynasties had been giving teachings for more than twenty years. He lived a simple life with few desires. A commander-in-chief named Li Gong admired the master and sought to propose that the emperor award him a purple monastic robe. However, Master Hengchao declined this honor with his poem, which says:

I will wear my coarse robe in illusion until old age.
Otherwise, I will be like a drifting raft, failing in my practice;
I vow to impart the teachings of the Dharma until I die,
And reject a life tainted by wealth and fame.

This demonstrates that the master aspired to dedicate his life to teaching the Dharma, rather than pursuing worldly desires.

Consider whether you can do the same: teach the Dharma, engage in activities beneficial to all sentient beings, and remain unaffected by worldly fame and wealth throughout your life.

However, when faced with the five desires, an ordinary person finds it difficult

to resist temptation. Imagine if a top leader were to grant you a high honor; you may waver on your path. Perhaps you would stop giving teachings and spend your days socializing instead. These actions do not reflect the behavior of a true practitioner. Therefore, we must strive to emulate past eminent masters who dedicated their entire lives to teaching and were unaffected by worldly concerns.

Fancy clothes are like the colors of a rainbow, so keep your attire simple and focus on your practice.

No matter how elegant your clothes may be, you will not be able to take them with you when death comes. Therefore, it is perfectly acceptable to dress modestly. Luxury clothes that cost thousands of dollars are not significantly different from ordinary clothes in terms of functionality.

Our body is merely a bag filled with blood, pus, and lymph, so there's no reason to cling to it.

Even the finest meals eventually become excrement, so don't place too much value on food.

A true practitioner does not place too much importance on the body. He can live solely on grass as food and wear leaves for clothing. Master Lianchi states in his *Motto Poetry*:

Eating grass is better than having an empty stomach,
A grass hut is preferable to living outdoors.
If one is content with what one has,
One's afflictions can be dispelled in no time.

Many people strive to outdo others in terms of clothing and meals. Particularly in big cities, individuals pursue various worldly ambitions. However, the disparity between their boundless desires and limited resources is so vast that many of their efforts prove futile, leading to unnecessary distress. Therefore, we should not chase after external fame and wealth. If you possess them already, you may enjoy them; if not, there is no need to pursue them deliberately.

All phenomena arise as enemies, so remain in hermitages or in the mountains.

When we are in a chaotic crowd, various discursive thoughts and adverse

conditions will naturally arise. Therefore, we should stay in a secluded place and be true practitioners.

The thorns of illusory perception pierce the mind; recognize them all as being of equal nature.

The Absorption of the Thus-Gone One's Wisdom Seal Sutra states:

If one neither clings to one's body and life,
Nor becomes attached to one's friends and relatives,
But instead diligently practices emptiness and selflessness,
One can attain enlightenment.

However, just as not everyone is wealthy, there are only a very few fortunate individuals who can practice emptiness. The flavor of emptiness can only be tasted by those few people.

All desires and needs arise from your mind; thus, keep to the very nature of mind.

All our desires and needs stem from the mind. If the mind is not content, our desires and needs will be never-ending. As Sarahapa said, the mind is the wish-fulfilling jewel. Therefore, we must guard our mind and tame it with the guru's pith instruction.

The most precious jewel lies within you; do not crave material wealth or food.

The mind is the wish-fulfilling jewel. When we recognize the nature of the mind through following the guru's pith instruction, all wisdom and compassion will naturally arise. Therefore, we must never let it become lost in meaningless trivialities.

People today indulge in worldly pleasures, including food and drink. They plan what to eat for lunch in the morning, what to have for dinner at noon, and what to eat the next day in the evening. It seems they live only for the three meals each day. The same goes for their choice of clothing. It is quite meaningless if we focus solely on what to eat and wear.

Excessive talking leads only to arguments, so remain silent like a mute person.

Too much gossip and chatter create obstacles on the path to liberation. Therefore, it is beneficial to practice silence frequently.

Mind has its own ability to give rise to all actions, so don't revolve entirely around your appetite.

The mind has its own ability to give rise to all kinds of actions, so do not fixate solely on food. Wang Anshi, a prominent figure in the Northern Song dynasty, was known for his indifference to taste in eating. He cared little for food as long as it filled his stomach, opting for whatever was convenient.

Su Xun, the father of Su Dongpo, disapproved of Wang Anshi's attitude toward food. He even wrote an article titled "On Distinguishing Traitors" to expose Wang Anshi's "hypocrisy." However, others believed that Wang Anshi's approach to food reflected his state of mind. In any case, it is beneficial not to excessively fixate on food. Otherwise, one may waste a great deal of time pondering what and where to eat, which is quite unnecessary.

Many people spend a great deal of time and energy on meals. To have lunch, they often travel three or four hours through traffic jams. After lunch, they wonder, "Whose turn is it to invite others for dinner? Is it my turn this time?" Then they travel again in the afternoon and spend two or three hours on dinner.

In reality, eating a meal is a simple task, and we should not need to invest so much time in it. However, changing this habit is difficult because people have become accustomed to this behavior.

Blessings come from within the mind, so pray to your guru and deity.

This advice is very important! To succeed in your practice, you must receive the blessings of your guru and all buddhas. Without these blessings, any Dharma practice will be as challenging as reaching the sky. Just as all plants thrive in spring when the earth warms, great qualities will naturally arise in us when our minds receive the blessings of our deity, our guru, all buddhas, and bodhisattvas.

Of course, to receive blessings, we must always pray. Some Buddhists believe that supplication is merely a formality and not truly necessary. This belief is

incorrect. It is only through frequent prayer to our guru and deity that we can receive the invisible guidance that ultimately facilitates our realization. Therefore, praying is very important.

*Staying too long in one place breeds criticism, even of the Buddha,
so don't stay anywhere for too long.*

Being around a person for too long—even if that person is the Buddha—can lead to the development of wrong views about him.

*You should behave with humility, so let go of any pride in your
status.*

The Qiqi, or tipping vessel, is an ancient Chinese ceremonial utensil that automatically overturns and spills its contents once it reaches capacity. When Confucius noticed a Qiqi, he exclaimed, “It overturns when overfilled.” Therefore, we should remain humble and avoid arrogance in our interactions with others.



Image source: A partial view of Confucius Observing the Tipping Vessel, painted by Weng Dali in the Ming dynasty.

*Time flies and waits for no one, so seize the moment and practice
now without delay.*

Time does not wait for us, and our lives are limited. Therefore, we must practice now while we have the chance. We should not procrastinate, repeatedly saying, “I will take my ordination in five or ten years.”

Eventually, even if you still have the intention then, you may no longer have

the opportunity. Since we have encountered the great Dharma, we should seize the chance by putting it into practice immediately.

You are just a traveler in this life, so do not build a castle where you will only stay temporarily.

Please do not work so hard every day constructing your cabins. We came to Larung Gar to train our minds, not to engage in construction. Training the mind and building a cabin are different, so make sure you do not mix them up! There once was a monk who spent many years at Larung Gar building his cabin, but when it was finally completed, he left. He did not spend much time practicing the Dharma, and when the cabin was done, he did not use it after all.

Many urban dwellers live for their houses or apartments. Initially, houses are meant to serve humans. However, after purchasing a house through a mortgage, the owner becomes a slave to the property, constantly working to pay off the mortgage for the rest of their life.

These individuals think, “Since others are doing this, I must follow; otherwise, I’ll be left behind.” However, from a Buddhist perspective, such a life is exhausting. As practitioners, although we need a place to live, we must always prioritize our Dharma practice. Be sure to recognize what is truly important!

No action will yield any benefit, so practice the Dharma diligently.

You can never predict when your body will be consumed by worms and vanish entirely, so do not be distracted by the appearances of this life.

Friends and family are like birds perched on a branch, so do not be overly concerned about them!

People often cling to the idea that “This is my family, and that is my friend.” However, in reality, friends and family are like little birds perched on a branch, gathering together temporarily and then flying off in different directions when circumstances change. Therefore, fixating on family and relatives all day holds little significance.

Confident faith is like fertile land; never neglect it and allow it to turn into a barren wasteland of negative emotions.

Faith is particularly important. It is like a fertile field that cultivates merit. Here is a story: a man responsible for watering trees lacked faith in the Buddha but had a small amount of faith in Sariputra. One day, he saw Sariputra begging for alms on a hot day and invited him, saying, “Bhikkhu, please come and sit under the tree. While I water the tree, I will also sprinkle water on you. This way, I can accomplish two things at once.”

Later, due to his act of watering Sariputra, the man was reborn in the celestial realm. Through his miraculous power, he came to understand the reason for his higher rebirth, so he descended to the earth and made an offering to Sariputra. In the end, he attained the fruition of *srotāpanna* (stream-enterer). Therefore, when we encounter a supreme object of offering, even a little faith can have a great effect.

Human life is like a wish-fulfilling jewel, so never hand it to the enemies of greed and hatred.

Samaya is like a watchtower; it must never be tarnished by the faults of wrongdoing.

While the Vajra Master is still in this world, do not allow your Dharma practice to slip into laziness.

When the Vajra guru is present in this world, you have the most extraordinary opportunity to practice the Dharma. Ensure that you do not carelessly abandon the Dharma; it would be a great misfortune if you did.

In summary, renouncing this life is crucial. All practitioners, whether lay practitioners or monastics, and regardless of their affiliation with Chinese or Tibetan Buddhism, can engage in this practice. Recognizing the importance of renouncing this life will help you let go of clinging to wealth and fame.

Take Layman Pang of the Tang dynasty, for example: He was a householder who placed little importance on wealth and fame. Later, by following Chan masters such as Master Daoyi, he recognized the nature of mind. After his realization, he placed his possessions, including gold, silver, and jewels, into boxes, brought them to the Xiangjiang River, and threw the boxes into the water.

Someone said to him, “You don’t want money, but you could use it to make offerings and spend it on something virtuous, which is better than throwing it away in the river!” Layman Pang replied with a verse:

Worldly people place importance on money,
But I appreciate moments of silence;
Money disturbs the mind,
Whereas silence reveals the true nature of mind.

Eventually, not only Layman Pang but also his wife and children achieved realization.

From Layman Pang's biography, we see that he was comparable to Fu Dashi—a well-known Chinese Buddhist layman of the Liang dynasty. Despite being a layman, he renounced his current life, viewing money as no different from manure and remaining unattached to anything.

In contrast, some city dwellers safeguard their gold earrings and necklaces in a safe, believing their possessions are secure indefinitely. However, thieves may steal the entire safe, causing the jewelry owners immeasurable pain. In reality, the pain stems from attachment to money. The reason accomplished practitioners can attain enlightenment is that they have no attachment to external possessions and wealth. They lead a lifestyle that surpasses our imagination and ultimately achieve ultimate liberation.

To truly practice and experience the Dharma, we must first understand how meaningless everything in samsara really is. The only way to develop this understanding is by meditating on the defects of samsara. We should keep reflecting on it until we deeply feel that samsara is full of suffering. We'll know this meditation has truly taken root when we resonate with Geshe Langri Thangpa.

One day, a close attendant told Langri Thangpa, "People refer to you as Langri Thangpa the Gloomy Face."

He replied, "How could I appear happy and cheerful when I constantly contemplate the immense suffering in all three realms of samsara?"

People say that Langri Thangpa smiled only once in his life. It happened when he saw a mouse trying to move a turquoise from his mandala. The mouse could not lift it alone, so it squeaked for help. Another mouse came, and together, one pushed while the other pulled. Witnessing this teamwork made Langri Thangpa smile.

