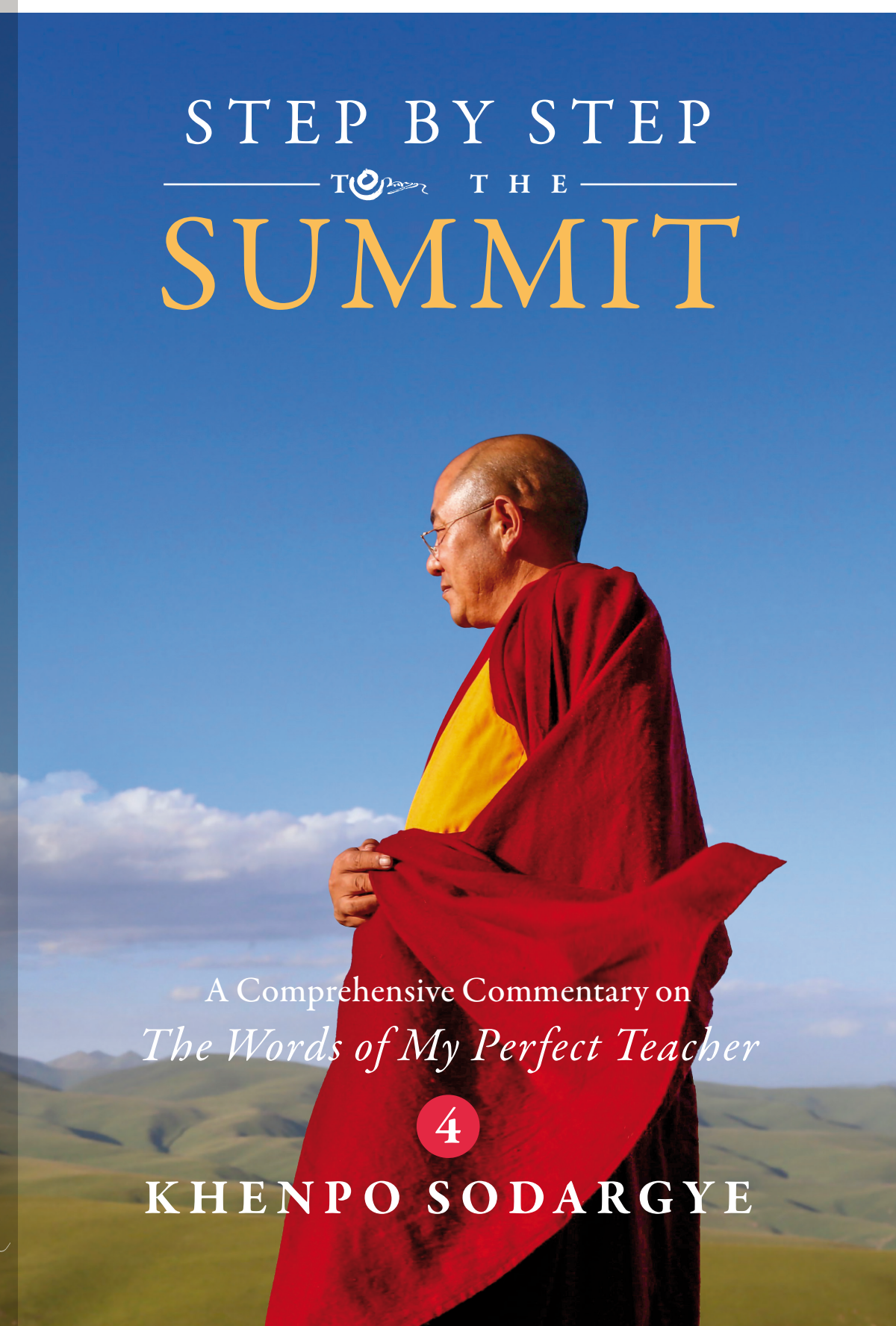




STEP BY STEP — TO — THE — SUMMIT

A Comprehensive Commentary on
The Words of My Perfect Teacher

4

KHENPO SODARGYE

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— T O — T H E —
SUMMIT

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TRANSLATED BY
*The Wisdom and Compassion
Translation Group*



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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.

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Lesson 62

“The rules that follow are for laypeople ... and is therefore extremely hard to attain.” [Page 107-108]

Let us discuss the third negative action to be abandoned:

2.1.4.1.1.3. Sexual Miscounduct

The following guidelines are intended for laypeople. During the era of the Dharma King Songtsen Gampo in Tibet, ethical codes rooted in the ten virtuous actions were established, encompassing regulations for both laypeople and the monastic community. In this context, we focus on the behavioral guidelines applicable to lay practitioners, who, as householders, are expected to adhere to a proper moral framework.

Specifically, to promote the ten positive actions, the *Sixteen Pure Human Laws*¹ were issued by Songtsen Gampo. These laws guided laypeople to abide by

¹ They are as follows:

- 1) Developing devotion for the Three Jewels (ལྷ་དོན་མཆོག་གསུམ་ལ་མོས་གུས་བསྐྱེད་པ་, lha dkon mchog gsum la mos gus bskyed pa)
- 2) Seeking out and practicing the sacred Dharma (དམ་པ་འི་ཆོས་བཅའ་ཞིང་བསྐྱབ་པ་, dam pa'i chos btsal zhing bsgrub pa)
- 3) Repaying the kindness of one's parents (པམ་ལ་བྱིན་ལན་འཇུག་པ་, pha ma la drin lan 'jal ba)
- 4) Showing respect to the learned (ཡོན་ཏན་ཅན་ལ་ཞེ་མཐོང་ཡོད་པ་, yon tan can la zhe mthong yod pa)
- 5) Being respectful to those of high status and one's elders (རིགས་མཐོ་བ་དང་རྒན་པར་བཀུར་སྟོ་ཆེ་བ་, rigs mtho ba dang rgan par bkur sti che ba)
- 6) Being benevolent to your neighbours (ཡུལ་མི་བྱིས་མཆོས་ལ་ཕན་གདགས་པ་, yul mi khyim mtshes la phan gdags pa)

moral ethics, which involves aligning one's speech and actions with one's social status, disciplining oneself according to the authentic Dharma, refraining from sexual misconduct to respect and abide by the law, upholding the precepts, and so on. In fact, similar ethical principles existed in the Han areas of China as well, where, especially in ancient times, people paid particular attention to them.

Such ethical principles have two sources: the first is traditional culture and ethnic norms, and the second is precepts, such as the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts for lay practitioners, as well as monastic precepts for monks and nuns. Observing precepts involves guarding one's mind with mindfulness and vigilance.

In fact, it is easier to discipline oneself based on precepts than without them. Otherwise, it may not be realistic to simply expect a self-indulgent person to stop smoking, drinking, eating meat, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, and so on.

It is only when one realizes that everything they cling to in this life has no inherent meaning and will destroy the happiness of their future lives that it will no longer be particularly difficult for them to uphold the precepts. For example, regarding the decision to give up meat: if people are concerned about their health and understand that meat is unhealthy, they will have no problem giving it up.

Generally speaking, it is difficult to dispel an ordinary person's desires through means other than wisdom. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

To extinguish the fire of desire,
One needs the water of wisdom;
Those who haven't dispelled their desires

-
- 7) Being honest (བཀའ་བློ་ཞིང་མཆོག་ཆུང་བ་, bka' drang zhing sems chung ba)
 - 8) Being loyal to close friends (ཉིད་མཛུགས་བཞེས་ལ་གཞུང་རིང་བ་, nye du mdza' bshes la gzhung ring ba)
 - 9) Emulating those who are polite and decent (ཡེ་རབས་ཀྱི་རྒྱུས་བསྟུག་ཅིང་ལྷི་ཐག་རིང་བ་, ya rabs kyi rjes bsnyeg cing phyi thag ring ba)
 - 10) Having moderate food and wealth (ཟས་ནོར་ལ་ཚོད་འཛིན་པ་, zas nor la tshod 'dzin pa)
 - 11) Repaying those who have previously shown kindness (སྤར་བློན་ཅན་གྱི་མི་ཅད་གཅད་པ་, sngar drin can gyi mi rtsad gcad pa)
 - 12) Being honest with regard to weights and measures (བུ་ལོན་དུས་སུ་འཇམ་ཞིང་བྲེ་སྤར་ལ་གཡོ་མེད་པ་, bu lon dus su 'jal zhing pre srang la g.yo med pa)
 - 13) Having little jealousy (ཀུན་ལ་ཕྱག་དོག་ཆུང་བ་, kun la phrag dog chung ba)
 - 14) Not being influenced by evil companions (ངན་པའི་གྲོགས་ལ་མི་ཉན་ཞིང་རང་ཆུགས་འཛིན་པ་, ngan pa'i gros la mi nyan zhing rang tshugs 'dzin pa)
 - 15) Speaking moderately and in a gentle way (ངག་འཇམ་ཞིང་སྒྲ་བ་ཉུང་བ་, ngag 'jam zhing smra ba nyung ba)
 - 16) Being patient and farsighted and enduring hardship (ཐག་པ་ཆེ་ཞིང་སློ་ཁྱོད་ལ་ཕན་པ་, theg pa che zhing blo khog yangs pa) (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Cannot attain liberation.

A person engages in sexual misconduct due to the defilement of mistaking another's body as pure, solid, and permanent. If one can reflect on the merits and power of the true Dharma, such desires or lust can be dispelled. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* states:

It is hard to give up all desires,
Then how can one be free from them?
If one appreciates the good Dharma,
All desires will naturally die out.

There are many monastics in this world who not only feel no pain but are constantly filled with joy on their path to liberation. Why? It is because they fully recognize the faults of samsara, as well as the superiority of liberation.

To help people untangle the constraints of desire, we should explain to them the faults of desire and the benefits of liberation. Additionally, we should assist them in discovering methods to dispel afflictions. Otherwise, they may have an intellectual understanding but lack the means to counteract afflictions or control desires and other negative mental states.

Due to factors related to age, biological needs, and karmic habits from previous lives, many young people struggle to restrain their desire or lust when encountering an attractive person. However, by employing methods from Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism to control their minds, they can naturally overcome their desires.

Moreover, if you assimilate the tantric view that “The nature of afflictions is self-liberation,” or if you actualize the state described in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* that “All afflictions are bodhi or enlightenment,” you will not be defiled by afflictions. Additionally, you will immediately recognize the nature of your desire, anger, or ignorance as it arises. This awareness is in the nature of indivisible emptiness and luminosity. Consequently, you will attain profound realization and recognize the nature of all phenomena in this universe.

Therefore, the most important aspect of our practice is to observe our own minds. Whenever a thought arises, whether it is an impure thought related to lust or anger, or a pure thought related to faith, compassion, or renunciation, we should first identify it as good or bad from the relative level. If the thought

is negative, we should counteract it with the teachings or the pith instructions from our gurus, buddhas, and bodhisattvas. By doing so, our mindstream will be purified, becoming untainted, and eventually, we will recognize the true nature of everything, including our afflictions.

Some individuals find it challenging to follow the path of Dharma. Despite being Dharma students for over twenty years, their afflictions continue to grow day by day. Conversely, some feel that studying the Dharma is easy, as their minds underwent a drastic transformation soon after they encountered Buddhism. The change was so profound that they feel they have become entirely different people.

Some of our Dharma friends belong to the second group. Their former colleagues and friends are often taken aback by the extent of their transformation after ordination. As laypeople, they had harbored strong desires, anger, and other afflictions. However, they have now become gentle and calm. Their positive changes serve as an inspiration for others to have faith in Buddhism, convincing them that Buddhist methods of mind training are truly the most effective and prompting them to embrace the Buddhist path.

Let's return to the root text. In ancient times, Tibetans followed ethical rules, and householders respected specific guidelines for laity. In the *Sigalovada Sutra*, which records the Buddha's advice to Sigalaka, the Buddha provides detailed explanations of family relationships and ethics, including the roles and responsibilities of both husband and wife. There are several Chinese translations of this sutra, and while the content of the different versions varies slightly, they all cover the core principles of being a couple.

Then, how should a husband treat his wife?

1) Care for the wife. The husband should be considerate and care for his wife. Husband and wife should respect each other and treat one another with courtesy. It shouldn't be that they are inseparable at first but later become sworn enemies.

2) Don't disrespect the wife. The husband shouldn't belittle his wife, and he especially shouldn't use harsh words with her. Many couples today fail to show mutual respect for each other, often neglecting even basic courtesy, which is not good. As Padampa Sangye said, it is a result of karmic affinity to be together as husband and wife; thus, mutual disrespect should be avoided.

3) Adorn the wife with jewelry. The husband should provide his wife with the means to adorn and dress herself. This is a way for him to demonstrate his affection.

4) Make the wife feel at ease at home. The husband should trust his wife completely, allow her some freedom in managing the household, and avoid interfering with her housework. However, in today's society, some husbands view their wives as mere servants and deny them any rights beyond completing household chores. If couples continue to live in such a manner for an extended period, family harmony will undoubtedly be compromised.

5) Feel affection for the wife. The husband should love and trust his wife and avoid alienating her. This principle can be interpreted more broadly: the husband should care for his wife's family and treat her family members with courtesy.

In addition, the *Sigalovada Sutra* explains the proper way for a wife to treat her husband, consisting of thirteen rules. Master Taixu provided a clear explanation of these rules in his commentary on the sutra.

In today's society, couples often lack respect for each other, resulting in disharmony within the family. When the family is not harmonious, it affects the organization and community as well. When there is conflict within the organization and community, peace within the country and the world becomes unattainable. Therefore, it is crucial that we prioritize our behavior. It is especially important for couples to adhere to ethical guidelines. Otherwise, if one partner engages in an affair, it can lead to numerous problems and karmic consequences.

Master Yinguang explains the twelve faults of sexual misconduct in his book, *The Valuable Reference on Longevity and Health*. According to the text, these negative actions can harm family ethics, personal morality, reputation, family honor, lives, mental well-being, social norms, hidden merits, fame, longevity, the grandfather, and the wife. As a result, sexual misconduct harms not only others but also oneself. Furthermore, wrongdoers will not receive protection from divine protectors. Therefore, lay practitioners should uphold the pure precepts of the Three Refuges and Five Precepts.

Monks and nuns are expected to abstain from sexual activity entirely. The *Madhyama Agama* states:

Diligently practice the observance of chastity,
 Actively engage in the wonderful practices.
 One will become purified and untainted,
 And be free from sexual desire and misconduct.

A true monastic should diligently observe sexual chastity so that the body and mind become pure and untainted. They should avoid the greed that causes endless suffering in this life and in many lives to come and completely refrain from sexual acts.

The most severe form of sexual misconduct involves causing others to break their vows. Additionally, sexual misconduct includes actions associated with specific individuals, locations, and situations, such as masturbation; engaging in sexual relations with someone who is married, committed to another, or with a legitimate partner under inappropriate circumstances such as in broad daylight, during a one-day vow observance, illness, distress, pregnancy, mourning, menstruation, or postpartum recovery; in the presence of representations of the Three Jewels; with parents, other forbidden family members, or a prepubescent child; in the mouth or anus; or with an animal or a corpse.

[Many laypeople claim to have taken the Three Refuges and Five Precepts, but perhaps due to their lack of Dharma training, many of their actions do not align with the Dharma. In fact, after taking the precepts, it is crucial to learn the detailed lists of observances, which are of utmost importance.]

If you can avoid sexual misconduct and provide beds, sheets, or blankets to those who uphold pure precepts, you will be reborn in the Pure Land in your next life. Avoiding sexual misconduct means not engaging in sexual relations with someone who is married or having sexual relations with your wife at inappropriate times and places.

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* states:

If one commits no adultery with other women,
 Has no sex with his wife in inappropriate places and times,
 And offers bedding to precept-holders,
 This person will be reborn in the Land of the Immovable One.

Therefore, laypeople should understand the various types of sexual misconduct concerning place and time and eliminate them altogether.

In fact, some householders choose to practice sexual abstinence. Mahatma Gandhi, the esteemed leader of India's nonviolent independence movement, was one such individual. He committed to abstaining from sexual activity in 1906, when he was in his late thirties, and remained devoted to this vow for the rest of his life.

Another example is Emperor Wu of Liang, who ceased sexual activity around the age of fifty. In the *Ode on Pure Activities*, he stated, "I don't have intimacy with my concubines..."

As you can see, even householders with social status and power can lead a very pure life and uphold the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. Of course, Gandhi did not necessarily adopt the Buddhist Three Refuges and Five Precepts, but other spiritual traditions in India also have precepts that are similar to or even stricter than those in Buddhism.

It is greatly beneficial for one to discipline oneself through traditional norms or religious precepts. However, as Mipham Rinpoche noted in his commentary on Shantarakshita's *Ornament of the Middle Way*, some so-called precepts serve merely worldly purposes, while others are simply folk taboos. Although these are not true precepts in the context of Buddhism, we should not completely discard them if they can be of assistance to us.

Unfortunately, today's younger generation does not pay much attention to this. They no longer resemble their ancestors, who adhered to certain rules and norms. As long as these young adults can eat well, dress well, and indulge in sensory pleasures, they tend to act without a sense of what is "permissible" or "not permissible." It is crucial for us to follow both worldly and transcendental rules so that we can understand what to do and what not to do. This is very important.

The above section discusses the negative actions of sexual misconduct that should be avoided. Since this topic is addressed more extensively in my teachings on the *Aspiration to Be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*, I have provided only a brief explanation here.

2.1.4.1.2. Verbal Actions to be Avoided

2.1.4.1.2.1. Lying

There are three types of lies: ordinary lies, major lies, and phony lama's lies.

2.1.4.1.2.1.1. Ordinary Lies

Ordinary lies refer to any false statements deliberately made to mislead others.

Lying is detrimental. Some people deceive others with lies when running a business, and this habitual tendency may continue even after they have taken ordination. Although they know lying is wrong, it is difficult for them to completely break free from this habit.

In the eighth volume of the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, the Buddha explains the faults of lying. One of the verses states:

If a person is dishonest,
He is like a dog, as said by the noble ones;
If a person says no real words,
He is considered inferior among the inferior ones.

If a person speaks without credibility, they are behaving like a dog instead of a human. In fact, some dogs bark with credibility. They will not bark unless there is a legitimate situation, such as a thief being nearby. A dishonest person is inferior, or even the worst, among the inferior. From this scriptural evidence, we understand that many prominent individuals are actually “small figures” because they tend to lie.

If you lie frequently, others will not trust you, as the saying goes, “Once bitten, twice shy.” If you deceive someone once, they will always remember it. Even if you stop lying to them, they will remain cautious and mistrustful. Influenced by your surroundings and education, some of you had a habit of lying before studying the Dharma or taking ordination. Although your teacher may have instructed you not to lie, you instead acquired the skill of deceit, leading you down a difficult path in life.

Now that you have encountered the Dharma, you should begin anew and strive to be as honest as possible. Unless there is a compelling reason, it is advised not to tell lies. You should understand that lying is not only a wrong deed as stipulated by the Buddha, but also an inherent wrong deed. Anyone who lies should confess and purify the negative karma; otherwise, they may be reborn in a lower realm, which is a terrifying prospect.

2.1.4.1.2.1.2. Major Lies

Major lies are statements that claim, for instance, that positive actions yield no benefits and negative actions inflict no harm, that there is no happiness in the Buddhafields and no suffering in the lower realms, or that the Buddhas lack good qualities. They are called “major lies” because few other falsehoods can result in such devastatingly misleading consequences.

Those who do not believe in the principle of cause and effect tend to make such statements, which stem from their ignorance. If you persist in denying the existence of things that truly exist, you are telling a blatant lie. For instance, despite the presence of numerous countries and people in this world, you negate these facts by saying, “There are no countries, and no one else but me in this world.” This is a lie, as it does not align with the truth.

In fact, major lies are the root of all faults, leading to grave consequences. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* states:

One should know that lying
Is the root of all evils;
It ruins the observance of pure precepts,
And leads to rebirth in the three lower realms.

Therefore, you should not think that it is acceptable to lie. Specifically, you should avoid telling major lies, such as “positive actions bring no merit” and “negative actions bring no harm.” Please refrain from expressing such erroneous views.

However, there are many people around us who are truly pitiful. They appear to live lives filled with abundant happiness, status, and wealth, but everything they do and say is nothing more than an illusion within an illusion. They have committed numerous wrongdoings, yet they remain unaware of this. Patrul Rinpoche states:

The Buddha teaches that all phenomena are like dreams or
illusions; what people are chasing after are illusions within illusions
that are completely unreliable.

Many sentient beings cling to illusions and deny the truth, which is indeed lamentable.

2.1.4.1.2.1.3. Phony Lama’s Lies

Phony lama's lies refer to any false assertions claiming to possess qualities and abilities such as achieving the Bodhisattva stages or having clairvoyant powers.

There are individuals who have not yet realized the five paths and ten stages, yet they claim to have attained Buddhahood. Such individuals might create a photo of themselves atop a lotus, with a halo around their heads. They then show this photo to others, proclaiming, "I have attained Buddhahood!" They do not believe in the principle of cause and effect and simply say and do whatever they wish. This is exactly as described in the *Shurangama Sutra*:

Claiming to have obtained, yet not having obtained;

Claiming to have realized, yet not having realized.

In this context, "having obtained" and "having realized" refer to supreme transcendental qualities, not a worldly certificate or skill. These phony lama's lies will result in severe karmic consequences.

Nowadays, a charlatan seems more welcome than a noble one. When a great master, who upholds pure precepts, possesses supreme wisdom, and behaves impeccably, visits a large city, he may receive neither respect nor requests for his teachings. However, a charlatan who has neither qualities nor wisdom, but merely pretends to be inscrutable and enlightened, will attract tens of thousands of followers who become his loyal "fans."

Recently, I read the book *Exploring the Traces of the Mind*, authored by a Tibetan. The book points out the misconduct of a very small number of so-called tulkus in Tibetan Buddhism. It also discusses the importance of practice and the extraordinary greatness of Tibetan Buddhism. I still remember several charlatans' tricks revealed in the book:

An ordinary householder from the Kham area was fined 20,000 Chinese yuan (approximately USD \$2,600) for theft. Unable to pay the fine, he decided to dress as a monk and traveled to the Han areas of China, pretending to be a Dharma master. In doing so, he deceived many people and received hundreds of thousands of Chinese yuan in offerings.

Upon returning to his Tibetan hometown, people asked him, "How did you make your fortune?"

He joked, "Thanks to my cleverness and the blessings of the Buddha's monastic robe, I, a Tibetan thief, became a Dharma master in the Han areas!"

From his response, we can infer that some “masters” indeed deceive many “disciples” who, due to their lack of wisdom, mistake a charlatan for a guru. As a Tibetan saying goes:

The possessions of the unmeritorious fall into the hands of the
unenlightened.

Conversely, a meritorious person will offer their wealth to a genuinely noble master or sangha—the supreme field of merits—ensuring that the one making these offerings gains immeasurable merits throughout their lifetime and beyond.

Here is another story from the book:

A charlatan “tulku” went to teach in a Han area of China. When his disciples asked him what the Great Perfection was, he, having no

clue about it, carelessly replied, “Isn’t the Great Perfection something to eat?” His disciples appeared surprised at his answer, and he then slyly added, “Ah! I’m just kidding! Because of this dependent origination, I can now bestow upon you the empowerment of the Great Perfection.”

Enveloped by his disciples’ earnest expectation, this “tulku” recited a love song by Tsangyang Gyatso, the sixth Dalai Lama, in Tibetan:

White crane! Lend me your wings. I will not fly far. From
Lithang, I shall return.

Meanwhile, the “tulku” made gestures of empowerment and concluded the so-called empowerment of the Great Perfection. His disciples believed they had received the most profound tantric empowerment, so they were extremely happy. However, a disciple inadvertently recorded the empowerment process. When the audio was eventually shared in the Tibetan region, it was revealed that he had used a love song to bestow empowerment.

Of course, such a phenomenon cannot be generalized, and this “tulku” does not represent all practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, nor do the disciples who received the “empowerment” represent all faithful believers in the Han areas of China. We shouldn’t deny the authenticity of all empowerments simply because of a rare case that occurred with a few individuals.

It is undeniable that many practitioners, including monastics and laypeople who traveled to the Tibetan region in pursuit of the Dharma, have gained a deep

understanding of the fundamental principles of Tibetan Buddhism through rigorous study and practice. However, we cannot ignore the fact that some disciples, without adequately examining the guru, rush to receive empowerment in a manner akin to a hungry dog devouring a piece of meat. Such occurrences have happened in the past, continue to happen in the present, and will likely happen in the future.

In fact, relying on a guru in Buddhism is very different from appreciating a worldly figure. When it comes to a worldly singer or superstar, all you need to do is buy a ticket for their concert in a stadium, as long as you don't mind spending money. If you don't enjoy the show, you can simply stop following this person, which is completely acceptable.

Establishing a connection with a Buddhist guru has significant implications for your present and future lives. Therefore, before following a guru, ensure you have thoroughly examined that person; otherwise, you may be easily misled by all kinds of lies.

Some people who enjoy lying are quite eloquent. Although they deceive themselves and others, they can change the minds of many individuals. Recently, some monastics who had been long-term Dharma students in the Tibetan region experienced rapid changes in their thoughts and behavior after attending a lecture by a Dharma teacher. When I heard about this, I felt that although these individuals had been in the Tibetan region for more than ten years, the Dharma had not yet permeated their minds.

What did that Dharma teacher say to them? He asserted that the entity of precepts does exist in Chinese Buddhism and is quite extraordinary. According to this Dharma teacher, he went to India and debated many eminent masters of Tibetan Buddhism. He claimed to have spent seven days studying the *Vinaya Pitaka* before the debates and argued the Tibetan masters into silence. After listening to what he said, many audience members felt his talk was remarkable and made a lot of sense.

The Dharma teacher did not imply that Tibetan Buddhism was negative; rather, he aimed to highlight the purity of precepts in Chinese Buddhism. There is nothing wrong with him expressing this viewpoint. However, it is somewhat exaggerated to claim that he “silenced Tibetan masters through argument.” Why? Because if he had only studied the *Vinaya Pitaka*, he might not have had a comprehensive understanding of all aspects of the precepts in Chinese Buddhism.

I think Master Hongyi's comments² on the entity of precepts in Chinese Buddhism may carry a hidden meaning. In this regard, a fair position would be that we should not judge the precepts in Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, differing views and arguments exist not only among lineages of Tibetan Buddhism but also between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as among different schools of Chinese Buddhism.

While we should conduct an objective analysis of these differing views, we must avoid elevating ourselves too much. When hearing that the Dharma teacher "had argued his counterparts into silence," many people considered him extraordinary. But are they being a bit too hasty in their judgment? Shouldn't they reflect on the Dharma teacher's words a bit more?

Of course, I am not saying that the precepts passed down by Buddha Shakyamuni don't exist. I simply want to emphasize that there are debates on this issue among different lineages and schools in both Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism, particularly regarding how the precepts were transmitted in these traditions. However, if you are looking for scriptural evidence used in those debates, it may be quite challenging to find it in the *Vinaya Pitaka*.

Many people claim, "Chinese Buddhism is so great because it includes the *Shurangama Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, and so forth." This argument is not valid, as both sutras also exist in Tibetan Buddhism. Some practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism assert, "Termas are so extraordinary that Tibetan Buddhism surpasses other forms of Buddhism." Such statements are also quite one-sided.

If you wish to emphasize the superiority of the termas and the extraordinary nature of the pith instructions, it is perfectly acceptable to express that view. For those who have attained realization through studying the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, this sutra may seem more significant than any other Buddhist scripture. However, they cannot claim that other Buddhist teachings are inferior.