Reflecting on the sufferings of samsara lays the foundation for all the positive qualities on the spiritual path. It helps turn our minds toward the Dharma,

strengthens our belief in the principle of cause and effect, shifts our priorities away from worldly pursuits, and deepens our love and compassion for all beings.

The Buddha emphasized the importance of recognizing the sufferings of samsara by beginning each of the teachings in the three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma with the words: “Monks, this life is suffering.”

Therefore, until our conviction regarding the sufferings of samsara arises, we must practice diligently. Otherwise, if we indulge in activities such as smoking and drinking and feel content with them, we have truly lost our true nature. Thus, we should apply the teachings until we are fully convinced.

*I know that samsara is filled with suffering, yet I still
cling to it.*

*I dread the torment of the lower realms, yet I continue to
commit wrongdoings.*

*Bless me and all misguided beings who are lost like me,
So we can see through and renounce this life.*

Patrul Rinpoche said this with humility and prayed to the guru and the Three Jewels for blessings. It would be a great pity to die burdened with bad karma without having attained any achievement in your practice.

After learning Mahayana Buddhism, we should all recognize that samsara is filled with suffering. The *Sutra of the Collection of the Six Perfections* contains a relevant story:

One day, a king ventured out alone and met an old cobbler. The king asked the cobbler, “Who do you think is the happiest in the country?” The cobbler replied, “The king, of course!”

To reveal the truth to the cobbler, the king got him drunk and dressed him in royal attire. He then sent the old cobbler to the palace, instructing the concubines to serve him as if he were the king. Consequently, everyone honored and revered the old cobbler, and the ministers consulted him daily on political matters.

However, the old cobbler knew nothing about governing a country. Yet, each day, he had to contend with various issues, which made him very unhappy. The king then got him drunk again and sent him back home. Once the old cobbler sobered

up, he believed he had just experienced a dream in which he was a king. He realized that being a king is something very painful.

Thus, there is no genuine happiness in samsara. Nonetheless, those who are not yet grounded in the Dharma may struggle to accept this and argue, “Life is so beautiful, yet you tell me it is filled with suffering. Aren’t you deliberately distorting the truth?” It is only when these individuals comprehend the true nature of all phenomena that they begin to understand this.

[This concludes *The Defects of Samsara*.]

So far, we have covered the three key issues in the common preliminaries: the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, and the defects of samsara. We will soon move on to the fourth one—the principle of cause and effect. When you understand these four common preliminaries and put them into practice accordingly, you have already established the foundation of the Dharma.

I sincerely hope that everyone can take in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. If you aspire to become a true Buddhist, following this text is sufficient. In this degenerate age, it is unrealistic to study thousands of sutras and shastras in a short lifetime. However, if you can carry a copy of this text with you wherever you go, read it for ten minutes or half an hour each day, and repeatedly reflect on its content, you will gradually become a true practitioner.

At this point, whether others praise or slander you is no longer important. What matters most is that your mind has merged into the Dharma. As Longchenpa stated in *The Precious Garland for the Four Themes*, here is the most essential point for a practitioner, which is also the Kadampa’s pith instruction for mind training:

Turning your mind to the Dharma,
Practicing the Dharma as a path,
Removing confusion while on the path,
Purifying confusion into pristine awareness.



Lesson 59

“You renounce evil and take up good ... be sure of at least one rebirth in hell.” [page 101–103]

2.1.4. THE PRINCIPLE OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

First, Patrul Rinpoche supplicates his root guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu:

*You turn away from wrongdoing and embrace virtue,
following the teachings on cause and effect.*

*Your actions align with the progressive stages of the nine
vehicles.*

*With your perfect view, you remain free from attachment
in all circumstances.*

Peerless guru, at your feet, I humbly bow.

What kind of accomplished practitioner was his guru?

“*You turn away from wrongdoing and embrace virtue, following the teachings on cause and effect*”: Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu was meticulous in choosing between good and evil by adhering to the principle of cause and effect. He refrained from any action, no matter how trivial, that contradicted this principle; he acted impeccably in accordance with the teachings of buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and the eminent masters of India and Tibet.

“Your actions align with the progressive stages of the nine vehicles”: His actions began with the Shravakayana and ascended through the nine successive vehicles, unlike some individuals who know very little about the view yet act recklessly without examining virtues and vices.

“With your perfect view, you remain free from attachment in all circumstances”: Regarding his view, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu realized that, at the ultimate level, all phenomena are devoid of conceptualization, and at the relative level, they are like dreams and illusions without inherent existence.

“Peerless guru, at your feet, I humbly bow”: Before such an unparalleled, extraordinary, and peerless guru, whose view, meditation, and action are always aligned, Patrul Rinpoche bowed at his feet with deep gratitude and veneration.

As we must recognize, in this lifetime, we have encountered the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and many other remarkable masters, whose view is as vast as the sky, yet who still meticulously choose what to do and what to avoid. From these buddha-like masters, we have gained the right view on causes and effects, so we must remember the immense kindness of our lineage masters.

Without receiving their teachings, we would have been like other ordinary individuals; and even worse, we might have committed wrongdoings so severe that endless darkness and suffering would await us in the future. Now, with the guidance of qualified masters, we understand the fundamental principle of cause and effect. How joyous! In light of their kindness, we should sincerely pay homage to the lineage masters with veneration.

This chapter covers three subjects: negative actions that should be abandoned; positive actions that should be adopted; and the all-determining quality of actions. By studying this chapter, I hope you will understand that nothing is beyond the effects of positive and negative actions.

The chapter on “the freedoms and advantages” explains the preciousness of the human form, which enables the pursuit of the Dharma; without this right view, a person will not embark on the practice. The chapter on “the impermanence of life” teaches us that the jewel-like human life cannot endure long because it will be destroyed by impermanence, so we should practice Dharma with a sense of urgency.

The chapter on “the defects of samsara” reveals that the three realms of samsara are like a house on fire. Therefore, our practice should be motivated by renunciation

rather than the desire for temporary benefits as a human or god being. We must aspire to transcend samsara.

The chapter on “the principle of cause and effect” explains that all beings are subject to the cycles of rebirth in samsara based on their positive and negative actions, and it is impossible for us to escape the constraints of cause and effect. Only by following the instructions of a qualified teacher and engaging in virtuous deeds will we find happiness in the future; otherwise, there will always be darkness and suffering ahead. Therefore, we should be prudent in our choices about what to adopt and what to avoid.

Make sure you understand the importance of the aforementioned chapters in the text. In particular, the chapter on the principle of cause and effect is crucial for practitioners.

During this degenerate age, many people claim to be Buddhists because they have taken refuge or received ordination. However, their actions and speech reveal that the Dharma has not taken root in their hearts and minds. Such individuals do not even acknowledge the basic principle of “What goes around comes around,” which states that virtuous actions bring happiness while vice leads to suffering. Even if they claim to accept this principle, they merely talk the talk instead of walking the walk.

In this world, all living beings long for happiness and strive to avoid suffering, which is inherent in all of us. Whether they are animals or humans, everyone desires happiness from the moment they are born and begin to experience sensations. Given that all beings seek happiness, it is crucial to identify the causes and conditions for attaining it.

The arising of a cause and condition depends entirely on our own efforts, not on the help of a king, minister, or patron. Otherwise, no matter how diligent we are, it will be in vain. So, what is the cause and condition for happiness? It is engaging in virtuous deeds. If you choose to engage in wicked deeds instead of virtuous ones, suffering will inevitably arise.

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

You commit wrongful deeds yourself,
Therefore, you must face the consequences on your own.
It is never the case that this person engages in wrong actions,

But that person endures the consequences.

We must firmly believe in the principle of cause and effect. In fact, believing in this principle is the only true indication of being a practitioner. If you do not believe in it, then no matter what persona you may assume, you are essentially a skeleton wearing a mask. This is because you lack something substantial within you.

2.1.4.1. Negative Actions to be Abandoned

Our rebirth in the higher or lower realms of samsara is determined by the good and bad actions we have personally accumulated. Samsara arises from our actions and is entirely shaped by their effects—nothing else dictates our rebirth in the higher or lower realms. Samsara is not created by an almighty god such as Indra, Ishvara, or Vishnu, as asserted by non-Buddhist religions. Our rebirth is not merely a random occurrence, as claimed by materialistic Lokayata philosophers and atheists.

The *Mahayana Sutra of Mental Contemplation During Earlier Births* states:

All phenomena arise from causes and conditions;
Without causes and conditions, there are no phenomena.

...

Believing in no cause and no effect is a significant wrong view;
Believing in no vices and virtues leads to deluded thoughts.

Therefore, everything arises from causes and conditions; without them, there are neither external appearances nor internal emotions. It is a grave wrong view if you believe that everything is purely a matter of chance, and that there is no distinction between good and bad, cause and effect, or virtues and vices.

The principle of cause and effect is unfailing. Once a seed is planted, when causes and conditions come together, the fruit will inevitably ripen. Similarly, regardless of whether you acknowledge this principle, if you engage in vicious deeds, you will undoubtedly face the karmic consequences of suffering one day.

However, few people truly grasp this. In particular, some teachers offer no guidance to their disciples in this regard. Worse still, if these teachers themselves don't have the right view on the principle of cause and effect, how can their disciples

develop a right view on cause and effect? It is like trying to pour from a large bottle that is itself empty into a small bottle; the small bottle will be empty as well.

Thus, if the teacher is deceiving both themselves and others, they provide no genuine benefits to themselves or others. Today, many individuals teach or learn the Dharma merely as a facade, often neglecting the principle of cause and effect, which is evident in their words and actions.

As practitioners, if we genuinely seek liberation, we should constantly reflect on the consequences of our positive and negative actions, striving to avoid wrongdoing and embrace what is right.

Although the principle of cause and effect is highly significant, it may not be beneficial for individuals with incorrect views. No matter how often or earnestly I try to persuade them, this teaching may not offer them any benefit. In fact, it could potentially worsen their afflictions. Conversely, practitioners with deep virtuous roots can grasp this principle when it is brought to their attention.

2.1.4.1.1. Physical Actions to be Avoided

Three of these ten are physical actions: taking life, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct; four are verbal actions: lying, sowing discord, harsh words, and worthless chatter; and three are mental actions: covetousness, wishing harm on others, and wrong views.

I have covered the ten negative actions in my recent teaching of the *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*, and I will repeat them here. This topic is essential, so it is not enough to listen to the teaching just once. Only through repeated study of these profound instructions can a fortunate practitioner truly consider how to act for their own benefit.

Leaving aside the goal of benefiting sentient beings for the moment, we should, at the very least, be mindful of cause and effect—for one's own sake.

Some people frequently engage in nonsensical talk, claiming, "Let it be if I end up in hell! It is my own affair, and it is none of your concern." Individuals who hold such wrong views are difficult to tame and show little interest in the principle of cause and effect. Even if they study the Dharma, they only grasp a few phrases or engage in empty rhetoric. When they commit wrongdoings, they feel no remorse, and when they witness others performing virtuous deeds, they hardly rejoice. In today's world, there is an abundance of such degenerate beings everywhere.

2.1.4.1.1.1. Take Life

Of the ten negative actions, taking life is the gravest, so we'll first address this action.

Taking life refers to any deliberate action that ends the life of another being, whether human, animal, or any other living creature. This negative action consists of four components:

- 1) **Object:** The being to be killed—whether human or animal—is correctly identified.
- 2) **Intention:** Once the object of killing is identified, the killer intends to kill the object, driven by afflictions such as anger.
- 3) **Action:** The killer engages in the act of killing through specific means.
- 4) **Completion:** The killer successfully takes the object's life.

Only then can we say that the negative action of taking life is fully accomplished. From these four components, we can infer that if you intend to kill A but accidentally kill B, although the act is wrongful, it does not encompass all four components discussed above.

As we all know, the negative impact of taking life is particularly severe. Why is this? It is because sentient beings cherish their own lives above all else and are willing to endure all sorts of pain to preserve their existence. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* states:

In the world, preserving one's life is the foremost priority.

How is this so? Because all people are willing to endure punishment, bodily mutilation, and physical torment to protect their lives.

As long as a person can continue living, they would willingly sacrifice a foot or a hand. Understanding this helps us grasp why the negative effect of taking life is so grave and horrifying.

The Sutra Preached by the Buddha on Distinguishing the Effects of Good and Evil states that the act of taking life, whether human, animal, or any other living creature, leads to five negative consequences: 1) Being short-lived life after life;

2) Frequently facing horrors; 3) Having more enemies; 4) Being reborn in hell and experiencing suffering; 5) Being reborn as a short-lived and sick human after emerging from hell.

Therefore, the fact that many people currently experience fear, have numerous enemies, and encounter various obstacles is related to their actions of taking life in previous lives.

In Tibet, you will often hear someone say, “Although I am not a good practitioner, I have never intentionally killed any living being. This is the most meaningful aspect of my human life.”

The same is true for certain Dharma friends. Once they have taken refuge or been ordained, it becomes impossible for them to kill a being. Even if they have not diligently practiced and have been idle at times, occasionally committing a few negative actions, the crucial point is that they will no longer engage in killing for the rest of their lives. It is precisely this cessation of killing that gives their human lives greater significance.

It is extremely important for you to understand the gravity of taking a life. Many people do not view killing as a serious matter. They take it for granted when a human eats a tiger, yet they find it unacceptable if a tiger eats a human. Whenever an incident occurs in a zoo where a dangerous animal takes a human life, the mass media covers the news as if it were of global significance.

In reality, we humans consume other living beings daily, so it should be considered normal if we are consumed by other beings as well. The life of each sentient being is equally valuable. The only difference is that we humans can communicate through speech, while other beings do not speak our language.

There are various types of killing, for example:

1) A warrior killing an enemy in combat exemplifies killing driven by hatred.

2) Taking the life of a wild animal for its meat or fur represents killing driven by desire.

Desire-driven killing is the predominant form of killing in contemporary society. Many individuals struggle to abstain from meat consumption, leading to animals being killed to satisfy their demand for food. As a result of such killings, the world is becoming increasingly frightening. Natural and man-made disasters

occur frequently, with earthquakes today, tsunamis tomorrow, and fires the day after. Ultimately, these calamities stem from humanity's outrageous actions.

Particularly considering the advancements in science and technology, people now employ machines to kill other beings, resulting in an unprecedented scale and frequency of killings compared to previous eras. The world can no longer tolerate such bloodshed; therefore, it is inevitable that we are facing various disasters. If people do not cease these harmful actions, the future is likely to be even more challenging. This is not a prophecy or prediction; it is simply a cause-and-effect consequence.

3) Taking a life without understanding the consequences of right and wrong—or, like certain tirthikas, believing it to be a virtuous act—is killing out of ignorance.

The types of killing driven by hatred, desire, and ignorance are also described in the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*. Regardless of the affliction that drives the act of killing, as long as a being is killed, the killer will inevitably face the consequences of their actions. The *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* states:

Killing others with joy
Leads to sorrowful wailing in hell
...
The countless sufferings endured for billions of years
Are too heartbreaking to express in words.

Many people today hold deep-rooted wrong views, leading them to commit wrongful deeds without hesitation. This is especially true regarding killing, as they do not fear the repercussions of their negative actions in the next life. *The Empowerment Sutra* says:

Driven by evil views, one kills sentient beings,
Then many demons will have the opportunity to bring harm.
One will fall into the hell realm,
And cannot escape for billions of kalpas.

However, many people remain indifferent to the concept of hell. When confronted with discussions about hell, they often respond, “Is that even possible?” Their reactions can be attributed to worldly education, parental and familial

influences, and so forth. I have encountered many such individuals, including monastics. During our conversations, they claim they accept the principle of cause and effect. After all, they have taken ordination, with shaved heads and monastic robes. Had they rejected this principle, others would have ridiculed them.

However, I have noticed that they do not fear being reborn in the hells. If monastics can feel this way, it is even more true for lay practitioners; and if lay practitioners can feel this way, it is even more so for non-Buddhists. How many non-Buddhists do you think truly understand the principle of cause and effect? The answer is not hard to infer.

Sometimes I feel that my teaching has little impact on you because many listeners have not even established the right view of cause and effect, let alone the view of the Great Middle Way and the Great Perfection, which transcend the four extremes and eight conceptual elaborations.

If you lack a fundamental understanding of cause and effect, you cannot even be compared to followers of the Lesser Vehicle. Some people claim to be Mahayanists and look down upon Theravada Buddhism. However, Theravada Buddhists view samsara as a burning house, possess renunciation, and uphold the principle of cause and effect.

If we, self-proclaimed Mahayanists, engage in self-reflection, we may realize that we might not even have the basic view of cause and effect, let alone the profound tantric view, meditation, and action. If a person has not acquired knowledge at the elementary school level, yet aspires to jump directly to the university level and comprehend higher education, they are simply dreaming the impossible.

Therefore, please do not assume that your practice is already pretty good so that when the teaching is on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* or the *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*, you can just pick up a novel and start reading it in class. You may think, “I am a university graduate; this teaching is below my level. It’s always about the principle of cause and effect, which I already know!”

You may possess intellectual understanding, but without generating conviction, you cannot truly claim to understand it. Even if you have generated conviction, if you do not pay attention to your actions, your “understanding” holds no meaning. Please take some time to reflect on this!

As Patrul Rinpoche states, there are three types of killing known as acts with immediate retribution, as they result in immediate rebirth in the Hell of Ultimate

Torment without passing through the intermediate state. These are the killing of one's father, the killing of one's mother, and the killing of an arhat.

According to the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, the gravest form of killing involves taking the life of one's parents or an arhat; the middling form involves killing a practitioner who has genuinely entered the path; and the lesser form involves killing a person or an animal. Thus, the gravest acts of killing lead to the most severe consequences.

Some individuals believe that as long as they have not committed the act of directly taking a life with their own hands, they are innocent of killing. However, in reality, no one—regardless of social status or power—can claim to be free of guilt, as we have all unknowingly stepped on and crushed countless tiny insects while walking around.

In the *Vinaya Daily Essentials*, a compilation of precepts to be observed daily in Chinese Buddhism, there is a practice guideline for not harming bugs and ants while walking. Before getting out of bed each morning, a practitioner first recites the Buddha's name a few times and then chants this verse:

From dawn until dusk,
All living beings, take care of yourselves.
If you lose your lives under my feet,
May you be reborn in the Pure Land right away.

Then the practitioner chants the mantra—*Om Iti Rinri Svaha*—three times before placing their feet on the ground. By doing so, the practitioner avoids fault when accidentally harming insects.

According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and Mipham Rinpoche's *Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way*, some negative actions accumulate new karma while others do not. When an individual unintentionally tramples on an insect, that negative action does not accumulate new karma.

If you understand the consequences of killing and are unwilling to engage in it yourself but instead ask someone else to do it for you, this action carries severe consequences. While teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche noted that during the Cultural Revolution, some Tibetan monks were coerced by others into taking the lives of animals. These monks understood that monastics are not supposed to kill, so they requested someone else

to carry out the killing on their behalf, which was very wrong and demonstrated their misunderstanding of the principle of cause and effect. In fact, even though they did not directly take lives themselves, they indirectly caused the killing of living beings, ultimately leading to negative consequences.

Emperor Wu of Liang's story is a typical example of this issue. According to *The Record of Water Mirror Turning Back Heaven*, once the emperor asked Chan Master Bao Zhi, "How long can I still live?" The Chan Master replied, "After I die, you will build a pagoda for me. When the stupa collapses, it will be the end of your life."

After the Chan Master passed into parinirvana, the emperor built a wooden pagoda. Later, recalling the Chan Master's prediction and feeling that the wooden pagoda was not solid enough, he decided to replace it with a stone pagoda. The emperor had the wooden one disassembled to begin constructing the stone pagoda. At that time, Hou Jing overtook the throne and imprisoned the emperor in Taicheng, where he eventually died from starvation.

Emperor Wu of Liang, a devout follower of Buddhism, had been deeply involved in virtuous acts and made significant contributions to Buddhism. So why did he not have a peaceful death? Some even developed erroneous views about Buddhism because of this question.

In reality, the emperor's life was the result of his actions in a previous life. He was a practitioner in a past life and spent much time in solitary meditation in a mountain cave. During that time, he had a mischievous and clever monkey. Whenever he dozed off during meditation, the monkey would make noise to wake him.

As his spiritual progress advanced, whenever he entered a meditative state, the monkey mistakenly believed he was falling asleep and would try to disturb him. This annoyed him. On one occasion, before meditating, he placed the monkey inside a nearby mountain cave and sealed the entrance with rocks.

Unexpectedly, he remained in the meditative state for several days. When he finally came out of meditation and went to check on the monkey, he found that the poor animal had starved to death.

Due to his spiritual practices, he was reborn as an emperor in his next life and continued to engage in virtuous acts. However, because he had caused the monkey's

death by starvation in the mountain cave, he also died from starvation in Taicheng. This exemplifies the principle of cause and effect, which never fails.

[Nyang Tingdzin Zangpo (eighth–ninth centuries), the teacher of the Tibetan emperor, was known for his remarkable ability to enter a meditative state for seven consecutive days. He possessed the extraordinary power of remote vision, allowing him to see distant places. For instance, he could observe the activities of Shantarakshita and Vimalamitra in India, which eventually led him to suggest inviting them to Tibet.

Once, a practitioner did a retreat in Chimpu and mentioned that his eyesight was not good at the time. I joked with him, saying, “When Nyang Tingdzin Zangpo did his retreat in Chimpu, his vision was so clear that he could see all the way to India. How is it that you are unable to see well in Chimpu?”]

We should also bear in mind that in this life, we may unintentionally take a life. Unless negative actions are purified, their consequences will eventually catch up with us. I heard a story about a practitioner who caught a mouse and relocated it, but unfortunately, the mouse was accidentally trampled to death by someone. Indirectly causing harm to living beings is truly dreadful, for until we fully repent for our negative actions, their consequences will continue to await us.

During Patrul Rinpoche’s time, some lamas and monks, when visiting their benefactors’ homes, were served the meat of animals that had been slaughtered and prepared specifically for them. Their craving for meat was so strong that they consumed it eagerly, showing neither remorse nor compassion for the slain creatures. In such instances, the negative karmic consequences of the killing were shared equally by both the benefactors and their guests.

It is true that the tradition of offering the flesh and blood of animals existed in Tibet in the past. It reflected the inappropriate actions of certain individual practitioners; we should address the matter as it is—there is no need to deny or hide. Tibetan Buddhism has since made positive changes in this respect. Except for very few monasteries and households, the tradition of slaughtering animals to make offerings to lamas and monks has generally disappeared.