Therefore, it is essential for you to engage in more listening and contemplation of the Dharma. Otherwise, your thoughts and actions may easily be swayed. Only

² In "An Outline of Vinaya Studies" (delivered at Cheng Tian Temple in Quanzhou in 1935), Master Hong Yi said: "I have a sincere message for all of you: The entity of the Bodhisattva precepts is not easily obtainable, and the entity of the novice and bhikshu precepts is unattainable. What both monastics and laypeople should aspire to are the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. If we can get the entity of the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts, that is already excellent."

through long-term listening, contemplation, and continuous practice can a firm conviction take root in your mind, leading to unwavering faith.

Without this, your faith is likely to fluctuate like a reed in the wind. For instance, if others praise something, you may quickly agree and say, “Yes, you’re right, that’s absolutely correct.” Similarly, if someone speaks highly of a guru, you may become enthusiastic and say, “Really? Then I should rely on him immediately! I also feel that he is incredibly compassionate. The first time I saw him, I almost wanted to cry!”

In fact, we should carefully examine a teacher before following them. Certain individuals falsely present themselves as enlightened masters or siddhas to mislead others. They boast of having visions of specific deities or having made offerings with gratitude.

Some Dharma practitioners declare, “Ah! I have had a vision of this or that...” Most of them are just phony lama’s lies. Therefore, I hope Dharma students refrain from making such statements without compelling reasons. Otherwise, people will question your credibility. According to the precepts of Buddhism, even if you have had a vision of a certain deity, you cannot share it carelessly with others.

However, many people are quite “daring”—they often proclaim they have had a vision of King Gesar or Vimalamitra. The other day, a person told me, “It looks like there is Manjushri holding a sword on your forehead. Dear guru, do not move, do not move. Let me take another look to see whether it is the Buddha Samantabhadra or Manjushri... Oh, how compassionate it is!” (*The audience laughs.*)

Therefore, it is crucial to avoid blindly trusting such cheats and charlatans. Since this matter impacts both your present life and future lives, it is essential to place your faith in a Dharma practitioner with whom you are particularly familiar, who demonstrates humility, and whose inner nature aligns with their outward actions. It is very important to rely on such a qualified teacher and then request teachings of the authentic Dharma that bring liberation in this life and many lives to come.

No matter what type of guru you rely on, this guru doesn’t have to be famous, wealthy, or good-looking, as such characteristics are irrelevant to your liberation. If a person is an actor, it is necessary for them to be good-looking; otherwise, it can be challenging for them to perform on stage. However, as a guide to our liberation, the most important qualities a guru must possess are great compassion

and bodhicitta. They should have authentic Dharma to guide their disciples and practice the Dharma impeccably and faithfully. It is crucial to find such a guru.

Many people today often favor the new over the old. They may abandon a qualified teacher they once followed and instead turn to a charlatan pretending to be an enlightened master. As a result, such individuals can completely lose their direction on the path to liberation.

I once read an article about a person who encountered a seemingly compassionate master at a Dharma assembly. This person, skilled in writing, drafted a brief introduction of the master to aid in his Dharma propagation in the Han area of China. The master was very pleased with the writing and asked this person to compose a longer biography. Eagerly, the writer agreed, viewing it as a rare opportunity to contribute to such a significant endeavor. He then accompanied the master to the beautiful Tibetan plateau, where he conducted numerous interviews for the biography in the master's hometown.

However, on the eve of Chinese New Year, the master suddenly fell ill and slipped into a coma. That night, he was urgently taken to the hospital for treatment. Three days later, the master finally regained consciousness. While in the hospital, all his communications with the outside world had to go through this writer. Consequently, the writer uncovered many unexpected truths about the master, which greatly disappointed him.

It turned out that the master, whom he had considered his idol and admired the most, was not who he thought he was. Even though the master treated the writer well after recovering from his coma, the writer's perception of him changed drastically. The writer dutifully completed the master's biography, sent him the manuscript, and then left. The writer had once eagerly wanted to be ordained, but after this event, he abandoned that intention.

Through this story, we can see that a person may end up feeling regretful and even compromise their commitment to liberation if they blindly follow an unfamiliar guru. Alternatively, they might have too many conceptual thoughts, causing them to miss the true hidden meaning of the guru. As such, one should thoroughly examine the guru before deciding to follow them. Otherwise, it is easy to become entangled in a web of mutual slander, resulting in harm to oneself and others, which serves no purpose.

Of course, when examining a guru, we cannot solely consider external

appearances. In general, some ordinary individuals possess a limited form of clairvoyance—a tainted, concept-bound clairvoyance that is inconsistent and only occasionally effective. In contrast, pure, untainted clairvoyance is attainable only by realized beings who have reached sublime levels, making it exceptionally rare and difficult to achieve. Therefore, a disciple shouldn't simply believe a person's self-promotion when they declare they have clairvoyance. For the guru, lying brings obstacles to their practice. If the guru wants to maintain and protect the image of Buddhism and themselves, they would be better off avoiding lies. Even if you have had some dreams or experiences, you shouldn't share them carelessly with others.

I once heard a master say that he had been teaching for over forty years. In the first ten years, he had to prepare for teaching, but after that, he relied solely on his spiritual experience. He claimed that he no longer needed to read books and that the buddhas and bodhisattvas spoke through him. If this were indeed the case, we should sincerely admire him. According to Chagme Rinpoche, even if a teacher is an ordinary person, the buddhas and bodhisattvas merge with him when he teaches. Nevertheless, one might want to speak modestly. If you have extraordinary qualities, there is no need to proclaim them deliberately; people will recognize them directly or indirectly.

Many great accomplished practitioners in history would not admit to their exceptional qualities. For example, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche always told others, "I am not the reincarnation of the great Tertön Lerab Lingpa (1856–1926). I don't have clairvoyance, nor do I have the capacity to validate a tulku. I haven't validated any tulku in my whole life..." Despite this, we all know the level of respect people had for Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and his contributions to Buddhism.

As practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism, we have the responsibility to spread the Dharma and benefit sentient beings. We should practice what we preach and have a clear understanding of what we should say and do. If we spend our days speaking nonsense, perhaps a few unwise disciples may initially follow us. However, this will not last because only wise and compassionate words can truly benefit all beings. Therefore, regardless of our identity, we must understand and abide by fundamental moral and ethical principles.

Currently, some Buddhists' words and actions can make people feel uneasy. Specifically, some lay practitioners tend to say things like, "I saw a ghost," "I saw a demon," or "I saw a bodhisattva." For instance, one lay practitioner claimed,

“Avalokiteshvara instructed me to pursue the Dharma in the Tibetan region. When I arrived in Barkam, Avalokiteshvara appeared once again...”

At first glance, his level of realization may seem higher than that of Longchenpa, as Longchenpa’s biography does not mention any extraordinary experiences. However, the lay practitioner then began to criticize others, saying, “This person has treated me unfairly! What a terrible driver!” This is quite disappointing. One might wonder, “How can someone who has seen and conversed with Avalokiteshvara still harbor such strong afflictions?”

Of course, my own practice is not very good, and I may often offend many people during my teachings. However, I do not intend to single out any specific individual. I mention this in my teachings to protect Buddhism. I also want to remind practitioners that if they are not cautious, they may stray far from Buddhism.

I provided the above examples solely to aid your understanding. It is possible that my examples may have inadvertently touched on someone’s sensitive spot, causing them to become quite upset with me, which is understandable.

To sum up, today we have discussed avoiding sexual misconduct and lying. If we can uphold these two major precepts, it will greatly benefit both our worldly lives and spiritual practice.

However, for some people, it is challenging to uphold the precepts pertaining to the ten basic good actions, let alone the higher monastic vows and samaya vows. Therefore, in our practice, we should stay grounded and avoid making grandiose claims!



Lesson 63

“Sowing discord can be either open or secret ... chatter and concentrate on reciting their mantras without talking.”
[page 108–109]

Yesterday we studied the section on “Lying.” Today we’ll cover the section on “Sowing Discord.”

2.1.4.1.2.2. Sowing Discord

Sowing discord can be done either openly or secretly.

2.1.4.1.2.2.1. Openly Sowing Discord

This tactic is often employed by individuals in positions of authority. It involves creating a rift between two people present by openly informing one that the other has spoken negatively about them behind their back. The instigator then elaborates on what the first person allegedly said or did to harm the second and may even question why the two are still behaving as if nothing has happened between them.

In general, only someone with power and authority can engage in such a negative action. This is because such individuals are not concerned about others’ unhappiness, allowing them to openly sow discord. Many such incidents occur in real life. Some Buddhists even view sowing discord as a necessary means of building connections with others, failing to recognize its significant faults. They do not see anything wrong with creating a rift between people, which is detrimental.

If they have sabotaged others’ relationships through sowing discord or turned

people against each other through cunning means, they will not only face difficulties in this life but may also be reborn in the hell realms in the next life, with little chance of escape. The *Collection of Writings about the Six Paramitas* states:

Through sowing discord,
One causes a rift among close family and friends.
Through cunning methods,
One incites individuals to hold grudges against each other.
Then one will fall into the hell realms,
And will never have the chance to escape.

Therefore, it is important to carefully and thoroughly reflect on the principle of cause and effect and assess whether our thoughts and actions align with this principle. If they do not, we will inevitably encounter various forms of suffering. For instance, when humans act against the laws of nature, such as by destroying forests, the balance of the four elements in the material world is disrupted, leading to frequent disasters.

Similarly, if we fail to align our actions, speech, and thoughts with the principle of cause and effect, we will undoubtedly face the corresponding karmic consequences of our negative actions. Some individuals become excessively arrogant when given a small amount of authority, neglecting the negative impact of creating a rift between two people. This is highly problematic. Those who believe in the principle of cause and effect should seriously reflect on the adverse repercussions of such behavior.

2.1.4.1.2.2.2. Secretly Sowing Discord

This involves driving a wedge between two people who have a good relationship by secretly approaching one of them to share false or exaggerated claims about negative things the other person, whom they care for deeply, has allegedly said.

Those who secretly sow discord do not dare to openly speak ill of others; instead, they sabotage the relationships of two people by talking behind their backs. This behavior is truly harmful. When interacting with others, whether they are Dharma friends or worldly acquaintances, it is best to express our true thoughts and opinions directly. Even if they do not accept our words, we can feel at ease

knowing that we are being genuine and sincere. Therefore, if we have an issue with someone, it is better to address it directly rather than gossip behind their back.

Some individuals may seem to get along well with everyone, but in reality, they create trouble by sowing discord behind others' backs. This may stem from habitual tendencies or a lack of mindfulness. Humans are complex social beings, each with different dispositions, motivations, and karmic influences. As a result, it is inevitable that we may not always get along with others. However, there is no need to intentionally sow discord.

The most severe form of sowing discord is inciting conflict between sangha members. The *Mahsasaka Vinaya* states:

When the sangha gathers together in harmony and joy,
The harmony often brings calm and peace.
Those who cause conflict among members of the sangha
Will suffer in the hell realms for one kalpa.

It also states:

When the sangha gathers in harmony and joy,
The harmony often brings calm and peace.
Those who unite the discordant members of the Sangha
Will experience joy for one kalpa as celestial beings.

It is now impossible to truly commit the wrongdoing of causing conflict between members of the sangha, as this specific wrongdoing refers to the act of creating discord among sangha members during the time of the historic Buddha Shakyamuni. However, sowing discord and causing conflict among sangha members, Dharma masters, or Dharma fellows still carries severe negative consequences. If we have the capability, we should strive to unite people in working together for the Dharma and for the benefit of all living beings. Engaging in pointless arguments over individual or exclusive group benefits serves no purpose.

It is particularly serious to create a rift between a vajra teacher and their disciples or within the community of vajra brothers and sisters. Some people are disciples of the same guru, yet they cannot get along with each other, much like fire and water. Once, a Rinpoche's attendant told me, "Lay practitioners A and B

may not be on good terms.” I asked why, and he replied, “Because when one comes here, the other will leave immediately.”

In the terminology of Buddhist logic, these two lay practitioners are “incompatible” or “irreconcilable,”³ just like water and fire, and darkness and light, in that when one appears, the other cannot remain. It is truly unfortunate if two vajra fellows are like this.

I heard that two well-known masters of a monastery also had a similar conflict. Whenever there was a meeting or gathering, if one master attended, the other would be absent. Of course, this information is purely hearsay, and I am unsure if it is true. If it turns out to be false, then it is merely baseless slander from others. However, if it is indeed true, it suggests that the masters are not behaving appropriately, regardless of their status.

As Dharma friends, if they refuse to engage in conversation with one another, how will they treat an adversary? How will they help those individuals who have no connection to them, as a true Mahayanist would? This is definitely worth reflecting upon!

Let’s return to the text. Regarding the faults of secretly sowing discord, there is a relevant story in the *Century of Noble Deeds*:⁴

Once, there was a man who was covered with sores soon after his birth, and no medicine could cure him. Because he wailed every day and lived a painful life, he was named “Wail.” As he grew up, he still bore the terrible sores. Day and night, he cried out in anguish. A neighbor heard him and said, “How pitiful you are! It is said that somewhere in a monastery, there is a Buddha who can heal all our physical and mental ailments. He is the Great King of Medicine in this world, so why not seek a cure from the Buddha?”

Upon hearing this, Wail went to see the Buddha with immense joy. Upon witnessing the Buddha’s majestic and dignified appearance, he couldn’t help but feel joy and admiration. The Buddha taught him the Dharma, and his sores were

³ Here, Khenpo Sodargye referred to these two terms in Buddhist logic: 1) opposition of mutual exclusion, which is further divided into direct opposition, such as permanence and impermanence, and indirect opposition, such as produced and permanent; 2) opposition of non-coexistence or simultaneous opposition, which is divided into factual opposition, such as hot and cold, and mental opposition, such as self-grasping and the realization of selflessness.

⁴ Skt. Avadanasataka

healed instantly. Later, Wail took ordination and practiced the Dharma with great diligence. Soon, he attained Arhathood.

The monks asked the Buddha, “Why did Wail have to experience such karmic consequences?”