We cannot deny what happened in the past, but it is not a common phenomenon. I have mentioned in some of my books that eminent masters such as Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, Patrul Rinpoche, and Pema Dündul (1816–1872) strongly condemned the offering and consumption of meat and blood, as can be seen from

their biographies. Of course, some benefactors may be unaware of the negative consequences of killing animals and offering their flesh and blood. However, it is not acceptable for recipients to knowingly withhold information about these faults to avoid upsetting the benefactors.

A Dharma teacher must know what to do and what to avoid. It is highly irresponsible for a teacher not to inform a benefactor about the negative consequences of killing, merely to prevent them from becoming unhappy or frustrated. Instead, the teacher should not give in to the benefactor's wishes and should firmly say, "No, that is not acceptable."

Here is a story from the *Sutra of Parables*:

A Dharma practitioner had a benefactor whose family made a living by slaughtering pigs. The master had been receiving offerings from the family for many years. He knew that killing animals is a negative action, but he simply yielded to the family and never tried to dissuade them. Later, the father of the benefactor died and was reborn as a river ghost. Due to the karmic effect of killing in his previous life, the ghost suffered tremendously from his body being constantly cut.

Once, the master was crossing a river by boat when the river ghost suddenly appeared and halted the boat. The ghost declared that he would not release the boat unless the master was thrown into the river. The boatman asked why. The ghost replied, "For years, my family and I have been offering to this master, but he never warned me about the karmic consequences of killing. Now that I must endure the consequences and suffer, I hold a grudge against the master!"

Upon hearing this, the boatman said to the ghost, "You are now experiencing immense suffering due to killing animals in your previous life. Just imagine how much worse the suffering will be if you kill a monk today!" The ghost replied, "I understand, but I am too angry to let you go. I will only release you if you make offerings, recite scriptures on my behalf, and dedicate the merit to me by calling my name."

Everyone on board agreed, so the ghost set the boat free. The master immediately began reciting scriptures and dedicating the merit, as did the boatmen and other passengers. Eventually, the suffering of the river ghost was alleviated.

Therefore, whether you are a monastic or a layperson, if you notice someone engaging in wrongful actions, you should bring it to their attention. Whether they

choose to listen or not is their decision. Since you understand the impact of positive and negative actions, it is important to explain this to others who may not be aware.

As stated in the text, when a benefactor offers the flesh and blood of animals and the master does not stop it and even accepts it joyfully, the negative karmic effect of killing the animals falls on both the benefactor and the master without distinction. The *Lankavatara Sutra* says:

Killing beings for the sake of profit,
Buying meat with money,
Both actions are negative,
Which lead to rebirth in the Howling Hell.

There was indeed a bad habit of meat consumption in Tibet. I hope Han Dharma students studying in Tibet understand the faults of eating meat and gradually change this habit to avoid negative karmic effects. Nowadays, many people eat meat, but this consumption is not beneficial. It is clearly stated in the *Lankavatara Sutra*:

Meat isn't good,
Meat is impure,
Meat leads to evils,
And destroys merits.

That being said, it is still difficult for some people to change their habits immediately. Even if you cannot completely eliminate meat from your diet, you should at least try your best to reduce consumption, which can already bring you great benefits.

Patrul Rinpoche also mentioned that when influential individuals and government officials travel, countless animals are slaughtered to provide for their tea parties and receptions wherever they go.

Today, it is said that in some places, depending on the status of the guests, their reception meals are categorized into three levels: the high level consists of meat only, the middle level includes half meat and half vegetables, and the low level contains one-third meat. One can imagine the number of animals that need to be slaughtered for these meals, especially when provincial government officials are inspecting cities. Many animals are killed to prepare meals for these visits.

I witnessed one such reception in a city in Southern China. While I was eating a vegetarian meal in a restaurant, over a dozen tables around me were reserved for government officials, with only meat dishes placed on those tables. Upon seeing this, I thought to myself, “Oh my! Just this meal alone is enough to bind them in samsara for many kalpas.” Therefore, those who believe in the principle of cause and effect will not feel the slightest envy when they see such a meal arrangement. Instead, they will worry for the diners.

Next, we’ll discuss life in the Tibetan region:

Wealthy individuals, as a general practice, take the lives of countless animals. Rather than allowing their livestock to die naturally, they slaughter nearly all of them as they grow older, sparing only a rare few.

Especially in places like the Aba grassland and the Zoergai grassland, wealthy herders with large herds of livestock sing loudly every day, creating a seemingly beautiful scene. However, beneath this facade, numerous animals are being slaughtered, resulting in a bloody and brutal situation. When I visited to release animals, I often heard about families killing a significant number of livestock, which was horrifying to hear.

Moreover, during the summer, these very cattle and sheep inadvertently cause the deaths of countless insects, flies, ants, and even small fish and frogs as they graze. These creatures are swallowed along with the grass, trampled underfoot, or buried in dung. The resulting negative karma from these actions affects not only the animals themselves but also their owners.

Although the owners of the cattle and sheep did not kill the small creatures directly, they did raise the livestock, thus indirectly committing negative actions. The negative karmic effect of livestock killing insects and more also impacts the owners. Therefore, it is truly unfortunate to be a herdsman.

[Many of you may not fully understand this example of a herdsman. However, if you consider a restaurant owner, especially one who runs a seafood restaurant, it is not difficult to imagine the corresponding negative karmic effects.]

According to Patrul Rinpoche, compared to horses, cattle, and other livestock, sheep cause particularly significant harm. While grazing, they consume various small creatures, including frogs, snakes, and baby birds.

I have never herded sheep, so I was not aware of this myself. Patrul Rinpoche resided in Sershul, a town on the Tibetan plateau, where there were numerous

sheep, so he was more knowledgeable about this. However, when we recently passed through Sershul, we did not see any sheep. We remarked, “There used to be many sheep here during Patrul Rinpoche’s time. Why do we not see any now?”

In summer, during shearing time, hundreds of thousands of insects carried by each sheep in its fleece all die. In winter, at lambing time, only half the lambs are kept, while the remainder are killed at birth, and their skins are used to make hats and clothing. Many wealthy individuals, including some lamas, choose to wear these products.

This is indeed a questionable practice among Tibetans, and I hope it will gradually diminish. Fur and leather clothing used to be popular in the Han region. However, animal rights organizations like World Animal Protection have called for a ban on the use of fur and leather, and people around the world have protested against animal cruelty. As a result, the situation has improved in recent years.

The killing of mother ewes and rams is also difficult to bear. The mother ewes are exploited for their milk and for breeding lambs until they become too old and weary, at which point they are all slaughtered for their meat and skins. No ram, whether castrated or not, is allowed to reach maturity without being promptly slaughtered. If the sheep are infested with lice, millions of them are killed on each sheep during shearing. Anyone who owns a flock of a hundred or more sheep is bound to face at least one rebirth in hell.

Now let’s examine the killing related to a woman:

For each Tibetan marriage, countless sheep are sacrificed during the dowry exchange, the bride’s departure, and her arrival at her new home. In most cities in the Han region, with very few exceptions for Buddhist weddings where vegetarian meals are served, most weddings offer meat dishes. The grander the wedding, the more sentient beings are killed for food.

In 2002, American film producer David Gest and Oscar-winning actor Liza Minnelli got married. The wedding cost \$3.5 million. Michael Jackson and Elizabeth Taylor were among the guests. However, despite the extravagant celebration, the marriage ended just a year later. I am quite certain that this wedding did not only offer vegetarian meals and that many animals were killed to cater to the guests. The scale of animal slaughter at this wedding must have been significantly larger than at a smaller event.

Martin Lee Ka Shing, a billionaire from Hong Kong, spent HK\$90 million on

his wedding in 2006. Despite the grandeur of the event, the sheer scale of animal slaughter for the wedding feast is alarming.

Today, people's greed knows no bounds. In the past, individuals would occasionally slaughter a few sheep or a yak, but now some people host extravagant weddings and invite thousands of guests. These guests often hold high social status, prompting the hosts to feel compelled to offer more than just vegetables.

Although these individuals seem to bask in glamour, they are unaware of the negative karmic consequences of killing. Here is a story from the *Merits of the Diamond Sutra*:

A woman passed away shortly after her wedding. Her spirit entered her parents' dream and said, "I did not engage in any wrongful activities during my life, except for the fact that numerous goats and sheep were slaughtered for my wedding feast. As a result, I am now enduring immense agony. If you recite the *Diamond Sutra* on my behalf, I will be liberated from this suffering."

Her parents followed her instructions and began reading the sutra. Seven days later, they encountered the Buddha in a dream, and the Buddha said to them, "Due to the merits of reciting the Diamond Sutra, your daughter has transcended the lower realm and has been reborn as a human once again."

Have you ever taken the lives of sentient beings while you were still a layperson or after you got married? Have you sincerely regretted your actions?

If you have not yet purified these negative actions, even if you did not directly commit the act of killing, you will still face the negative karmic consequences in a future life. Therefore, we must exercise great caution regarding the outcomes of our actions.



Lesson 60

“For every marriage, innumerable sheep ... one act of killing could be divided up among many people.” [page 103–104]

Now let us continue to study “taking life,” the first of the ten negative actions to be avoided.

When we celebrate holidays or invite guests, we often engage in numerous acts of killing. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche primarily addresses this issue with examples of Tibetan women, illustrating that even a woman can be involved in horrific acts of killing.

Yesterday we learned that when a Tibetan woman gets married, countless sheep are slaughtered by the groom’s family. Let’s continue on this topic.

Afterward, whenever the young bride returns to visit her family, another animal is inevitably killed. If her friends and relatives invite her out and serve anything other than meat, she feigns shock, loses her appetite, and eats in an affected manner, as if she has forgotten how to chew.

However, when she is presented with a plump sheep and a generous serving of breast meat and tripe, the young bride, like a red-faced little glutton, sits down with great seriousness, takes out her small knife, and devours it all with noisy enthusiasm. The next day, she departs burdened with the bloody carcass, resembling a hunter returning home—except worse, for each outing ensures she will not return empty-handed.

[When hunters go out to hunt, they sometimes return home empty-handed. But each time such a woman visits her own family, she is sure to bring back meat.]

As I mentioned previously, Tibetans traditionally followed a diet that heavily relied on meat, which is not considered healthy. However, it is undeniable that factors such as geography, transportation, climate, and others contributed to a scarcity of vegetables and grains at that time, which is very different from the situation today. Consequently, some Tibetan women also resorted to killing animals for food.

Generally speaking, women, who are often gentle, tend to be less daring than men. However, sometimes women can be fiercer than men when it comes to killing. The same is true in the Han region of China, where many butchers are women. Though they may not be as strong as their male counterparts, who slaughter larger animals like pigs, sheep, and cattle, these women are often skilled at killing chickens and eels.

Currently, the act of killing is extremely serious in the Han region of China, and the methods employed are varied. I heard that in Ruian City of Zhejiang Province, there is a small village known as the “ant-eating village,” where 70 percent of the population enjoys eating ants.

The villagers first search for ant nests in the mountains and then collect them in bags to take home. They pour the nests into an iron cylinder and steam them on a stove. After that, they dry the cooked ants and consume them. The villagers prepare ants in various ways, including dehydrating, steaming, eating them raw, soaking them in alcohol, and more. They believe that eating ants helps to improve immunity, physical fitness, and longevity. There are differing opinions about eating ants, and sometimes, the cruelty of humans can be quite frightening.

Some women may appear gentle, kind, and well-educated, but they can be ruthless when it comes to consuming animals. It can be quite scary to witness blood occasionally dripping from their teeth. Interestingly, when a tiger consumes a human, it is labeled as a ferocious beast. However, humans, despite consuming countless other beings, are not considered “ferocious.”

In fact, humans are the most ferocious beings in this world. Additionally, humans tend to prioritize their own interests above all else, often disregarding other species. When several thousand people perished in the Yushu earthquake, the tragedy garnered global attention, and mass media outlets commented on the

pitiful state of the victims. However, every day in slaughterhouses and markets, countless animals are killed, their lives no different from ours. Sadly, many people remain indifferent to this reality. There are no equivalent animal rights laws in place to protect them, which is undeniably unfair.

In this world, it is wrong to consume other animals as food. Buddhists have played a positive role in challenging this negative practice. I hope that in the future, more attention will be given to abstaining from killing, releasing lives, giving up a meat-based diet, and adopting a vegetarian diet. Otherwise, some laypeople who have been studying the Dharma for years may understand that killing a person results in legal punishment, but they may not realize that killing an animal leads to negative karmic consequences. Even worse, some may feel indifferent when killing animals or insects with their own hands. It is our responsibility to help them correct these misguided beliefs.

Women are often compassionate. Patrul Rinpoche referred to compassionless Tibetan women as “red-faced monsters.” By extension, compassionless Chinese women could be labeled “white-faced monsters.”

Many of you may feel that you do not have such a fault because you have never engaged in killing. In reality, you may simply be unaware of the killings you commit. If you examine your life closely, you will realize you have committed many acts of killing and have taken away the precious lives of many beings, both intentionally and unintentionally. As you know, killing is the gravest negative action, as life is the most precious thing in this world.

Here is a story from the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*:

A man searched for treasures in the ocean. His ship was wrecked, and all his treasures fell into the sea. Fortunately, he was unharmed. He returned and joyfully announced, “I nearly lost a valuable treasure!” People laughed at him, saying, “You lost all your treasures in the ocean, and nothing remains. Why do you say, ‘I nearly lost a valuable treasure?’” He replied, “Among all treasures, human life is the most important. People seek treasure to support their lives, not the other way around.”

Life is the most precious thing in the world. All sentient beings, including insects, view this the same way humans do. While beings vary in size, their experiences of happiness and pain are similar. Adults and young children suffer when killed, just as insects do. Despite their small size, insects also experience significant pain when they are killed.

Therefore, experiencing suffering when killed is the same for everyone, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, skin color, species, and more. All sentient beings in this world experience fear when faced with being killed. Except for noble beings who have attained the ultimate state of realization, all beings, regardless of size, inherently desire life and fear death. Those who disregard the lives of other beings should be condemned. The anger of a person who takes lives frightens all beings.

The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says:

Those who enjoy killing
are disliked by all living beings;
Those who dislike killing
are welcomed happily by all beings.

If a butcher who takes lives stays in your house, it is very likely that you will fear he may murder you in the middle of the night for money. In contrast, a person who aspires to benefit all beings will naturally possess a kind demeanor, making people happy to stay with him. Therefore, everyone should cultivate compassion for all sentient beings.

Children often cause the deaths of countless animals while playing, whether they are aware of it or not. For example, in summer, they may unknowingly kill many insects simply by striking the ground with a willow branch or a leather whip as they walk.

Except for those whose Mahayanist disposition has already developed in childhood, most children have killed frogs, tadpoles, dragonflies, butterflies, earthworms, ants, and more. However, in today's densely populated cities filled with skyscrapers, children primarily encounter concrete buildings and school playgrounds. They have fewer opportunities to experience nature's greenery, resulting in fewer chances to harm insects.

Nevertheless, if a child lacks inherent or learned kindness and compassion, they may harm small birds, chicks, or rabbits in their youth, and eventually harm larger animals like cattle, horses, lions, or elephants as they grow older. Moreover, if they become scientists, they may develop atomic bombs and other nuclear weapons, leading to the destruction of countless lives.

Children should be taught about compassion. They need to learn not to harm others, and if they do, there should be consequences. Many schoolteachers who

are present here for today's teaching told me that they would slap a student's palm if they do not turn in their homework on time. While this might be effective, it should also apply if a student takes the life of a living being. In addition to discipline, the student should receive Dharma teachings so they understand from a young age that all living beings value their lives just as humans do. Through these teachings, young people can develop compassion over time.

Last year, on June 1st, the International Children's Day, I invited many children and their parents to participate in various activities rooted in Mahayana Buddhism. These activities included saving animals, chanting prayers, prostrating, offering lamps, singing Buddhist songs, and engaging in Buddhist dances. Such activities can help children cultivate values of compassion, loving-kindness, and animal protection. With this year's Children's Day just a month away, I strongly suggest organizing these activities in various locations so that the seeds of compassion and loving-kindness can be sown in the hearts of children. This is more important than anything else in their lives.

Generally speaking, the experiences we have during primary and secondary school are most likely to stay in our memories. When we look back, we can vividly recall experiences from those years, while most of what happened afterward has already faded from memory.

For this reason, we now combine the study of traditional Chinese culture with Buddhism. We aim to help children cultivate compassion from a young age through activities such as watching cartoons and recitation, among others. By doing so, we hope that as these children grow up, they will possess kindness and develop bodhicitta. Ultimately, they will become good individuals, regardless of their wealth, status, or fame. This is more meaningful than anything else.

In fact, it is the responsibility of every Dharma practitioner to care for the children around us, as their fate is closely connected with ours. It is never too late to guide them toward the right path. If you take action, even a seemingly small effort or simple act can have a significant impact on a child's life and on the lives of many others in the future.

Many teachers from Wisdom and Compassion Elementary School¹²² are present today. What you are doing may seem insignificant compared to the work of eminent Buddhist masters, but in fact, you are as great as those masters. I once

¹²² This charity school was founded and built by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche to educate children who otherwise have no access to basic worldly education.

heard a speech given by a primary school teacher from Qinghai Province. The teacher said, “During my thirty-plus years as a teacher, everything I do is for my students because they will be the doers of the future and the promoters of our culture.”

The key to instilling the essence of wisdom in both adults and children is in our hands. I hope we can all vow to care for those around us, especially children.

If a child receives education in compassion, he will surely have a bright future. On the other hand, if he grows up following negative intentions and dispositions, his whole life may be ruined. *Records of Protecting Lives* from the Ming dynasty contains a story about a child who faced immediate karmic retribution for his recent wrongdoing:

There was a child in Jizhou who enjoyed killing animals. He particularly liked taking bird eggs from nests to eat. One day, someone told the child, “There are bird eggs at a specific location. Come with me to get them.” The person then led him to a mulberry field, where the child noticed a city along the roadside. The city appeared to be bustling and crowded, prompting the child to wonder, “How did a city end up here?” The person then took him into the city, and the gate suddenly closed.

The ground in the city turned into hot iron, causing the child’s feet to feel like they were on fire and inflicting unbearable pain upon him. The child cried out and ran around the city, eventually reaching the east gate, only to find it closed. The same was true for the west, south, and north gates.

A mulberry picker noticed the child running in the field, crying out, and thought the child had lost his mind. The mulberry picker then informed the child’s father. When the father arrived, he called out the child’s name, and the child responded, but then fainted.

Suddenly, the city and the fire disappeared. However, when the father examined his son’s legs, he discovered that they were burned from the knee down. The wounded areas eventually turned into bone and never healed.

Some children suddenly develop incurable diseases. Some become disabled or even die. These occurrences are the karmic consequences of their actions related to killing in this life and past lives. If parents want their children to contribute to societal development, they should instill good values in their minds early on. Otherwise, it is difficult to predict what the children will become as they grow up.

As Mahayanists, we do not live in isolation, detached from social interac-

tions. Therefore, we must care for those around us. We should not solely focus on concerns like “What to eat?” or “How to sleep.” If we only think about ourselves and lack an altruistic mindset, we are not true Mahayanists.

Many people, in fact, spend their entire lives taking life, like ogres. Some individuals living in big cities are no different from hunters and butchers. Why is that? It is because they consume many animals in their daily meals. People living near the sea especially kill numerous sentient beings for each meal. These individuals can be even more ferocious than a hunter, who only occasionally kills an animal.

Regarding the killing of animals, Patrul Rinpoche exclaims:

Indeed, when we reflect on how we slaughter cattle to feast on their flesh and blood, despite the fact that they have spent their entire lives serving us and nourishing us with their milk like a mother, we appear more monstrous than any ogre.

[There are two kinds of ogres: one that eats even its own child, and the other that does not. The latter is slightly more conscientious, as it does not directly kill others.]

Here is a well-known story from Tibet that explains why humans are worse than any ogre:

Once, there was a thief who hid in the forest while being pursued. He planned to steal and slaughter a yak from a nearby herdsman at night. Driven by his negative karma, he encountered a mara. During their conversation, the thief learned that the mara intended to kill a yak. So he said to the mara, “Since you are a mara, you must be powerful and capable. You go and kill a yak. I will boil water for you here.” The mara then left. At dawn, the mara returned empty-handed.

“Is everything ready?” the thief asked.

“Yes,” the mara answered.

“Then where is the beef?”

“Not yet,” said the mara. “I just inserted a piece of sawdust into the yak’s hoof, which will soon start to fester. When it festers, it will become infected, and the yak will soon die.”

“That is too slow,” complained the thief. “I do not want to wait that long. Why don’t I go, and you wait for me?” The thief then stole a yak and slaughtered it immediately. Soon, he carried the bloody beef back to the forest.

The mara was surprised and said, “That was so fast! Are you a mara who is more ferocious than I am?” The mara dared not eat the beef and ran away.

This shows that sometimes humans are more terrifying than maras. When a mara kills living beings, it considers the time and conditions. Only when the causes and conditions ripen will the mara initiate pandemics or create natural disasters to gradually reach its goal. In contrast, when a human wants to kill a living being, they can do so on the spot and eat it right away. One can witness such horrifying scenes in restaurants. Such humans have no compassion; all they care about is satisfying their appetites. In this regard, humans are indeed worse than maras.

Taking a life is considered complete as a negative action when all four elements are present. As a result, the killer must experience the full karmic consequences of killing. This concept is emphasized in the teachings of the *Vinaya* as well as in my recent teaching on the *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*. Many people are unsure whether they have completed an act of taking life, so let’s elaborate on this.

What are the four elements of killing? Consider the example of a hunter killing a wild animal.

First, he clearly sees and identifies the animal—whether it is a stag, musk deer, or another creature—fully recognizing it as a living being. This awareness forms the *basis* for the act.

Next, the desire to kill arises within him, and the idea of killing the animal is the *intention* to take its life.

Then, he carries out the action by striking a vital point of the animal with a weapon, such as a gun or a bow and arrow—this represents the physical *execution* of the act.

Finally, the animal’s vital functions cease, and the conjunction of its body and mind is severed, marking the final *completion* of the act of taking a life.

At this point, the animal’s vital functions come to an end, and the conjunction of its body and mind disintegrates. This signifies the final completion of the act of taking a life.

The act of killing is complete when it encompasses all four aforementioned elements of a negative action.

Another example is the slaughter of a sheep raised for meat by its owner in the

Tibetan region. First, the owner instructs a servant or butcher to kill the sheep. The *basis* for this act is the owner's awareness that the sheep is a living, sentient being.

The *intention*, the idea of killing the sheep, arises the moment the owner decides to have it slaughtered.