The Buddha replied, “In one of his countless past lives, there were two wealthy men in a kingdom, A and B, who harbored deep resentment and often clashed with each other. One day, the rich man A presented the king with a large number of jewels and said, “B is a malicious man who often schemes to harm me, so I hope Your Majesty can punish this wicked person.”

Without verifying the truth, the king believed A’s words and arrested B, subjecting him to brutal torture. As a result, B was left covered in wounds. Later, B’s family bailed him out, allowing him to finally return home.

From this experience, B developed significant disenchantment with samsara. Consequently, he chose to practice in seclusion and ultimately attained the realization of a pratyekabuddha. He then recognized the equality of friends and foes. Concerned that A would be reborn in hell due to the harm inflicted upon B, he went to visit A and displayed various miraculous signs. Upon witnessing these signs, A felt a profound sense of reverence and expressed genuine remorse for his past wrongdoings in B’s presence.

The Buddha told the sangha, “The rich man who sowed discord in front of the king is Wail in this life.”

So, as Buddhists, we shouldn’t just talk the talk. Instead, we should walk the talk and strive to transform our minds. Each of us should reflect on whether we have secretly sown discord in our lives. If the answer is yes, we should contemplate the potential karmic effects that may manifest in the future. In fact, if we haven’t purified all of our negative actions, it is certain that we will experience the karmic consequences. This is akin to planting a seed; if the seed is not destroyed, it will inevitably sprout and eventually bear fruit. Therefore, we must reflect on our own lives and, if we have committed such negative actions, we must repent.

Otherwise, the karmic effects of sowing discord are quite severe. *The Sutra of Verses on the Six Destinies* states:

If one enjoys sowing discord, quarreling, and getting angry,
one will be reborn as a human-eating demon with an ugly face.

The Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings states:

Those who sow discord will suffer negative karmic effects—
They will fall into the hell realm,
And constantly be burned by fire,
Which will cause them great pain.

Thus, those who sow discord will be reborn in the hungry ghost or hell realms. This may not concern those who do not believe in the principle of cause and effect, as such individuals are indifferent to karmic retribution. However, those who do believe in this principle will be mindful of their speech and strive to nurture harmony among people through their words.

For example, whenever you encounter interpersonal conflicts—whether between two Dharma masters, a guru and a disciple, two non-Buddhists, or even two tribes—you should do your utmost to act as a mediator and restore harmony. It is worth investing time and resources in this endeavor.

As you may know, it is greatly meritorious to bring people together in harmony, a topic that will soon be discussed in the teaching of the *Aspiration to Be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*. It is a meaningful pursuit if you can find a way to resolve others' interpersonal misunderstandings and conflicts.

In fact, when two individuals have a strained relationship, it can often be discerned from their expressions and attitudes. If someone's name is mentioned and the other person displays a peculiar expression, it may indicate interpersonal conflict between the two. I am skilled at making such observations when needed. Although I do occasionally make mistakes, I am accurate about 90 percent of the time.

Currently, many people lack integrity. On the surface, they appear amiable toward one another, but they engage in gossip behind others' backs. Here is a verse from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* that I particularly like:

Don't harm qualified teachers,
Stay away from evil friends and family members,
Always speak words of harmony,
Then one can be reborn in the Buddha-field called Immovable.

I hope you can behave in this manner over the long term. Specifically, do not

harm any qualified teachers, do not go along with negative companions to prevent adopting their bad habits, and strive to speak words of compassion, gentleness, and harmony with others.

In summary, we must be mindful of our words. Sometimes, two people have a good relationship, but it can easily be damaged by the careless words of a third party. Conversely, some individuals can help others maintain harmony. Perhaps this is because they have already cultivated bodhicitta in their minds. Just a few phrases from them can be incredibly persuasive and may even inspire others to naturally develop compassion.

In fact, it leads to significant problems if a person constantly thinks about sowing discord. If we have ever caused conflicts between two individuals, we must genuinely repent for this negative action and vow never to do it again.

2.1.4.1.2.3. Harsh Speech

Harsh speech involves making offensive comments about others' physical imperfections, such as openly labeling them as one-eyed, deaf, blind, and similar terms.

Some people use derogatory terms like "cripple," "short," "big," "flat-nosed," "big-eared," "skinny," "fat," and so on, to refer to others based on their appearance. While this may seem like a specific manner of expression, such hurtful language leads to significant karmic consequences.

The *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* contains a story about a monk named "Filled with Honey," which illustrates the terrible consequences of harsh speech.

At the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, a monk named Filled with Honey attained Arhathood very quickly. Ananda asked the Buddha what Filled with Honey had done in his previous life to achieve such rapid realization.

It turned out that once, while the Buddha was on his alms round, he met a monkey. The monkey offered honey to the Buddha. When the Buddha accepted the offering, the monkey was so happy that it jumped up and down. However, it accidentally fell into a deep pit and died. The monkey was then reborn as a human, who became the monk Filled with Honey.

Ananda then asked, "Why was he a monkey in a previous life?"

The Buddha replied, "At the time of Buddha Kassapa, he was a young bhikkhu.

He once saw an arhat leaping across a river and laughed at the arhat, saying the arhat jumped like a monkey. Because of this misdeed of harsh speech, he was reborn as a monkey for the next five hundred lives.”

Thus, we should not only refrain from commenting on others’ physical defects, but we must also avoid mocking others by saying they resemble a monkey, yak, dog, pig, and so on. Engaging in such harsh speech will lead to significant consequences.

When teaching *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, shared a similar story:

In a past life, during the time of Buddha Kassapa, Düsüm Khyenpa (1110–1193), the 1st Karmapa, once insulted a monk by telling him that his face resembled that of a monkey. As a result of this negative action, he was reborn as a monkey for the next five hundred lives.

Later, when he was reincarnated as Düsüm Khyenpa, his face still resembled that of a monkey. Before becoming a monk, he had a girlfriend who ended their relationship due to his unattractive looks. This breakup prompted him to renounce worldly pursuits, and he made a vow to be good-looking in his next life. Otherwise, it would be challenging for him to approach and guide sentient beings. As it turned out, Düsüm Khyenpa was the last of these monkey-faced lives. There are online comments suggesting that the majesty exuded by the 16th and 17th Karmapas is a result of this vow made in a previous life.

Many people, both Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, are preoccupied with their physical appearance. If you are not good-looking, there may not be much you can do about it in this life. If you are determined to change your looks, you may need to undergo plastic surgery, which can be expensive. Sometimes, a few thousand dollars may not be sufficient for the procedure.

Therefore, you might consider making a vow to improve your appearance in the next life. It is said that the 16th Karmapa had a very majestic appearance, so when he was in the United States, many followers were drawn to him because of this. Numerous stories attest to this.

“Harsh Speech” is a negative action related to our words, yet it can directly impact our physical bodies and adversely affect many aspects of our future lifetimes. Therefore, with everyone we encounter in this lifetime, we should discipline ourselves with mindfulness and vigilance, refraining from speaking harshly to them. Sakya Pandita says:

Do not say harsh words to harm others,
 Not even to your enemies.
 Just like echoes in a valley,
 The insult to others will immediately return to you.

Therefore, we must be cautious about using harsh words. Some Buddhists disregard this, despite having studied the Dharma. I'm not sure if it's due to karmic influences from past lives or other reasons. They listen to the teachings as if they were mere news and fail to internalize them. Studying the Dharma in this manner yields few advantages.

Harsh speech also includes exposing others' hidden shortcomings and engaging in offensive talk of all kinds. Thus, we must refrain from saying anything that makes others unhappy. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* states:

Do not criticize others' faults,
 Do not expose others' wrongdoings,
 Abstain from coarse speech and stinging—
 Such a person will attain liberation.

Some words may be spoken sweetly rather than harshly, yet they can still make others unhappy or uncomfortable. These words are still considered "harsh speech." A Tibetan saying goes:

There is no much or little for harsh speech;
 There is no cheap or expensive for joyful food.

No matter how harshly one speaks, if it upsets others, the speech is not good. No matter how cheap or expensive the food one offers is, as long as it conveys good intentions, the food is good.

Some people have the ability to make others happy for a long time with their words. They may say a simple sentence, but the listener will never forget it. That sentence can bring great benefits to the listener's life. Those who frequently speak with gentleness and softness will undoubtedly be reborn in the celestial realms. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

Harsh words break a kind heart,
 So wise people abandon them;

Those who often speak gentle words,
Will be reborn in the celestial realm.

Some great masters often speak with remarkable skill. They rarely upset anyone, and whatever they say tends to make others happy. In contrast, some individuals are not like this. They would be better off remaining silent, as their words often disturb others. They frequently find themselves distressed, wondering, “What negative actions did I commit in my previous life? Why do my words always create problems?” As you can see, while humans may appear similar, their levels of inner compassion and communication skills vary.

If you want to learn communication skills, you may refer to Buddhist scriptures such as *The Just King*,⁵ the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, and the *Lotus Sutra*. In summary, as long as you are compassionate and altruistic, your words will undoubtedly bring direct or indirect benefits to your listeners. Even if you are scolding others with harsh language, you may still benefit them, as your words may help eradicate the negative seeds in their mindstream, preventing them from reverting to their former bad habits. Therefore, regardless of our words, inner compassion is essential.

Using offensive language in the presence of one’s guru, a Dharma peer, or a sublime being is particularly serious. If your words cause the guru to appear unhappy, cease their Dharma activities, or even enter parinirvana, the one who speaks disrespectfully creates significant faults.

Thus, no matter to whom we are speaking, we must be mindful of our words. In today’s society, many people seem unable to control their speech. Whenever there is an opportunity, they speak carelessly, which is not good. We should guide our speech with mindfulness and vigilance, say what should be said, and refrain from saying what should not be said.

When attending a meeting, some individuals choose to remain silent and simply sit there, which is not ideal. Conversely, there are others who cannot seem to stop talking and end up disrupting the discussion, which is equally undesirable. In fact, effective communication relies on language, so it is important for us to develop proper speaking skills.

2.1.4.1.2.4. Worthless Chatter

⁵ Khenpo Sodargye specifically referred to Chapter Four of the text: *Analyzing Your Own and Others’ Speech*.

Worthless chatter refers to speaking at length without any meaningful intent, such as reciting what one imagines to be Dharma but is not—like the rituals of brahmins—or engaging in pointless discussions that provoke desire or anger, such as sharing stories about prostitutes, singing lustful songs, or glorifying theft and violence.

In today's society, worthless chatter is ubiquitous, permeating TV shows, films, the internet, newspapers, magazines, and so forth, where a significant portion of the content is essentially meaningless. People not only listen to and believe in this worthless chatter but also engage in it themselves. This external environment poses challenges for individuals who aim to practice the Dharma. If someone wishes to engage in Dharma practice, they will undoubtedly encounter various difficulties and obstacles. While one may manage to overcome these obstacles for a day or two, the question remains: when will they truly transcend and transform these challenges?

Therefore, I often think that the pith instructions from Vajrayana are particularly well-suited for people in modern society. This is because Vajrayana teachings often embrace a more open-minded approach and offer extraordinary methods to help us transform our thoughts and actions onto the spiritual path. In contrast, other types of precepts, especially the pratimoksha precepts, are becoming increasingly challenging for practitioners in today's world to observe.

This can sometimes be observed in our everyday lives. How many Buddhists actually engage in virtuous deeds such as chanting mantras, helping others, and meditating? Not many. Instead, many people spend their time watching TV programs and films or chatting online every day. This world itself is already an illusion, yet they pursue further illusions within this illusory world. Apart from greed and hatred, they hardly gain anything of value from the TV programs and films they watch. By examining what occupies most people's minds and the state of today's society, it becomes clear how our mental intake is connected to the status of the external world.

Today's media is saturated with information that promotes greed and anger, covering topics such as military affairs, business, and more. What we are exposed to runs contrary to the conducive conditions needed for the pursuit of liberation. When practitioners encounter these influences, it becomes challenging to resist temptation. Eventually, some may even abandon their Dharma practice and stray further from the right path. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

Much worthless chatter
Can disturb and confuse one's mind,
Destroy one's pure conduct as a practitioner,
And impede one's path to nirvana.

In addition to worthless worldly chatter, I must remind you to refrain from irrelevant and distracting talk when others are reciting prayers, chanting mantras, and meditating. Otherwise, you will disrupt others' accumulation of merit through their virtuous actions, which is a serious mistake. This is why I reprimanded some lay practitioners in yesterday's class. If you do not wish to listen to the teachings, that is fine; however, if you disturb many other Dharma listeners, it is truly detrimental.

This also applies to those who receive teachings through audio and video. For instance, if more than twenty Dharma friends are listening to a teaching together and everyone is attentively focused on the Dharma, one person's talk can disturb the entire group and hinder everyone's merit accumulation. Therefore, if you are unable to remain silent, it is quite harmful to both yourself and others. The *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings* states:

The doors of hundreds of hundreds of merits,
Are destroyed by tongues.

The Popular Collection of Traditional Chinese Wise Sayings also states:

Illnesses enter through the mouth,
Troubles come out through the mouth.

Some individuals seem to lack self-control and enjoy talking incessantly, even during a Dharma class or a group mantra recitation. While they may not wish to engage in virtuous acts, those around them still seek to participate in practice and should not be disturbed.

Specifically, it appears that some laypeople do not know how to properly listen to Dharma teachings. Despite having attended teachings for many years, their behavior in a Dharma class remains inappropriate. In fact, it would be better for these individuals to withdraw from the class, as their absence would be acceptable. However, if they stay and disrupt others, it will create obstacles to their Dharma practice in this life and in future lives.

Moreover, many works by novelists, screenwriters, and authors are filled with

trivial chatter. There are artists, singers, and movie stars who captivate millions with their works of worthless chatter. These works prevent their audiences from engaging in something meaningful.

At times, when we carefully observe this world filled with delusions, we must acknowledge the herd mentality of humans. However, as Dharma practitioners, when we gain a bit of wisdom from the Dharma, we can begin to examine the world through the “microscope” of the Dharma. This enables us to easily recognize the “bacteria” of meaningless things, such as worthless chatter.