The *execution* of the killing occurs when the slaughterer takes his noose, swiftly captures the chosen sheep, flips it onto its back, secures its legs with leather straps, and tightens a rope around its muzzle until it suffocates.

In the Tibetan region, cattle and sheep were previously killed by strangulation. This method inflicts excruciating pain on the animal and takes approximately ten minutes to end its life. In comparison, cutting the throat of an animal takes about three to four minutes, while electrocution takes two minutes. Electrocution is also a method used to execute criminals. Therefore, if one must kill a living being, it is crucial to minimize its suffering by carrying out the killing as swiftly as possible.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche also mentioned in class a story about Lama Woesser of Dawu County, who possesses a strong sense of compassion.

While pursuing his Dharma studies at Dzogchen Monastery, Lama Woesser overheard a local method of slaughtering yaks: by stabbing a specific vein in a yak's back, the animal would collapse and die instantly. He returned to his hometown and advised the villagers, "If you must kill yaks, consider using this technique."

Later, someone slandered him, stating, "This lama left his hometown to study Dharma, but instead of focusing on learning the Buddhist teachings, he learned how to kill yaks, something he should not have learned. What is even worse is that he brought this technique of slaughtering yaks back to his hometown."

In response to this, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche commented, "Even though a great bodhisattva teaches others how to slaughter yaks, which may have a direct or indirect karmic impact on oneself, what he does can alleviate the suffering of those living beings."

In many slaughterhouses, cattle are killed in extremely cruel ways. As those who watched the documentary *The Journey of Compassion*¹²³ know, that the yak's eyes are still rolling and its muscles are still quivering when the butcher cuts open its throat or even after decapitating it. The process of ceasing to breathe is very painful for the yak.

¹²³ The video documented Khenpo Sodargye and his sangha members rescuing yaks that were destined for slaughter and releasing them in a Tibetan grassland in 2006.

Sometimes I wonder: with advancements in science and technology, should electric shock be used by butchers when killing yaks to minimize their suffering? As we all know, the pain of sickness is incomparable to the agony of death. However, we struggle to endure even the suffering caused by illness, let alone that of death. Therefore, when we encounter these pitiable living creatures, we should not only think about ourselves but also consider their well-being.

As the sheep is strangled by a rope, its breath ceases, its wide eyes take on a bluish hue and grow cloudy, with tears streaming down. What a brutal and agonizing death! Its lifeless body is then dragged into the house, marking the final stage—the *completion* of ending its life.

In an instant, the sheep is skinned with a knife, its flesh still trembling because the “all-pervading energy” has not yet fully departed from its body, making it appear as though it were still alive. Without delay, it is roasted over a fire or cooked on a stove and then consumed. Reflecting on this, such animals are almost eaten while still alive, making humans no different from predatory beasts.

In the past, Tibetans engaged in a horrifying practice in which an animal’s flesh was cut off piece by piece and cooked for food before it stopped breathing. However, in many parts of the world, conditions are far worse. The torture animals endure while alive is even more severe than the act of killing itself.

As we all know, foie gras is a specialty French food product made from the liver of a duck or goose. Foie gras, caviar, and truffles are considered three delicacies in the haute cuisine of the Western world.

To obtain foie gras, ducks or geese are force-fed two or three times a day through a metal tube, resulting in large deposits of fat in their livers. This process can enlarge the liver of the unfortunate birds to ten times its normal volume. Force-feeding inflicts significant suffering on ducks and geese. To produce this delicacy, people deliberately fatten the birds in a cruel manner, showing little regard for their welfare.

A similar cruelty is evident in the production of KFC’s chicken drumsticks. I have heard that these chickens are raised in large warehouses under highly uncomfortable living conditions. The chickens endure a distressing existence, and consuming such chickens can pose a considerably higher risk to our health. The presence of numerous incurable and peculiar diseases is likely a consequence of these human practices.

People often speak of “world peace,” but given the extent of cruelty toward animals, we know that this world can hardly be peaceful. Why is that? Because the fundamental cause of peace is great compassion. Without it, there can be no harmony among people, ethnic groups, and nations. Therefore, great compassion is essential for human livelihood. It is the source of peace and happiness for all living beings. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* states:

Loving-kindness and compassion are vast,
Then peace and happiness will permeate all beings.

No matter how eloquent a person’s speech may be, without loving-kindness and compassion, such eloquence cannot bring genuine good to oneself or others, in this life or in lives to come.

The *Mahapurusa Sastra* also says:

Giving love and compassion in such a manner
Renders endless merits;
Making offerings in such a subtle way
Brings peace and happiness to all beings.

Therefore, we should all cultivate compassion. Even if we are unable to observe all the other precepts, as Mahayanists, we should uphold the precept of non-killing and compassion. The *Sutra Requested by Ananda* states:

If you do not abandon one dharma,
You then uphold all supreme dharmas.
What does “not abandoning one dharma” mean?
It refers to “not abandoning all sentient beings.”

Furthermore, we should frequently practice love and compassion. The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says:

If one practices love and compassion
Day and night to all living beings,
One will obtain long-lasting happiness,
Because one does not annoy others.

Therefore, as more compassionate people arise, this world will transform

into a garden of happiness. Conversely, if there is no love, compassion, joy, and equanimity in people's hearts, no matter how advanced the external material world becomes, it does not necessarily benefit humanity. Worse yet, it may even lead to humanity's self-destruction.

I firmly believe that the key to world peace lies in the love and compassion of Mahayana Buddhism. Without them, achieving peace is simply impossible. In the 1980s, the late renowned Tibetan Lama Mogye Sumtun stated:

The essential foundation of world peace is great compassion.

When I was younger, I did not pay much attention to his words. However, as I reflect on his statement now, I recognize the immense value in the insights of experienced practitioners like Lama Mogye Sumtun.

Not only does the peace of the world, nations, and ethnic groups depend on great compassion, but the peace of our communities and families does as well. Individuals who possess deep compassion naturally foster harmonious relationships with others. In contrast, those with selfish mindsets can never bring about peace in the world.

We have just studied the four elements required for the completion of the act of killing. Does this mean one can be exempt from the karmic effects of killing if all four elements are not fulfilled? The answer is no.

Suppose you planned to kill an animal today, or you had the intention to do so but ultimately did not carry out the act. In this case, two key elements—the *basis* and the *intention*—of the negative action would still be present: first, the awareness that the creature is a living being, and second, the deliberate intention to take its life. While the harm caused would be less severe than if the act had been fully executed, the stain of a negative act—like a reflection in a mirror—would nevertheless remain.

Therefore, in our daily lives, we should avoid thinking or saying something like, “I am going to kill you,” even in jest.

During an argument, some individuals may choose to shout, “I will eat you if you continue to ignore this matter!” However, it is important to note that cannibalism, which refers to one person consuming another, is extremely rare. When someone threatens another using such language, even if they do not

genuinely intend to act upon it, they have already planted the negative karmic seed of cannibalism in the mindstream, which is undesirable.

Some people believe that only the individual who directly commits the act of killing accumulates negative karma, while the one who merely gives the order remains unaffected—or, if they do bear any karmic consequences, it is only minimal. Because of this wrong view, when it is time to order at a restaurant that serves living creatures like fish, some laypeople will say, “I am not going to order because I have taken refuge. You all can place the order. I like to eat so-and-so fish...” Such an action is quite concerning.

However, be aware that everyone involved, even those who simply felt pleased about the act, will experience the same karmic consequences. This applies even more so to the individual who directly gave the order for the killing.

According to the Theravada precepts, soliciting others to kill carries the same karmic effect as killing by oneself. However, according to the bodhisattva vows of Mahayana Buddhism, soliciting killing results in more negative karmic effects than the act of killing itself. Why is that? Killing with one’s own hands brings karmic effects solely to the killer, whereas soliciting another to kill harms not only oneself but also the person being solicited. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes altruism, making such solicitation a greater transgression.

The Sutra on Deciding the Effect of Good and Evil Actions states:

If one’s mind is kind, they will receive a positive karmic effect.

If one’s mind is evil, they will receive a negative karmic effect.

...

The actions a person takes will lead to corresponding effects on themselves.

Therefore, all karmic effects are subject to the mind, while speech and actions are secondary. If you solicit others to kill, even if you do not physically kill but have generated the thought, you will experience the karmic consequences.

All individuals involved in the killing of an animal will fully experience the karmic consequences of that act. The act of killing a single animal cannot be divided among multiple people; each participant bears the complete karmic result. For example, when ten diners order a single large fish for their meal, the karmic effect

is not divided by ten; instead, each diner receives the full consequence of killing that fish.

The *Treasury of Abhidharma* also states:

In wars and so forth, all of them
Have the same goal, so all possess
The karma, like the perpetrator.

If an army of one hundred soldiers kills a person, then every soldier receives the entire karmic result of that killing. [This principle also applies to those who perform positive actions.]

Therefore, we must be mindful not to take life, as many karmic actions are interconnected, which is quite alarming. Take KFC and McDonald's, for example. According to statistics from 2009, there were over thirty thousand McDonald's restaurants in 120 countries, including 1,065 in China. Every day, more than fifty million customers worldwide visit McDonald's. Similarly, there are over 11,000 KFC restaurants in more than eighty countries, including two thousand in China.

The KFC slogan is "It is finger-lickin' good," while the McDonald's slogan is "I am lovin' it." These chain restaurants share the same objective of promoting meat consumption. If you dine at one of these chain restaurants, you become entangled in the karmic consequences of the killings carried out by all these restaurants worldwide.

Do you dare to dine at one of these chain restaurants? You should definitely consider this. The two chains slaughter millions of living beings every day. McDonald's was established in 1940, and KFC in 1952—over sixty years ago. How many living beings have been killed during such a lengthy period? The exact number is difficult to calculate.

Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu and Patrul Rinpoche both stated that anyone who owns a flock of one hundred or more sheep can be assured of experiencing rebirth in hell. Therefore, we can conclude that the karmic consequences for the owners of these restaurants are extremely severe.

I heard that in 2006, a Hong Kong celebrity gave a lecture at a university. After the lecture, the organizer hosted a dinner for the celebrity and his staff members. Together, they consumed over 150 kilograms of fish. The restaurant owner was so surprised that he referred to the celebrity as the "big stomach king."

Acts of killing in cities can be more severe compared to Tibet or rural areas. As mentioned in the previous section, in Tibet, when a married daughter visited her mother, at most one sheep would be slaughtered to treat her, and she would bring some meat back home. Nowadays, in the Han region of China, each time you visit a restaurant or an entertainment venue, you will witness extravagant meals that involve the sacrifice of countless living beings.

Therefore, as humans, we should reflect on the state of the world today. It is also crucial for us to contemplate our past actions that have caused harm to living beings. Just recently, a Dharma student confessed to me, saying, “I came across a Buddhist story, and now I feel immense remorse for my past actions.” It is not necessary to feel remorse solely from reading a Buddhist story. However, if you have ever taken the life of a living being, then you should indeed feel deep remorse. Have you considered how you might repay such a karmic debt?

In summary, the karmic consequences of taking life are extremely severe. Therefore, we must repent for our negative actions and vow not to intentionally kill any living being in this lifetime, even if it means sacrificing our own lives. I hope that everyone in attendance at today’s teaching will make this vow. With such a strong determination, the negative actions of killing committed in the past will gradually be purified.