People today enjoy engaging in all sorts of worthless chatter, which seems to come out naturally and spontaneously. Upon careful reflection, you can realize that much of this worthless chatter is driven by greed or hatred. Furthermore, the severity of the fault is proportional to the level of attachment or hatred generated in your own mind or in the minds of others.

For example, after reading a novel, someone might say to others, “I read a novel today featuring a woman who is incredibly beautiful...” Due to their eloquence, many may develop desires. Similarly, after watching a film, someone might persuade others by saying, “There was a war between our country and another. Our troops fought in this manner...” Upon hearing the story, various reactions arise among people. Some feel anger and hatred, while others are misled and display foolishness. There are also those who praise themselves and belittle others, believing their side to be exceptionally powerful, thus fostering arrogance.

Consequently, many afflictions stem from listening to others’ worthless chatter. As you know, afflictions such as greed, hatred, and ignorance lead to negative karma. If these afflictions arise from your worthless speech, then undoubtedly your speech is flawed.

On the other hand, by studying the Dharma together, which helps eradicate our defilements of greed, hatred, and ignorance, the merit of our speech is incredible. Why do I teach every day, even if it’s a short class? It’s because during my teaching, I cannot engage in discussions that provoke afflictions, and the Dharma in my teachings can eliminate our defilements. As you listen to the Dharma class, the likelihood of harboring unwholesome thoughts decreases, and even a fleeting moment of freedom from afflictions is, in itself, a merit.

Very often, people complain that listening to Dharma teachings is too tiring. However, studying the Dharma is very necessary. Even if we only listen to one

Dharma lesson, the benefits we receive from it are significantly different compared to listening to a lesson on worldly knowledge. Why is that? It's because the Dharma can directly or indirectly antidote afflictions. Therefore, listening to Dharma teachings is crucial for us. Many Dharma practitioners read Buddhist texts and listen to one or two lessons every day. This habit is genuinely beneficial.

If you are unable to hear, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma, you can still recite verses and aspiration prayers from Buddhist scriptures or those written by esteemed masters that are full of blessing power, as suggested by Mipham Rinpoche. Even if you are unable to do that, you can still chant auspicious mantras such as the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, the mantra of Padmasambhava, the mantra of Vajrasattva, and similar ones, which should not be difficult. In any case, we should reduce idle talk and devote more time to chanting mantras.

About a year ago, an elderly practitioner made a vow in front of me to recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara one hundred million times. Today, I met him again at the entrance of the Dharma hall. He can hardly hear, but he kept holding my hand, asking for my blessing. He said that even if he could live for just another year or so, he could complete the recitation. He practices diligently and only sleeps a little at night. He has managed to recite the mantra over fifty million times in a year and a half. He can finish the remaining forty million and more in just over a year. Such an elderly practitioner is truly remarkable!

If you engage in idle or unrelated chatter while saying prayers or reciting mantras, it will render your efforts ineffective, regardless of how many times you repeat them. In this regard, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche did not oppose reading or discussing the Dharma while reciting prayers or mantras, unlike some other gurus who prohibited it. When I was young, I was dedicated to studying the Dharma, so I would read a book and occasionally engage in discussions about Dharma questions while chanting mantras.

This is particularly relevant to the various types of gossip that spread among the rows of the assembled sangha. A single individual who spreads rumors can undermine the merit of an entire congregation and nullify the virtuous deeds of its supporters and donors.

Therefore, good practitioners rarely engage in idle gossip. *The Record of the Exalted Acts of Buddhist Monastics* introduced Chan Master Datong of the Song dynasty, who always remained solemn and upright and whose eyes always gazed

ahead, whether he was practicing or resting. It was said that he never engaged in frivolous talk and refrained from laughter for thirty years while he was leading the sangha. Maybe he was like Langri Thangpa.

As you can see, those who possess wisdom and states of realization typically do not speak nonsense, whereas those who do not practice well are especially inclined toward trivial worldly chatter.

In ancient India, it was customary for only those who had achieved the highest spiritual accomplishments and were free from any detrimental flaws to use funds donated to the sangha. The Buddha strictly prohibited anyone else from doing so. However, in modern times, individuals learn one or two tantric rituals and, as soon as they can recite them, begin to accept and use any potentially harmful offerings they can obtain. Without having received the necessary empowerments, without upholding all the samayas, without mastering the generation and completion stages, and without fulfilling the requirements of mantra recitation, to seek offerings by performing tantric rituals—merely chanting mantras superficially, like bönpo sorcerers—constitutes a grave transgression.

In both the Han areas and the Tibetan region, a practitioner who intends to use the funds donated to the sangha must at least have upheld pure precepts and must consistently guide their mindstream with mindfulness and vigilance. The *Precious Garland of Precepts* states:

Only those who study and practice the Dharma on the foundation of pure precepts are entitled to use the offerings of the faithful.

Using these dangerous offerings is akin to swallowing red-hot iron pills: unless one possesses the cast-iron jaws of the union of generation and perfection stages, ordinary individuals will burn themselves and be utterly destroyed. As the saying goes:

Dangerous offerings are like deadly sharp blades:
Partake of them, and they will sever the vital artery of liberation.

Therefore, it creates serious faults if a practitioner uses donations without first

attaining genuine states of realization. *The Buddha Speaks of Unprecedented Causes and Conditions Sutra*⁶ says:

It's better to cut off one's own flesh to feed oneself,
Than to receive others' offerings with evil intentions.

Some individuals are far from mastering the generation and perfection stages of meditation. While they may be familiar with the ritual's words, they don't even make an effort to recite them correctly. To make matters worse, as soon as they reach the mantra recitation—the most crucial part—they begin chatting, unleashing a torrent of irrelevant gossip filled with desire and aggression, wasting the entire allotted time.

For example, such a person might recite the mantra of Vajrasattva—*Om Vajra Sattva Hum*—three or four times and then start chatting with those sitting next to them, saying, “Hey, how have you been? Have you received money from home?” This is disastrous for themselves and others.

During the Song dynasty, Chan Master An resided in Qingtai Temple. One day, while in a meditative state, he observed two monks engaged in conversation while leaning against a railing. Initially, celestial guards surrounded them and listened attentively. However, the celestial guards eventually departed and were replaced by demons. In the end, the demons began to spit on the monks, curse them, and even erase their footprints.

Upon emerging from his meditative state, Chan Master An inquired about the monks' conversation. They revealed that they had initially been discussing the Dharma but then transitioned to idle gossip. Eventually, they began discussing the donations made by their patrons, which even disappointed the demons. It is most important for monastics to abandon this kind of chatter and focus entirely on reciting their mantras without engaging in conversation.

Lay practitioners should also strive to recite mantras and avoid worthless chatter. *The Sutra of Accepting the Ten Good Karmas as Precepts* states:

If one can avoid worthless chatter,
One's mouth can often emit a pleasant aroma,
Resembling that of a utpala lotus,

⁶ Skt. Adbhutadharmaṃparyāya

And one will be born in a place where a buddha appears.

Therefore, we should strive to avoid worthless chatter, focus on reciting mantras, and speak words that are beneficial to all living beings.



Lesson 64

“Covetousness includes all the desirous or acquisitive thoughts, ... longer leads to liberation, and the harm you do can no longer be confessed.” [page110-112]

We are currently discussing the ten negative actions in the chapter on cause and effect. We have studied negative actions related to one’s body and speech. Today, we will examine negative actions related to one’s mind.

2.1.4.1.3. Mental Actions to be Avoided

2.1.4.1.3.1. Covetousness

Covetousness encompasses all desirous or acquisitive thoughts, even the slightest ones we may have about other people’s property. Contemplating how agreeable it would be if those wonderful belongings were ours, we repeatedly imagine possessing them and devise schemes to acquire them, and so on.

For example, if you don’t own a car and see someone driving a luxury vehicle, you might feel jealous and strongly desire to claim that car as your own. Or, if you notice someone has a beautiful house that you don’t possess, you may wish to make that house yours. Similarly, if you know someone has a substantial amount of money in their bank account, you might imagine transferring all that money to your own account. Such thoughts are examples of covetousness.

In a broad sense, desirous thoughts about a person, the Dharma, and property all fall under the category of covetousness. However, Patrul Rinpoche explains

it here from the perspective of property. Ordinary people often do not view this defilement as unvirtuous; rather, they believe that wishing to acquire more property reflects their ambition and drive. In reality, when a person harbors covetousness toward wealth, it becomes easy for them to descend into the hell realms. As stated in the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*:

Covetousness is quite evil,
And it drags people to hell.

Therefore, when we see someone's property, we should avoid feelings of covetousness. Instead, we should rejoice for them. In *The Just King*, Mipham Rinpoche states:

No matter how wealthy others are,
Do not covet what they possess,
But instead remain joyful for what you have.

Otherwise, a person filled with great covetousness, even if they possess some wealth, will easily lose what they have. Here is a story from the *Mula-Sarvastivada Vinaya*:

Once, there was a man who had a beautiful daughter. When she grew up, her father passed away and was reborn as the king of geese. After losing her father, the daughter lived in poverty and suffered greatly. Witnessing her plight, the king of geese picked up one jewel each day from a treasury island and placed it at her door in the morning. The daughter was quite stingy and did not spend the jewels at all, so over time, she accumulated a large number of them.

One day, she wondered, "Who on earth gives me a jewel every day?" She woke up very early in the morning to see what was happening behind the door. She discovered that it was the king of geese who was bringing her the jewels.

The daughter thought, "This goose brings me a jewel every day, so there must be many more hidden in its stomach. I should try to capture it, so I can have even more jewels."

Immediately, she set a net to catch the goose. Seeing that she was ungrateful and intended to repay kindness with harm, the king of geese flew away and never returned. A celestial being witnessed this and composed a verse that says:

One should not be covetous;
 Covetousness is unvirtuous.
 If one becomes covetous,
 All one's gains will be lost.

Therefore, no matter how much money covetous people have, they still experience a sense of poverty and can hardly feel genuine happiness. The *Acts of the Buddha*⁷ says:

Being wealthy but lacking contentment
 Is also being poor;
 Being poor but feeling content
 Is the greatest wealth.

Some practitioners at Larung Gar lead simple lives, embracing minimalism in their choices of clothing, food, and provisions. What does this lifestyle bring them? It brings them a sense of ease and happiness. In contrast, there are individuals who are very wealthy but lack knowledge of the Dharma, and they experience a profound sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction. Therefore, if we do not adjust our mindset, it will be incredibly challenging for us to find satisfaction and fulfillment solely through material accumulation.

We must understand that the value of inner happiness and wisdom surpasses that of external wealth. While material things may bring us temporary pleasure, they cannot eliminate our suffering.

Why is Buddhism sometimes referred to as *Adhyatma Vidya*, which means the inner science of realization? This is because Buddhism focuses on cultivating inner wisdom. Unlike other fields of knowledge that primarily deal with external objects and offer solutions to specific problems, Buddhism has the potential to eradicate all our afflictions. As a result, when we achieve realization in our minds, the entire external world becomes more beautiful.

2.1.4.1.3.2. Wishing Harm on Others

This refers to all the malicious thoughts we may harbor toward others—such as holding onto anger or hatred while imagining ways to hurt them, feeling upset

⁷ Skt. Buddhacharita

or envious when they achieve success, wishing they were less fortunate, happy, or capable, or taking satisfaction in their misfortunes.

As Lama Tsongkhapa says:

If the intention is good, then the stages and paths will also be good;

If the intention is bad, then the stages and paths will also be bad.

The difference between a good person and a bad person lies in their intentions, whether good or bad. Being regarded as a good person is not based on factors such as skin tone, wealth, or communication skills. If a person harbors hatred and is driven by negative emotions, their actions are inherently not good, and they may even go to the extreme of committing outrageous acts.

Such an individual will cause varying degrees of harm to those around them. In the process of harming others, they also harm themselves. Furthermore, there are instances where they harm themselves before they have the chance to harm others.

During the Three Kingdoms Period, the king of Wu, one of the three major kingdoms, had a eunuch under his command. This eunuch was a villain with ill intentions and a narrow-minded nature who liked to hold grudges. He had a long-standing feud with the warehouse keeper and constantly harbored resentment, always seeking opportunities for revenge against him.

On a hot summer day, the king of Wu sent the eunuch to the warehouse to fetch some honey to accompany his plums. In order to frame the warehouse keeper, the eunuch secretly placed a few pieces of rat excrement in the honey container and presented it to the king.

The king noticed the rat excrement and became furious. When questioned, the eunuch immediately blamed the warehouse keeper. The king then summoned the keeper and interrogated him. The warehouse keeper was terrified, his face turning pale and unable to stop bowing. He desperately explained that he had not neglected his duty in any way.

The king had always been intelligent and observant. To uncover the truth, he commanded someone to cut open the rat excrement. It was discovered that the excrement was moist on the surface but dry within. Therefore, the king deduced that it was the eunuch who had placed the excrement. If the rat excrement had been in the honey for a significant period, it would have been completely saturated.

However, the fact that it was dry inside indicated that it had been recently placed in the container. As a result, the eunuch's scheme was exposed, and he was punished for deceiving the king.

Therefore, harming others is harming oneself. Especially, as practitioners, we must never wish harm on others. Some practitioners of the Pure Land school strongly resist studying the Dharma. They have conflicts with others and hold grudges in their daily lives, yet they rarely desire to make a change. It may be quite difficult for such practitioners to be reborn in the Pure Land. The Sixth Patriarch said in the *Platform Sutra*:

If one's mind harbors no ill intentions,
The Western Pure Land is not far away;
If one's mind holds ill intentions,
Even reciting the Buddha's name cannot bring rebirth there.

If you do not have a malicious mind and are pure-hearted and kind, being reborn in the blissful Pure Land is within reach. However, if you are like a venomous snake wishing harm upon your Dharma fellows and those around you—quarreling with one person today and fighting with another tomorrow—not only will you fail to be reborn in the Pure Land, but you will also lead a difficult life in this lifetime, as those who encounter you will reject you.