Lesson 61

“Taking what is not given is of three kinds ... action of their killing or stealing.” [page 105–107]

2.1.4.1.1.2. Taking What is Not Given

Of the ten negative actions to be avoided, we have covered “Taking Life.” Today, we will study “Taking What is not Given.”

Taking what is not given is of three categories: taking by force, taking by stealth, and taking by trickery.

2.1.4.1.1.2.1. Taking by Force

This is also known as taking by overpowering. For instance, a powerful figure, such as a king, may not rely on lawful taxation but instead seize others’ property or possessions, such as mines, land, and other assets, through illegal force and coercion. Alternatively, such a powerful individual may openly plunder by deploying their army.

People are becoming increasingly greedy. It is said that the Iraq War, initiated by the George W. Bush administration in 2003, was partly motivated by the desire to gain control over Iraq’s oil resources. Similarly, in the 1840s, the British government sent military forces to invade China, coercing the Qing Empire into paying a significant indemnity and granting extraterritorial rights in economic, political, and military matters. This Opium War was also fueled by greed. These invasions can be seen as large-scale acts of taking by force.

By comparison, when one person takes another person's possessions, it can be described as "taking by force" on a smaller scale. For instance, it is not uncommon for bigger or older classmates to take a schoolchild's favorite pens and toys, leaving the child feeling unable to report the incident. Bigger children forcefully seizing the belongings of a younger child exemplifies "taking by force."

In fact, the precept concerning "not taking what is not given" is quite strict. For instance, if someone overtly or covertly takes two or three Chinese yuan (equivalent to forty to fifty cents) from another person, this already violates the precept. Therefore, it is relatively easy to commit such a transgression.

2.1.4.1.1.2.2. Taking by Stealth

This means secretly taking someone else's possessions, like a burglar, without being seen by the owner.

In recent years, theft has become more frequent in large cities. Sometimes, when a monk or nun goes shopping at a supermarket like Carrefour, a salesperson will constantly watch them. Perhaps the salesperson is concerned that the monastics might steal. On one occasion, I told a salesperson, "I will not steal, so you do not have to follow me all the time." I was informed that the supermarket had experienced over one hundred thefts in a single month, resulting in significant losses.

Theft also occurs in schools. Various items, such as clothing and stationery, are sometimes stolen. Children who steal at school may not have been taught proper behavior by their teachers. Alternatively, they may have developed bad habits. If such a child does not correct their behavior at a young age, they are likely to become even worse as they grow up. For example, they may engage in corruption and speculation, ultimately leading to their own ruin and harming others.

To a person without a conscience, stealing brings great pleasure, while a person with a conscience understands that stealing causes great pain to others. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says:

One should not take possession of others' belongings,
As they are like a blazing fire;
If one steals others' belongings,
The owner will cry and become frustrated.

The problem of theft is widespread in today's society. To prevent theft, homeowners in cities install anti-theft doors and windows in their homes. There are multiple layers of metal doors that one must pass through before reaching their room. People are essentially living in spaces that resemble prison cells, yet they still do not feel secure.

This situation is a consequence of the deteriorating social atmosphere. People's morality, conscience, and kindness are diminishing, while negative emotions such as lust, anger, and ignorance, along with erroneous views, are becoming more pronounced. Consequently, despite the fact that skyscrapers are growing taller each year and cars and luxury condos are becoming more comfortable and elegant, people's internal morality is declining, leading to a decrease in overall happiness. As a result, the happiness index in major cities is gradually decreasing.

Stealing is a negative action that we should all understand from an early age. Monastics should not steal; otherwise, they are not permitted to remain in the sangha.

Laypeople should not steal either. Something may have gone wrong with social norms, values, or education in some rural areas, where stealing is considered an act of heroism. When a parent sees their child stealing, they do not punish the child. Instead, the parent encourages the child, saying, "You are great! You deserve a reward! Can you steal this or that next time? You are getting smarter and more capable! You will be better when you grow up! What a hero!"

Such an upbringing is completely twisted. We, as human beings, must know what to do and what not to do.

2.1.4.1.1.2.3. Taking by Trickery

This refers to acquiring another person's goods, such as in a business transaction, through deceit—by misleading the other party, manipulating weights and measurements, or employing similar dishonest tactics.

Subterfuge is quite common in the business context. However, today even hospitals, which are supposed to save lives and cure diseases, are involved in trickery and deception. According to media reports, manufacturers sell the antibiotic clindamycin to distributors for four yuan, while hospitals then sell the product to patients for more than thirty yuan.

Additionally, the quality of commercial goods is deteriorating. When applying

for production permits, food manufacturers maintain good quality control over their products. However, during the subsequent distribution process, manufacturers begin to reduce ingredients or skip steps to maximize their profits. As a result, the products contain fewer healthy ingredients and more harmful additives. Ultimately, it will be humanity that brings about its own destruction.

In today's business world, if most individuals adhere to the principle of cause and effect and act in accordance with their conscience, they should gain some profit. However, the truth is quite the opposite. Motivated by greed, countless people engage in actions of taking by trickery, without feeling ashamed. These individuals do not believe in the law of karma and lack a conscience; all they care about is making a profit. By behaving this way, they are inevitably accumulating significant negative karma. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

If one cheats to easily acquire others' possessions,
One is very greedy and will often commit negative actions.

When corrupt government officials are imprisoned, people are often surprised to learn of their crimes, exclaiming, "Ah! Why are they so greedy? Has a dog eaten their conscience?"

These officials are driven by insatiable greed, ultimately losing control over their actions. Somehow, they seem unable to behave decently.

I have often thought that if people could adhere to the fundamental principles of Buddhism—the three refuges and the five precepts—society would be in great harmony, and the country would be stable. Sadly, many are unaware of the supreme value of Buddhism. Not only ordinary individuals but even national leaders sometimes struggle to abide by the five precepts. Consequently, it is quite challenging for many to make a meaningful contribution to society and to themselves.

In fact, Buddhist precepts are not incompatible with worldly ethics. Leaving aside the precepts for monks and nuns, just consider the five precepts observed by lay practitioners—the benefits they bring to society are obvious upon reflection. For example, if the mayor or the municipal party secretary refrains from killing living beings, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication, they are less likely to make major mistakes during their tenure. However, many government officials fail to abstain from wrongdoing, and at some point, they cannot resist the temptation of money, ultimately leading to their own destruction.

Many believe that as long as they do not personally steal, but instead make money through deception or trickery in business and similar means, they are not committing wrongdoing. However, any profit obtained through deceit is, in essence, no different from outright theft.

In particular, many lamas and monks today see no issue with engaging in business; in fact, they dedicate their entire lives to it and even take pride in their skills. Yet, nothing weakens a lama or monk's mind more than involvement in commerce. Consumed by their transactions, they lose the motivation to study or engage in practices to purify their obscurations—and, in any case, they have little time left for such pursuits.

Often, people make online comments such as, “This renowned master is not a Buddhist master, but rather an entrepreneur.” These comments may be baseless slander, but they can also highlight the master's shortcomings. Nevertheless, it is inappropriate for a monk to engage in business activities, as nothing can damage a monastic's spiritual path more than this. The *Sutra that Inspires Noble Intentions* states:

Now that I have taken ordination in pursuit of benefits,
I should not enter into competitions and generate negative
thoughts;
Without owning lands and running a business,
What can possibly lead me into competitions and conflicts?

Monastics should relinquish their involvement in mundane activities. Now that you have been ordained, your ultimate goal should be to benefit all sentient beings. If you still behave like laypeople, constantly seeking ways to accumulate wealth, that is truly inappropriate. Furthermore, monasteries, where monastics reside, should serve as places for listening, contemplating, and meditating, as well as for spreading the teachings of the Dharma and benefiting others. These places should not be utilized for the purpose of accumulating money.

For those of you who have come to Tibet in pursuit of Dharma, please focus your attention on propagating the Dharma, which is of great importance to each of you. As you may already know, a superior practitioner can benefit countless beings once they have achieved a high level of realization. For instance, there was a Tibetan lama who, as one of the four main Kadampa disciples, constructed 108 monasteries during his lifetime. Master Xuyun of Chinese Buddhism, on the

other hand, managed fifteen Dharma centers, revitalized six lineage temples, and supported five schools of Chan Buddhism.

A middling practitioner devotes themselves to diligent practice while overseeing their Dharma center. An inferior practitioner, however, experiences various afflictions daily. The worst practitioner, instead of benefiting sentient beings, often engages in actions that harm themselves and others. Even if we are not superior practitioners at this time, some of us may achieve a high level of realization in the future. It is certainly worth rejoicing in their achievements.

Some people often say, “Everything is empty, so what’s the use of building a Dharma center?” Such a comment is not right. Although ultimately all phenomena are empty, we should not give up accumulating merit on the relative level. Master Xuyun said,

Though it is like flowers in the sky,
Many Buddhist ceremonies still need to take place.
Though it may seem like the moon reflected in water,
Many temples still need to be constructed.

Having more temples is always beneficial. In Tibet, for example, there is a small monastery in each valley. Even during the upheavals when Buddhism was almost destroyed, such monasteries played important roles for the people living nearby.

Unlike in the past, today’s regulations on religion are relatively relaxed. If causes and conditions permit, more temples or monasteries should be built, especially in the Han region of China. If a city of a million people has only one temple, this facility will not be sufficient to meet the needs of the faithful.

Many people have faith in Buddhism, and every month on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar calendar, there is a large crowd in the temples, with many unable to squeeze in. It would be meaningful to build more temples everywhere.

Therefore, for those who come to Tibet in pursuit of Dharma, once you have learned, you should return to your hometowns. There is an old saying in Tibet: “Birds return to their nests as they grow old, and people return to their hometowns as they age.”

At that time, if you have the capacity and resources, you should build temples. Although it may be impossible for one person to build 108 temples as the Tibetan eminent master did, it is still feasible for you to construct one temple or monastery.

Of course, you should not keep the temple closed and allow no one in, as this removes the opportunity to connect with others. If you can open the temple to the public, at least a dozen individuals living nearby will frequently come to chant prayers and study the Dharma. Gradually, the roots of merit, compassion, and wisdom will permeate their mindstream, which can be passed down from generation to generation. This is very meaningful.

Otherwise, if you focus all your attention and energy on accumulating wealth, you will neither benefit sentient beings nor succeed in your own practice. Why is that? If you spend your entire day rushing around, seeking business opportunities, you will not have any time or energy left for studying and practicing the Dharma. Eventually, you will become no different from a worldly person, and your conscience will fade away. There are some monastics who frequently go on business trips – today to Hong Kong, tomorrow to Beijing – and they boast to anyone they meet, saying, “Our corporation is planning to go public soon. Everything is already in place. Soon, I will work on expanding our network and meeting with the leaders of the Civil Affairs Bureau and the Ministry of Commerce. I believe the business is going to thrive, whether it is the scale of the monastery or...” [Oh, I should not have said this...*Om Vajrasattva Hum*]

Moreover, some monastics spend every waking moment, from morning until bedtime, absorbed in reviewing their financial records, contemplating questions such as, “What is the production cost? How much does transportation cost? What is the profit margin? Do I make any net profit after paying taxes, workers’ wages, electricity, water, and rent? Oh, it might be a bit difficult...”

As a result, any sense of devotion, renunciation, or compassion is completely lost, leaving them engulfed in continuous delusion. [Although they wish to make a profit, they may ultimately end up losing money and can hardly break even.]