Some people refer to themselves as “lay practitioners,” but their character may be worse than that of some non-Buddhists. Some monastics took ordination years ago, yet their intentions are filled with malice, and there is no trace of kindness. Especially during this degenerate age, some Buddhists who always appear to hold mala beads in their hands are rife with hypocrisy. Although they may give eloquent Dharma talks, they are actually unkind. Such individuals will find it difficult to attain rebirth in the Pure Land through praying to Buddha Amitabha, and worse yet, they may experience boundless suffering in this life and in many future lives. Mipham Rinpoche says:

A malicious intention leads to constant suffering in future lives,
Causing one to be harmed by others for no reason.

Thus, if you are slandered or harmed by others without cause, it is likely the

karmic result of your past intention to harm others. The *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings* also states:

The one who likes to wish harm on others,
Is protected neither by humans nor by gods.

A person who wishes harm upon others will not receive protection from Dharma protectors and celestial beings. Moreover, they will attract various forms of harm from both humans and non-humans. Therefore, for those experiencing great suffering, their circumstances may be related to karma from actions committed in previous lives or in this life.

2.1.4.1.3.3. Wrong Views

Wrong views include the belief that actions have no karmic effect, as well as the perspectives of eternalism and nihilism.

2.1.4.1.3.3.1. The View that Actions Cause No Karmic Effect

As stated in the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and *Upper Abhidharma of the Mahayana*, the belief that actions have no karmic effect—that positive actions yield no benefit and negative actions cause no harm—leads to a series of inferences. These include the denial of past and future lives, the belief that the Three Jewels lack any great qualities, the notion that the Buddha has never come into this world, and the idea that heavens and hells are mere fictions, among other things. Such wrong views are particularly concerning. Without correct views, studying the Dharma becomes merely a formality, and Buddhist teachings cannot be internalized.

2.1.4.1.3.3.2. The Views of Eternalism and Nihilism

The views of eternalism and nihilism encompass the various beliefs held by the *tirthikas*. While these views can be categorized into 360 false views or sixty-two wrong views, they ultimately fall under the two categories of eternalism and nihilism.

The *tirthikas'* views are explained in detail by Venerable Longchenpa in *The Treasury of Wish-Fulfilling Jewels* and *The Treasury of Philosophical Tenets*. There are many types of wrong views, and the aforementioned numbers are merely

rough estimates. Sentient beings hold a multitude of wrong views that are beyond enumeration. Nonetheless, all these wrong views can be summarized under the two categories of eternalism and nihilism.

1) Eternalism

Eternalists believe in a permanent self and an eternally existing creator of the universe, such as Ishvara, Vishnu, and the God. In the *Commentary on Valid Cognition*, the chapter titled “Establishing the Buddha as the One with Valid Knowledge” refutes the existence of an eternally existing creator. The eternalist view is also refuted in texts such as Mipham Rinpoche’s *Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna’s *Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, and Chandrakirti’s *Introduction to the Middle Way*. Why is the eternalist view invalid? It is because, at the ultimate level, no phenomenon can remain eternal.

Thus, in strict terms, any spiritual tradition that claims the existence of an eternally existing creator can be considered a tirthika belief. However, from a broader perspective, it is important to promote the harmonious coexistence, mutual learning, and inclusivity of all the world’s religions. Nevertheless, the unique perspectives of Buddhism on view, meditation, action, and fruition should remain clearly distinguishable from other spiritual beliefs. Just as there are differences between the major old-school and new-school lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, various Buddhist schools should clarify their own views and analyses, even though they all fall under the umbrella of Buddhism.

When establishing views in Buddhism, we Buddhists should not blindly adhere to or conform to other religions. Otherwise, it may hinder our progress toward liberation. While other spiritual traditions may possess admirable qualities, there are significant differences when compared to Buddhism.

Recently, I met an intellectual at Peking University who is a Christian. When I was introducing the extraordinary greatness of Buddhism, he bluntly stated that he believed his religion was good and infallible. He then asked me to point out anything that was not good in his religion. I replied, “I may not cover everything, but one thing I can say is that the doctrine in your religion may not sufficiently consider non-believers and animals, which contrasts with the Buddhist value of compassion for all beings. If you disagree and would like to discuss this further, we can have a peaceful conversation on this issue.” The intellectual is a wise man, and after hearing my words, he reflected on what I said.

Of course, I don't intend to disparage other religions to highlight the supremacy of Buddhism. As stated in the *Praise of the Sage Who Surpasses Gods*, we should take refuge in and follow whichever religion aligns most closely with the truth—that is the choice of the wise.

2) Nihilism

Nihilists hold the view that everything emerges by itself, denying the existence of past or future lives, the concept of karma, and the possibilities of liberation or freedom. How did the nihilist view arise? It is said that when the asuras initiated a war with the gods, the gods didn't want to engage in negative actions such as killing, due to their inherent belief in the principle of cause and effect. However, when the gods faced defeat, the god Brihaspati needed to motivate his celestial soldiers, so he deliberately created a text that promoted a wrong view on the nonexistence of past and future lives. Later, the rishi Drokarwa, a tirthika teacher, brought this wrong view to the human realm.

What were the wrong views? As it says in the doctrine of *Black Ishvara*:

The rising of the sun, the downhill flow of water,
The roundness of peas, the bristling length and sharpness of
thorns,
The beauty of the iridescent eyes of peacocks' tails:
Nobody created them, they all just naturally came to be.⁸

They argue that the sun rises in the east without anyone causing it to do so, and rivers flow downhill without being pushed. No one shaped peas to make them round or sharpened the points of thorns. The vibrant patterns on a peacock's tail were not painted by any hand. These phenomena simply exist as they are, governed by their own nature. Similarly, everything in the world—whether pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad—arises on its own. There is no such thing as past karma, previous lives, or future lives.

Such views are quite ridiculous and were refuted in Mipham Rinpoche's *Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way*. Of course, those who have never studied the Dharma may find them reasonable. However, if we examine those examples closely, we will realize that they are not valid at all because all phenomena

⁸ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 110.

arise from causes and conditions. When causes and conditions ripen, phenomena will manifest; otherwise, all phenomena, including the sharp points of thorns, will not manifest because they do not exist intrinsically.

Even if these external phenomena were intrinsically existent, we still could not conclude that internal suffering and happiness also possess inherent nature. Why is that? For an analogy to be effective, the two things involved must share something in common. The aforementioned analogies do not share any commonality with internal suffering and happiness. The suffering and happiness of sentient beings arise from causes and conditions, in the way that one's past positive and negative actions lead to future suffering and happiness.

Of course, to accept this view, we must first acknowledge the Buddha as "the One with Valid Knowledge." Then, we will accept the Buddha's teachings on the principle of cause and effect. Alternatively, through debate, we can refute the nihilist viewpoint by exposing its logical fallacy. This way, nihilists cannot disprove the existence of past and future lives. We have studied numerous logical reasonings and empirical evidence on this matter, which you can refer to in your analysis.

Believing that the teachings of tirthika traditions are true and adhering to them, or even without such adherence, considering the Buddha's words, your teacher's guidance, or the writings of respected Buddhist scholars as mistaken, and harboring doubts or criticisms toward them, all fall under the category of wrong views.

Even if we currently don't hold wrong views, as some Dharma masters have mentioned, we may eventually adopt erroneous views due to our own lack of merit and blessings. This is particularly true for individuals whose seeds of wrong views have not yet been completely eradicated. Their wisdom is limited, so when they are influenced by the views of tirthikas or fools, they are more likely to abandon the views of Buddhism, which are as precious as a wish-fulfilling jewel, and instead follow religious doctrines that can cause significant harm in this life and in future lives. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for you to carefully contemplate which views you choose to accept.

Now we have studied all ten negative actions. The worst of the ten negative actions are taking life and holding wrong views. As it is said:

No action is more severe than taking someone else's life.

Among the ten negative actions, holding wrong views is the

gravest.

Regarding wrong views, the *True Attainment Treatise* says:

The power of mental acts exceeds that of physical and verbal acts,

and

Of all the vicious acts, wrong views are the gravest.

Therefore, the power of actions related to the mind surpasses that of actions related to the body and speech.

So, why are taking life and holding wrong views considered the worst? Here, Patrul Rinpoche offers a brief explanation:

When it comes to the act of taking life, aside from beings in the hell realms, there is no being that does not fear death or prioritize their own life above all else. Of course, when a crisis arises in relationships or life, the pain of living can far exceed the pain of death, leading a person to choose suicide.

If we humans disregard and trample upon the lives of other species, we are truly committing a grave error. Leonardo Da Vinci, the renowned Italian Renaissance painter, stated, “Whoever does not respect life does not deserve it,” and “My body will not be a tomb for other creatures.” If the animals we consume could communicate in our language, I believe no one would dare to take their lives. However, it is precisely because they cannot speak and cannot defend themselves that we humans thoughtlessly end their valuable lives.

Thus, taking a life is a particularly negative action. According to the *Sutra of Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*:

If someone kills another living being, they will have to repay that act with five hundred of their own lives in future rebirths.

Additionally,

Killing even a single being will result in spending an entire intermediate kalpa in the hell realms as retribution.

Therefore, under no circumstances can we Buddhists kill any sentient being.

Some time ago, I met a Dharma friend who told me he planned to buy insecticide because there were many ants in his house. After hearing his words, I felt that many people hadn't yet recognized the preciousness of life.

Once, a person asked me, "There are many termites in the wooden pillars of the Dharma hall. Should we kill those termites?" My answer was, "We shouldn't. We can simply replace the wooden pillars with concrete ones. After all, the lives of sentient beings are more precious!"

Therefore, as long as you acknowledge the value of life, you will discover various solutions that do not involve killing to resolve any problem. If you fail to recognize this, you may recklessly kill beings for the sake of your own appetite, regardless of whether sentient beings cause you harm. By doing so, you will have to repay every life you take with five hundred of your own lives. What a dreadful karmic consequence!

Even worse is using a virtuous endeavor, such as building a representation of the Three Jewels, as justification for engaging in negative actions like taking a life. As Padampa Sangye warns:

To build a representation of the Three Jewels
In a way that causes harm and suffering
Is to cast your next life to the wind.

Not long ago, I heard of a particularly troubling case, although I cannot confirm its truth. I was told that, in order to construct a stupa, a Tibetan lama gathered many sheep and cattle and sold them to a slaughterhouse for money. In another instance, some Tibetans would kill animals for money before going on a pilgrimage to the Jowo Rinpoche in Lhasa, using the proceeds for the trip and then repenting for the act of killing once they arrived. How foolish!

The same is true for some individuals living in the Han areas of China. When they see ants, cockroaches, and mice, they kill these creatures while reciting mantras for them. They even claim that this killing is acceptable since the recitation can help transfer the consciousness of the unfortunate animals.

Their actions are highly unreasonable. If they genuinely want to benefit living beings, they could simply whisper the Buddha's name close to the animals' ears. Why do they feel the need to kill them? Imagine if someone recited the Buddha's

name to you and then killed you. How would you feel? Each of you should reflect on this.

In 2009, during an interview with journalists at the White House, US President Barack Obama had a fly persistently landing on his face. Eventually, the annoyed President swatted the fly. Leaders of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) were dissatisfied with Obama's "execution" of the fly.

A year later, while attending a conference, Obama was once again buzzed by a fly. The fly persisted, sometimes landing on the President's head, sometimes on his cheek, and even on his lip. However, Obama had learned a lesson and simply let the fly linger without taking action.

In terms of how we should treat living beings like flies and other pests, I believe Master Yinguang set a commendable example. Once, when his room was infested with bedbugs, one of his disciples wanted to eliminate them. However, Master Yinguang stopped him and said, "The fact that they are still living in my room shows that I have not yet cultivated enough great qualities to tame and transform them." Thus, he remained undisturbed by the presence of the bedbugs.

It is said that after reaching the age of seventy-three, there were no longer any bedbugs in his room. Some Dharma masters attributed this to Master Yinguang's merits and virtues. Consequently, upon hearing this story, some Buddhists may find inspiration to further advance their practice of abstaining from killing.

Regarding the horrific effect of taking life, here is a story from the *Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra*:

A wealthy man wanted to eat lamb, but he feared his son would oppose the idea. So, he lied to his son, claiming that the family's prosperity was due to the protection of a tree god residing in a tree on their land and that they should slaughter a sheep to offer as a sacrifice to the tree god. The son believed his father's story, so he built a small shrine near the tree and frequently sacrificed sheep.

Eventually, the wealthy man died and was reborn as a sheep in the family due to his negative actions. Later, when the son was about to sacrifice a sheep, he happened to choose the one that had been his father in a previous life. The sheep bleated as it was being taken out.

At that moment, an arhat passed by to beg for alms. Observing the situation, the arhat blessed the son, enabling him to see through the divine eye that the sheep was his father reborn. Understanding the karmic consequences of killing, the son

was deeply troubled, and he immediately destroyed the shrine and ceased taking life.

Under the influence of wrong views, sometimes people may make offerings that appear virtuous, but in reality, they are not virtuous at all. It is equally misguided to think you are performing a virtuous act by killing animals and presenting their flesh and blood to monastics invited to your home or to an assembly of sangha members.

Such situations occur in other contexts as well. For instance, some donors showed special respect to a lama. Knowing that the lama enjoyed shrimp, they always served him this seafood during his visits. On one occasion, the lama ate so eagerly that he didn't even notice the shrimp whiskers stuck to his beard. His disciples were delighted to see this and praised him, saying, "Ah! You look so wonderful, my guru. Let me take a picture of you!"

The negative karmic consequences of killing animals for food offerings affect both the offeror and the recipient. While the donor is offering food, the act constitutes an impure offering, and the recipients are consuming improper sustenance. Any potential positive effect is overshadowed by the greater negative consequences.

Practitioners in the Han areas of China have been advocating for vegetarianism, which is indeed a commendable tradition. However, a few lay practitioners make exceptions by killing animals and offering the flesh to a Tibetan lama in order to "please" him. Such an act is not acceptable.

Certainly, unless you have the ability to immediately revive those you harm, there is no situation in which killing does not defile you as a negative action. You can be sure that such actions will adversely affect the lives and Dharma activities of your teachers.

Thus, unless your teacher possesses the extraordinary ability to transfer the consciousness of living beings, like the great enlightened practitioners Sarahapa, Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje (1800–1866), or Dudjom Rinpoche, receiving offerings that involve killing will ultimately harm their lives and activities. As Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781–1851) pointed out, even if a teacher has such extraordinary capacity, accepting the flesh and blood of a freshly killed animal as a meal does not seem appropriate.

In fact, if you frequently take lives and offer them to the teacher, it will undoubtedly have negative effects on their lifespan and ability to carry out their

Dharma activities. However, if the teacher is a noble being like Tilopa, who could transfer the consciousness of the fish he consumed, then engaging in wrathful or fierce activities to benefit beings is permitted in Buddhism.

If you are unable to transfer the consciousness of the beings that were killed to the state of great bliss, you must strive to avoid taking their lives. Otherwise, as the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* states:

Do not take another's life,
(Because) taking life leads to sufferings life after life.

Regarding wrong views, according to the *Vinaya* and the *Four Part Vinaya*, holding wrong views, even for a brief moment, results in breaking all your vows and severing your connection to the Buddhist community. It also undermines the precious opportunity of human life to practice the Dharma. From that instant, your mind becomes defiled by wrong views, rendering even your good actions incapable of leading to liberation, and the harm you cause irredeemable through confession.

Why is this the case? It is because if you aim for liberation, you must hold the fundamental right views on rebirth and karma. Otherwise, any virtuous deed you perform is merely a matter of appearance, which does not lead to liberation.

Thus, Aryadeva says:

It is better to break the precepts
Than to destroy right views.

Nagarjuna also says:

Those with wrong views, even if they perform virtuous acts, will
still suffer unbearable consequences.

In addition, *The True Attainment Treatise* says:

When a virtuous doer is about to die,
If he generates a wrong view, he will fall into the hell realm.
When a vicious doer is about to die,
If he generates a right view, he will be reborn in the celestial
realm.

Therefore, a fleeting wrong thought at the moment of death carries very significant consequences.

Chan Master Wude of the Northern Song dynasty was very strict with his disciples. Once, one of his novice monks accidentally trampled a frog to death while walking at night. The Chan master asked the disciple to jump off a cliff on the back mountain as a way of repenting for his fault.

The novice monk approached the edge of the cliff in great sorrow. He looked down but could not see the bottom. Realizing he would definitely die if he jumped, he didn't know what to do and began to cry out loud.

A butcher happened to pass by and asked why the novice monk was crying. The monk explained the situation. Hearing this, the butcher replied, "You just accidentally killed a frog, and the karmic effect is already so heavy that you must repent by jumping off the cliff. I slaughter pigs every day, and my hands are steeped in blood! My faults must be boundless! Ah! You don't have to jump off the cliff. Let me replace you!"

Then the butcher jumped without hesitation. Feeling extremely regretful, just as he was about to hit the ground and die, a cloud suddenly caught him and saved his life. There is also a historical account stating that the butcher attained realization at that moment. This can be regarded as an example of "laying down the butcher's knife and immediately becoming a Buddha."

Thus, a fleeting thought of remorse can purify infinite negative actions, whereas a fleeting thought of wrong views can trap one in the abyss of suffering for thousands of kalpas. Moreover, since those with wrong views believe that all buddhas and bodhisattvas are nonexistent and have no merit, even if they wish to repent after committing misdeeds, they don't have an object to repent to.

Therefore, of all negative actions, wrong view is the worst. To avoid generating wrong views, we should often pray to the guru and the Three Jewels, while also understanding the truths related to views, meditation, actions, and fruition in Buddhism.

By doing so, the seeds of wrong views in our mindstream will gradually be burned away by the fire of wisdom. We will protect the Dharma and benefit living beings with our right views, life after life.



Lesson 65

“Each negative act produces four kinds of karmic effect ...
the cause, resulting from their impure generosity in the past.”
[page 112–114]

2.1.4.1.4. The Effects of the Ten Negative Actions

Each negative action produces four types of karmic effects: the fully ripened effect, the effect similar to the cause, the conditioning effect, and the proliferating effect. Below is a detailed explanation of each.

The principle of cause and effect is extremely important. However, many people are unaware of it, and their intentions behind certain actions do not align with this principle. As a result, their actions bring great agony to their current lives, and they will continue to experience suffering in the infinite kalpas of their future lives.

Therefore, of all the pith instructions in Buddhism, a practitioner must first develop unwavering faith in the principle of cause and effect, i.e., what goes around comes around, meaning virtuous actions bring happiness while harmful actions lead to suffering. Those who were not raised with this belief may have serious doubts about the existence of rebirth and karma. Worse yet, they may eventually form wrong views and even slander the principle of cause and effect, resulting in severe karmic consequences.

It is crucial for people to understand that any criticism of the principle of cause and effect arises from a misunderstanding on their part. Throughout history,

there has not been a single individual, whether a scientist or practitioner, who has been able to truly overturn or disprove this principle. Some people may reject the principle, but their disbelief is rooted in personal doubts. No one can provide irrefutable evidence that disproves it.

Due to the influence of your environment and education from a young age, some of you have always been somewhat skeptical about the principle of cause and effect. Even during the most crucial moments, you remain unconvinced, leading to the squandering of your previous efforts in practice and resulting in failure just before success. This is truly unfortunate.

As intelligent practitioners, we should engage in an in-depth analysis of the principle of cause and effect. If we cannot find any fault, we should embrace it without hesitation, for we now understand that our previous disbelief stemmed from a lack of understanding.

Previously, we covered the ten negative actions, which are crucial for us to understand. Today, we will examine the karmic effects of these negative actions. The karmic effects mentioned below will undoubtedly arise. Those who are unaware of or do not believe in this principle will inevitably experience the negative karmic effects.

2.1.4.1.4.1. The Fully Ripened Effect

Engaging in any of the ten harmful actions driven by hatred results in rebirth in the hell realms. If motivated by desire, it leads to rebirth as a preta, or hungry ghost; if motivated by ignorance, it results in rebirth as an animal. Once born into these lower realms, one must endure the specific sufferings associated with them. Nagarjuna states in the *Precious Garland of the Middle Way*:

Greed leads to rebirth as a preta,
Hatred leads to rebirth in hell,
Ignorance leads to rebirth as an animal,
While the opposite leads to rebirth as a human or a god.

Additionally, the *Ityuktakasutra*, a Buddhist scripture meaning “Thus Has it Been Said,” says:

Those full of greed, hatred, and ignorance

Have no wisdom to see the bright truth;
 Thus, they definitely won't attain liberation
 From birth, old age, sickness, and death.

And

Those free from greed, hatred, and ignorance
 Have the wisdom to see the bright truth;
 Thus, they can surely attain liberation
 From birth, old age, sickness, and death.

When intense greed, hatred, or ignorance arise—for example, if you have been in a state of strong anger for an extended period today—if you fail to purify the corresponding negative actions completely, their fully ripened effect will inevitably lead you to a lower realm. “The fully ripened effect” refers to the karmic results when the effects of various causes finally come to fruition.

Master Yongming Yanshou's *Record of the Mind Mirror* states that various causes can lead to the same karmic effect, much like various seeds of bitterness yielding fruits that all taste bitter, and various seeds of sweetness producing fruits that all taste sweet. This is the distinctive characteristic of the fully ripened effect.

Additionally, an intense and overwhelming impulse—whether it is extreme desire, anger, or ignorance—driving a prolonged and continuous accumulation of negative actions leads to rebirth in the hell realms. If the impulse is somewhat weaker and the actions fewer in number, it results in rebirth as a preta. If the impulse is even milder and the actions less frequent, it leads to rebirth as an animal.

Therefore, whatever actions you've committed will inevitably result in corresponding karmic effects. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* also states:

The virtuous and vicious actions
 A sentient being has conducted
 Always follow them like shadows.

Our negative and positive actions consistently follow us like shadows. Even if the karmic effects haven't yet manifested, the corresponding suffering and happiness will certainly arise in due time.

However, many people with wrong views do not understand this principle.

They believe that negative actions will bring wealth and happiness, which is fundamentally incorrect. You should know that any happiness an evil-doer is experiencing is, in fact, the karmic result of their past good deeds. This is similar to a farmer who, this year, is planting no crops or even destroying his land, yet can still rely on the grain he harvested last year to sustain him for a while. On the surface, it seems this farmer has plenty of food, but since he isn't accumulating any grain for the future, he will find himself without food once his current stock is exhausted.

As stated in Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, except in very rare cases, it takes a certain period of time for the karmic effects of our actions to ripen. Generally speaking, this ripening does not occur as immediately as the bleeding from a cut. We must understand and accept the principle of cause and effect by studying it through various means. Otherwise, if we refuse to accept this principle, we will behave in the ways described in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*:

If one does not accept the existence of rebirth,
There is no evil they wouldn't commit.

Such a person will commit terrible acts. Of course, the most subtle link between a cause and its effect cannot be identified even by an arhat, let alone by us ordinary beings. Here is a story from the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*:

Once, Buddha Shakyamuni and Sariputra were at the Jetavana Monastery when they suddenly saw an eagle chasing a pigeon. The pigeon was so frightened that it flew to the Buddha and hid beside him. When the Buddha's shadow fell over the pigeon, it immediately calmed down, stopped trembling, and was no longer afraid. However, when the Buddha walked forward and Sariputra's shadow was cast over the pigeon, the bird resumed trembling and fear.

Seeing this, Sariputra asked the Buddha, "Like you, I have also eliminated the three poisons, but why does your shadow calm the pigeon and remove its fear, while my shadow cannot?" The Buddha replied, "This is because, although you have eliminated the three poisons, your subtle habitual tendencies have not yet been completely removed."

Then the Buddha pointed at the pigeon and said, "Look at the previous lives of this pigeon and tell me how many lives it has been since this being lost human form and was reborn as a pigeon." With his miraculous power, Sariputra saw that over the past eighty thousand great kalpas, this pigeon had been continuously

reincarnated as a pigeon. However, Sariputra was unable to determine what kind of being the pigeon was in the very beginning.

Then Sariputra tried to see what the pigeon would become in future lives and saw that it would continuously be reborn as a pigeon over the next eighty thousand great kalpas. He could not tell when the pigeon would finally attain liberation.

So Sariputra asked the Buddha, and the Buddha, in his unhindered wisdom, told him, “This pigeon will be reborn as a pigeon for as many great kalpas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River. It will finally be reborn as a human after its negative actions are exhausted. After another five hundred lives, this being will finally encounter the Dharma and will eventually attain liberation...”

As you can see, even an arhat cannot clearly describe the most subtle link between a cause and its effect, let alone us ordinary individuals. Some people like to talk nonsense, claiming things like, “What you are now experiencing is the karmic effect of this or that action from your previous life.”

Please exercise caution when making such statements. If an arhat is unable to clearly identify the link between a karmic effect and its cause, it is highly unlikely that we, as ordinary people, can accurately deduce the causal link using only our fabricated thoughts.

Generally speaking, the fully ripened effect of the ten negative actions refers to the karmic effect of actions motivated by the three poisons that lead to rebirth in the three lower realms. We should all be clear about this.

2.1.4.1.4.2. The Effect Similar To the Cause

Even after one escapes the lower realms, where the fully ripened effect of one's actions had led to rebirth, and attains a human form, one continues to experience effects that resemble the causes of past actions.

In fact, in the lower realms, too, there are various kinds of suffering that are similar to particular causes. For example, animals that preyed on others in their past lives are predators again in this life due to the effect similar to the cause; animals that grazed and did not prey on others in their past lives will have similar habitual tendencies in this life.

The Tibetan words (རྒྱུ་མཐུན་པའི་འབྲས་བྱ) that correspond to “the effect similar to the

cause” mean “the result compatible with the cause,” that is, the karmic result aligns with the cause. The *Introduction to Abhidharma* states:

Because the result is similar to the cause,
So it has the keyword “similar.”
Because it arises from the cause,
So it also means “concordant.”

Therefore, the effect is similar to the cause, and the effect arises from the cause. This is akin to how a seed of sweetness yields sweet fruits, while a seed of bitterness yields bitter fruits. Such a causal relationship is called “the effect similar to the cause.”

Regardless of the type of causal relationship, we must understand that causes definitely lead to their corresponding karmic effects, about which there is no doubt. The *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* states:

Even after hundreds of thousands of kalpas,
The karmic causes won’t disappear;
When the causal conditions arise,
The karmic effect will return to oneself.

The *Collection of Sutra Passages on Correct Practice that Cover One with Merit* has a similar verse:

Even after infinite kalpas,
Your karmic actions will never fade away;
When karmic effects ripen,
Living beings will definitely experience them.

If we examine the world with our wisdom, we can easily develop a conviction in the principle of cause and effect.

These effects, which are similar to the causes, can be divided into two categories: actions similar to the cause and experiences similar to the cause.

2.1.4.1.4.2.1. Actions Similar to the Cause

This effect refers to a natural tendency toward actions that mirror the original

cause. The actions one was drawn to in a past life tend to persist, resulting in a continuation of similar actions in the present life.

As stated in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya Vibhāṣā*, Bhikkhu Bull was often reborn as a bull, causing him to ruminate like a bull when eating. One bhikkhu frequently jumped around while walking because he had been a monkey in many of his past lives. Another bhikkhu had attained certain realization but still enjoyed looking in the mirror, as he had been a prostitute in many of his past lives.

As you can see, our preferences and habits in this life originate from those in past lives. If we engaged in killing in previous lives, we may still have a tendency to kill in this life; if we stole in the past, we may still feel inclined to take what is not given in this life, and so on. This helps explain why, for instance, some individuals instinctively kill insects or flies they encounter from a very young age. Such a natural inclination to harm living beings reflects similar actions performed in their previous lives.