Here is an inspiring story about Milarepa:

One night, Milarepa arrived at a monastery and lay down to sleep outside the door of a monk’s cell. Inside, the monk lay awake, preoccupied with plans to sell the carcass of a cow he intended to slaughter the next day. He meticulously calculated the value of each part—the head would fetch a certain amount, the shoulder blade another, the shoulder itself a different price, and so on, down to the knuckles and shins. Lost in his calculations, he remained awake the entire night, managing to determine the price of every part of the cow—except for the tail.

[I wonder how much a yak was worth at that time. Last year, when we went to Hongyuan to release lives, we were told that after being slaughtered, a yak was directly shipped to Lhasa, and the meat could be sold for around 5,000 yuan, which was quite substantial. Some yaks were sent to Chengdu and could be sold for 3,000 to 4,000 yuan each.]

In the morning, the monk got up straight away, completed his prayers, and made tormas offerings.

As he stepped outside, he noticed Milarepa still asleep and scolded him, saying, “You call yourself a Dharma practitioner, yet you are still sleeping at this hour! Don’t you engage in any practice or recitation at all?”

Milarepa calmly replied, “I do not usually sleep like this. But last night, I spent the entire night thinking about how to sell a cow of mine that is destined for slaughter. I only managed to fall asleep a short while ago...” With this remark, Milarepa exposed the monk’s hidden faults and walked away.

Like the monk in this story, those who devote their lives solely to business become so consumed by their calculations that they remain lost in delusion. Even when death arrives, they will pass away as deluded as ever.

This section of the text addresses “taking what is not given,” but Patrul Rinpoche primarily highlighted the fault of a monastery running a business, given the situation at that time. In fact, it is the same today. Some monasteries turn rituals of confession and purification into a money-making tool. Just as a layperson told me recently, some monasteries charge different rates—high, middle, and low—based on the social status of the deceased. Some monasteries even set specific prices for consecration; for example, a higher-level consecration costs one amount, while a medium-level consecration costs another.

Many people conduct business under the name of Buddhism, but what they really engage in is commercial trading. They become involved in calculations, planning, and strategizing on a daily basis, which inevitably consumes a great deal of their time and energy. As a result, this is bound to affect their spiritual practice.

In fact, apart from getting basic things such as clothing and food, a true practitioner should focus on things related to benefiting others, as well as on studying and practicing the Dharma. In particular the abbot of a Dharma center should pay close attention to the hearing, contemplation, and meditation in the monastery, instead of making the monastery a profitable organization.

Recently, someone proposed the idea of initially establishing a platform centered around Buddhism, followed by the development of an economic model on this platform. From a worldly point of view, this approach may seem skillful, as an increasing number of individuals are beginning to embrace Buddhism. However, from a Buddhist perspective, people generally seek solace in their faith when faced with hardships; therefore, it would be more beneficial to provide them with Dharma teachings. If the primary objective of constructing temples is solely for financial gain, the local government might be pleased. Nevertheless, this approach fails to bring significant benefit to humanity or to the dissemination of the Dharma.

However, such a thing happens inevitably during the degenerate age. As Padmasambhava said,

The species of humans has not changed, but their minds have;
The species of humans has not changed, but the era has.

Therefore, as monastics, we must not engage in business. Otherwise, if we are occupied with business activities on a daily basis, we will become entangled in all ten types of negative actions.

Business dealings often involve various forms of negative actions. Sellers, regardless of the actual quality of their goods, go to great lengths to exaggerate their value. They fabricate claims, such as insisting that another buyer has already made a high offer that they supposedly declined or that they originally purchased the item for a substantial amount. This is lying.

In an attempt to acquire something already being negotiated between two other parties, sellers may resort to slander to create discord and disrupt the agreement. This is sowing discord.

They resort to harsh language to disparage their competitors' products and to extort debts, among other tactics. This is harsh speech. Some retailers prohibit their salespersons from using harsh language with clients. Some supermarkets do not allow their employees to argue with customers. Therefore, even if a salesperson wants to quarrel, they must suppress their anger. According to these corporate regulations, as long as the employee remains silent, feeling angry is not considered a "transgression."

They engage in meaningless conversations by setting absurd prices or bargain-

ing for items they have no genuine intention of purchasing. This is worthless chatter.

They feel envious of others' possessions and eagerly seek ways to acquire them. This is covetousness.

They wish harm upon their competitors, constantly striving to outdo them. This is wishing harm on others.

If they engage in livestock trading, they are involved in the act of killing.

Business, in fact, involves all ten negative actions, except perhaps wrong views and sexual misconduct. However, business can indirectly lead to wrong views and sexual misconduct. For instance, when negotiating a contract, one may network in a place of entertainment that includes prostitution, which constitutes sexual misconduct.

Moreover, when an individual engages in business for an extended period, they may struggle to devote sufficient time to studying and practicing the Dharma. Consequently, they may eventually begin to criticize the law of karma and even the Three Jewels, thus adopting wrong views. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* states:

If one covets the wealth of others,
Constantly giving rise to anger and hatred,
And has various wrong views,
This person will fall into a lower realm.

When their transactions collapse, both parties deplete their assets, causing everyone involved to suffer. In extreme cases, merchants may even face starvation, harming not only themselves but also their counterparts. Yet, even if they achieve some success, no amount of wealth ever feels sufficient. Even those whose fortunes rival Vaishravana still eagerly engage in their unethical dealings.

Many people are like this today. Even if they have made tens of millions of dollars, they continue to invest more. They have done nothing beneficial for society, nor have they enjoyed a single day of happiness in their lives. They spend their entire lives being busy and aimlessly wandering around, and eventually, their lives come to an end. They rarely engage in virtuous deeds, and all they do each day is indulge in food and drink. In doing so, they harm and deceive many beings.

As death approaches, they will beat their chests in despair, for their entire lives were consumed by these very obsessions—which now act as crushing burdens, dragging them into the lower realms. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

If a person's mind is often covered by evil and greed,
He will always fall into the lower realms, such as hell and the
realms of pretas.

There is no more potent means of accumulating countless harmful deeds and completely corrupting yourself than through trade and commerce. You constantly devise schemes to deceive others, as if sifting through an assortment of knives, awls, and needles in search of the sharpest tool. By obsessively dwelling on malicious intentions, you abandon the noble aspiration of bodhicitta—the commitment to benefit others—and your destructive actions grow boundlessly.

Since business involves many negative actions, one might ask, “Does this mean it is inappropriate for a monastic to engage in business for the purpose of propagating the Dharma and benefiting others, or for a layperson to run a business to make a living?”

The answer is, “It depends.” If a monk engages in business to benefit others and support the sangha, this action is actually permitted by the Buddha, as mentioned in the *Vinaya*. The *Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* introduces eleven altruistic undertakings, stating:

Or if you are a monastic, you may engage in commerce to obtain
clothing and food;
Or if you are a layperson, you may appropriately engage in
farming, commerce, or becoming a government official.

It is acceptable as long as you are running a decent business. For example, you may purchase products from a wholesaler and then, as a retailer, sell them to end users. It is permissible to make a profit through such practices.

Additionally, the *Samyukta Agama* provides clear explanations on this matter:

A person may start by learning a skill,
Which helps them accumulate wealth;

After acquiring money and wealth,
They should divide it into four parts:
One part is for food and other necessities,
Two parts are for running the business,
And the remaining part is for saving in a secret place,
In case of poverty and shortage.

However, many people do not understand this. After earning money, they are reluctant to spend it and instead reinvest all their earnings back into the business. Ultimately, they may not even recover their initial capital. Therefore, we can draw inspiration from this advice from the Buddha.

For example, if you earn \$4 million, you should set aside \$1 million for personal use, invest \$2 million, and leave the remaining \$1 million untouched. This \$1 million can then serve as an emergency fund in the event of an economic crisis or financial downturn.

The Buddha suggests that when generating income, laypeople should adhere to the principles of “decency” and “wisdom.” The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

If one can consider all living beings as one’s parents,
One can abstain from taking what is not given,
And one’s wisdom and merits will be boundless.

Therefore, a practitioner should examine everything with wisdom, treat living beings with great compassion, and seek realization with faith. These are the three points I emphasize, and they are also the fundamental qualities of a practitioner.

For the act of taking what is not given to be regarded as a complete negative action, it must also encompass the four elements previously outlined. This is also addressed in the *Ascertaining the Three Vows*. However, even the slightest involvement, such as merely providing hunters or thieves with food for their endeavors, is sufficient to bring you an equal share of the consequences of their killing or stealing.

Therefore, we should not assist wrongdoers, nor should we provide physical or financial support for their actions. Otherwise, it will bring negative karmic effects upon ourselves.

We have just studied the faults of the negative action of taking what is not

given. This teaching is very important. Throughout your studies, even if you do not expect to attain full enlightenment immediately, you should at least derive some benefits from the Dharma on a daily basis.

As you may know, the Dharma is truly difficult to encounter. Now that you are fortunate enough to have found it, you must appreciate it as much as possible, rather than set it aside. However, human beings can be quite strange. When we obtain something too easily, we often fail to appreciate it. The harder it is to attain something, the more we treasure it.

There was a Chan master named Niaoke, or Bird Nest, during the Tang dynasty. He lived in a tree, which earned him his name. One of his disciples had been following him and practicing asceticism for six years, but the Chan master had not imparted any teachings to him.

One day, the disciple had enough and told the master, “I have been following you for six years, but you have never given me any teaching. I am leaving today to find another master so that I can study the Dharma.”

The master asked, “What do you want?”

“Dharma, of course,” the disciple replied.

Upon hearing the disciple’s answer, Niaoke slowly pulled out a loose thread from his worn monastic robe and said, “Look, isn’t this the Dharma?”

Looking at the thread, the disciple attained sudden realization.

Am I overwhelming you with teachings to the point where you cannot attain realization? Some Chan masters do not need to teach orally; they can help disciples reach realization with just a gesture. However, while this approach is suitable for practitioners with superior faculties, such skillful methods are not appropriate for everyone. In fact, even if you have not yet attained realization, you can still benefit from listening to a single Dharma class on the principle of cause and effect.

Some people study the Dharma with remarkable diligence. Today, I received a phone call from a graduate student of Chinese Philosophy at Lanzhou University. She told me that since last year’s Vajrasattva Dharma Assembly, she has listened to all my teaching videos available on my Chinese website, completing this in less than a year.

I asked her, “How many classes have you listened to in total?” She replied, “Around 1,300 classes.” She mentioned that she slept only three to four hours at

night, and sometimes just two hours. Aside from the time dedicated to schoolwork, she devoted the rest of her time to studying the Dharma.

In comparison, some Dharma students might feel embarrassed. They listen to only two or three classes per week yet complain that it is too much.

The other day, a lay practitioner said to me, “Don’t you know how hard we work?”

I asked, “In what way?”

She responded, “We have to listen to one Dharma class per week!” (*The audience laughs.*)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KHENPO SODARGYE was born in 1962 into a nomadic family in a small valley of the Tibetan region of Kham. He was ordained in 1985 and went on to become a lineage holder of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition, as well as a preeminent practitioner and scholar at Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in Sertar. Khenpo Sodargye was the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's chief Tibetan-to-Chinese translator. He has traveled extensively in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia to offer teachings at Dharma centers and universities. For more information, please visit www.khenposodargye.org.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

The Wisdom and Compassion Translation Group, under the guidance of Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, is dedicated to translating authentic Buddhist teachings into languages that resonate with individuals from all walks of life. Comprised of Buddhist practitioners and scholars, the translation team is committed to bringing Dharma students teachings that empower them to engage in the systematic study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism.