From birth, each of us behaves in distinct ways, driven by different karmic impulses. Even within the same family, siblings may exhibit contrasting tendencies—some may take pleasure in harming or stealing, while others naturally avoid such actions and are inclined toward virtuous behavior. These inclinations are the lingering effects of past actions, known as the effect similar to the cause.

For example, Jigme Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche (1865–1926) was able to present *The Way of the Bodhisattva* exceptionally well at the age of eight. Patrul Rinpoche proclaimed, “Jigme Tenpai Nyima can teach the Dharma at eight years old. This shows that the teachings of the Nyingma School are thriving, with a bright future!”

I heard that Teresa Teng, a renowned Taiwanese singer, had a passion for singing from a very early age. At that time, most people in Taiwan entertained themselves by listening to the radio, and Teng often sang along with the songs. No matter how difficult the song was, she could sing it after listening to it a few times. At the age of ten, Teresa won her first major prize when she performed a song from the famous Chinese Huangmei opera.

When I visited Yunnan Province in China, I noticed that the locals admired Yang Liping for her peacock dance. It is said she has loved dancing since childhood and draws inspiration from everything in nature. For example, she observes how a piece of cloud flows, how an ant walks, how a dragonfly skims over the water, and how a peacock spreads its tail feathers, and she dances accordingly.

It is said that she enjoys dancing based on the theme of Tara, a female enlightened being in Tibetan Buddhism, which is quite lovely. Otherwise, if she were to spend her entire life imitating animals like peacocks, it would be difficult to predict what she might be reborn as in her future lives.

Individuals in the entertainment industry who possess sources of merit often encounter productions that plant the seeds of virtue for living beings, whereas those without sources of merit but burdened by heavy karmic debts may directly or indirectly harm many people through their singing and dancing. Even if a person with such tendencies has long since passed away, their works can still influence audiences, triggering strong feelings of greed, hatred, and ignorance. This may also relate to each person's karma and aspirations.

The tendencies mentioned above are the residues of actions from previous lives. Since childhood, some people have enjoyed virtuous actions, while others have preferred vicious ones and feel distressed when required to read books or engage in good deeds. Some naturally enjoy hearing, contemplating, and meditating, and can immediately recognize the merit of positive actions, whereas others are filled with wrong views and show no interest in virtuous actions. What causes these varying habitual tendencies among living beings? It is our respective effects similar to the causes.

A villager in my hometown has been talking about the faults of monastics since I was a young child. I don't know why he does this. Through his eloquence, he can focus on a trivial flaw and make it seem significant, and many people find him persuasive. He used to strongly oppose the idea of the merits and virtues of being a monastic. Although he no longer dares to openly disagree, he chooses to remain silent when this topic arises. Sometimes I deliberately mention the benefits of being a monastic in his presence, but he remains indifferent.

Thus, a person's past life can be reflected in their actions in this life. This is why it is said in the sutra:

To know what you did in past lives, look at what you are now.

To know where you will be born in the future, look at what you
do now.

To determine whether you were a good or bad person in a past life, simply examine what kind of person you are in this life. If you enjoy virtuous actions and

detest vicious ones, it indicates that you definitely engaged in virtuous deeds in your past life. Conversely, if you prefer vicious actions and show no interest in virtuous ones, it suggests you were an “expert” in vice in your past life.

Therefore, you don’t need to seek divination from someone with miraculous powers to learn what you were in a past life. You can simply observe your behavioral tendencies in this life, which will reveal what you were in a past life.

Similarly, to understand what you will be reborn as in the next life, just consider what you do in this life. If you engage in virtuous deeds and accumulate merit every day, your future life will undoubtedly be brighter and happier. Otherwise, you will continue to experience suffering.

This effect also applies to animals. The natural behaviors of certain animals—such as falcons and wolves killing prey or mice stealing food—are effects similar to, and caused by, their former actions. Therefore, regardless of what sentient beings are, their behavioral tendencies in this life are closely linked to those of their past lives.

For example, immediately after his birth, the great Jigme Phuntsok was able to recite the Manjushri mantra, demonstrating his extraordinary affinity with Bodhisattva Manjushri from his past life. Here is another example: A young girl in Myanmar would scream at the sight and sound of an airplane because she had been a Japanese soldier who was bombed to death by an aircraft in her past life.

Therefore, through these teachings, we should generate conviction in the principle of cause and effect. If you are still not convinced about cause and effect, you should express your doubts and try to refute the principle with well-reasoned arguments in the presence of a wise person. However, I believe your skepticism arises from a lack of understanding. It is utterly impossible for anyone to successfully disprove the existence of cause and effect.

The teaching on the principle of cause and effect is an important essential instruction. If you hold wrong views on this critical issue, you may not derive any benefit from the Dharma, regardless of how profound and supreme the teachings you receive are.

Many people seek high teachings, which I do not oppose. However, if you don’t have a solid foundation—for example, if you do not accept the principle of cause and effect and question whether virtuous actions lead to positive outcomes while vicious actions lead to negative results—then even if you practice the most

supreme pith instruction, you are merely building a mansion on ice, which will not endure.

What matters most for us now is to establish a solid foundation in the Dharma. If we do not accept karma and rebirth and lack understanding of Buddhist cosmology, we will be unable to embrace the most profound teachings in Buddhism. These high teachings, no matter how great, cannot benefit inadequate Dharma recipients, just as lion's milk cannot be preserved in an inferior ceramic container. I hope everyone will reflect on this carefully.

2.1.4.1.4.2.2. Experiences Similar to the Cause

Each of the ten negative actions leads to two effects that impact one's subsequent experiences.

♦ Taking life

Taking life in a past life not only shortens our current lifespan but also makes us more prone to frequent illnesses. The *Ārya-bodhisattvagocaropāya-vis-aya-vikurvan-a-nirdeśa-sūtra* states:

Taking life results in negative karmic consequences:
A short lifespan and frequent illness,
Rebirth in a lower realm in the next life,
Which brings various forms of suffering.

Taking life generates no merit and brings abundant suffering. Of all the corresponding karmic effects, the most significant is a short lifespan. For example, sometimes newborn babies die as a result of having taken life in a past life. For many lifetimes, they may repeatedly experience death shortly after birth. In another example, some people may live thirty or forty years but suddenly die in an accident; for many lifetimes, they may continue to die in accidents. They are like the pigeon that Buddha Shakyamuni and Sariputra encountered, which has been continuously reborn as a pigeon over countless lifetimes and is unable to free itself from the entanglement of the nets of karma.

Some individuals reach adulthood but endure constant illnesses from early childhood until their death, experiencing no relief from their ailments. This unending suffering is the karmic consequence of having killed or harmed others

in a past life. Without purifying their negative actions, they will be reborn in the three lower realms in future lifetimes.

Therefore, when we're sick, we shouldn't focus solely on how to eliminate the disease. While it is perfectly fine to seek treatment, it is unreasonable to believe that the disease is unrelated to actions taken in previous lives.

Some patients spend considerable amounts of money trying to find a cure for their illness, often with little success. However, if they recite prayers and engage in confession, the situation may improve significantly. Why is that? It suggests that the disease is a result of their past actions.

Under such circumstances, it is more crucial to sincerely confess the past negative actions that led to these outcomes than to focus solely on addressing each immediate issue. We should genuinely confess our wrongdoings, vow to refrain from repeating such actions, and actively counteract their negative effects by engaging in positive actions and abandoning negative ones. By doing so, many diseases will naturally and remarkably be cured once the negative actions are purified.

♦ Taking what is not given

Stealing in the past not only leads to poverty in the present but also makes one vulnerable to theft, robbery, or other misfortunes that scatter the few possessions one acquires among enemies or rivals. Therefore, for those who currently lack wealth or resources, it is far more beneficial to create even a small amount of merit than to go to great lengths in pursuit of riches. *The Sutra on Judgment of Merits or Demerits* states:

If you sow happiness, you will reap happiness;
 If you sow poverty, you will reap poverty.
 If you haven't practiced generosity in past lives,
 You will suffer poverty in this life.

The main cause of becoming wealthy is generosity. If one's past lives lacked acts of generosity, making it not one's destiny to be rich, then no matter how hard one tries in this life, it will not lead to wealth. As the saying goes, "you reap what you sow." The *Śukasūtra* also says:

You sow barley, you will reap barley;

You plant rice, you will reap rice;
You do good, you will get good in return;
You do bad, you will get bad in return.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* contains a similar verse about reaping what one sows. When I studied Karl Marx's dialectical materialism at school, some teachers attempted to refute the principle of cause and condition, but no matter how eloquently they argued, they could not provide legitimate evidence to refute this principle. Therefore, we must recognize that, just as sweet seeds yield sweet fruits and bitter seeds yield bitter fruits, our negative and positive actions in this life will inevitably result in corresponding suffering and happiness.

The nature of causes and their resulting effects is consistent; thus, a poisonous seed cannot yield medicinal fruit, nor can a medicinal seed yield poisonous fruit. Of course, some special cases are acknowledged in Buddhism. For example, one may have initially committed a wrongdoing, but after purifying those negative actions before a supreme object of confession, the effects of those wrongdoings may not ripen, and the act of purification can further become a source of merit. This is similar to how a plant may change its nature when mutating with other seeds.

Consequently, when it comes to the law of cause and effect, a truly steadfast person should maintain an unshakable right view under all circumstances. You should not go with the flow—believing what one master says today and what another Dharma friend says tomorrow—like reeds on a wall, drifting and swaying with every passing wind, lacking stability and consistency.

As previously mentioned, having stolen in a past life will result in poverty in a future life. Never having engaged in any meritorious actions, such as practicing generosity, in a past life will likely prevent anyone from becoming rich, regardless of their efforts. Furthermore, the person may even experience significant loss instead of gaining wealth.

Look at the vast amounts of wealth that robbers or bandits seize during their raids—sometimes so much that it seems the earth itself can scarcely contain it. Yet, despite their plunder, those who live by theft often meet their end in hunger. Similarly, observe how merchants or those who misappropriate the possessions of the sangha never truly benefit from their ill-gotten gains, regardless of how large those gains may be.

These individuals have not accumulated any merit in their previous lives. So

although they cling to their wealth like misers and refuse to contribute to society, in the end, they either die of hunger or lack the opportunity to use their wealth. Therefore, these insatiable individuals are among the poorest in the world. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* says:

A person who is greedy
And who never feels he has accumulated enough wealth
Is a frantic person who is actually the poorest.

Some millionaires and billionaires lead exhausting lives despite their wealth and are not as carefree as a penniless beggar. I once saw a beggar who found an ear of corn in a trash can and began to eat it with great joy. The beggar then drank some water from a river, lay down on the grass, and gazed up at the blue sky and white clouds while listening to the gentle songs of the river.

What a relaxing life! Perhaps when the beggar sleeps, he remains in a state of indivisible luminosity and emptiness. Who knows? (*The audience laughs.*) The point is, if you are busy making money all day long and what you do benefits neither society nor yourself, you have become completely enslaved to money.

You must know that the extent of your wealth is closely tied to your merit. Those who are currently reaping the karmic effects of their past generosity enjoy a lifetime of abundance, often without needing to exert any effort. Therefore, if you aspire to attain wealth, devote your efforts to practicing generosity and making offerings! This is the only way to become wealthy. Even if you haven't yet experienced this karmic effect in this lifetime, you will certainly do so in a future life.

The continent of Jambudvīpa has a unique power regarding the effects of actions, making it likely that actions performed early in life will manifest their effects later in the same lifetime—or, in some exceptional cases, immediately. If you happen to encounter a supreme object of merit, it is possible that the karmic effect ripens in the blink of an eye. Here is a story from the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*:

Once, there was a poor man who made a living by cutting and selling firewood. One day he met a pratyekabuddha who had no food to eat, so the poor man offered all his food to him. The poor man then went to cut firewood on the mountain, where he saw a rabbit. He threw his sickle, which killed the rabbit, and it immediately fell

to the ground. When the man went to fetch the rabbit, it transformed into a dead man and jumped onto his back, holding his head.

The poor man was very frightened at first. He dared not go home during the day for fear that someone would see this. He had to wait until nighttime to carry the dead body back home. Upon arriving home, the dead body fell to the ground and turned into a golden man. Later, the king overheard this and came to see the golden man. However, the king could only see a dead body, which, in the eyes of the poor man, appeared to be a body made of gold.

The poor man offered a bit of gold to the king. The king had never seen such gold before, so he asked the poor man where he had obtained it. The poor man explained his offering to the pratyekabuddha. Overjoyed, the king appointed the poor man as his minister, showering him with various honors and privileges.

Many similar situations occur in today's society as well. Some individuals were initially quite poor, but after encountering extraordinary circumstances or making exceptional aspirations, they naturally became wealthy.

Thus, the right view of cause and effect is very important to us. Especially as Buddhists, if you do not believe in the principle of cause and effect, it's best not to prematurely pursue advanced teachings. Instead, you should study the karmic stories from the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* and *The Sutra of One Hundred Parables*, as well as the logical reasoning found in the *Commentary on Valid Cognition*. Through these studies, you will learn how cause and effect operate at the relative level and how this principle differs from the teachings of tirthikas.

Once you have established the right view of cause and effect, it becomes feasible for you to engage in any practice based on this foundation. This is akin to how a farmer can plant a variety of crops once he possesses a piece of land. However, if you do not accept even the most fundamental principle of cause and effect, then no matter how ambitious you are on the path, your practice may ultimately collapse.

Therefore, we must internalize these crucial points.

Engaging in theft, fraud, or any form of taking what is not given, with the hope of becoming wealthy, ultimately achieves the opposite of our intentions. The karmic consequences of such actions will bind one to the realm of the preta for many kalpas. Even in the later stages of this life, the negative effects will begin to manifest, leading to increasing poverty, distress, and hardship. One will lose control over the little that remains and live in a state of deprivation and helplessness. There

was once a man who managed to acquire a valuable book, which was then taken away by another man. Seventeen years later, the man couldn't stop lamenting the theft of his book, but he could do nothing about it. Incidents like this occur due to a lack of merit.

Our greed will leave us feeling increasingly impoverished and deprived, no matter how much wealth we accumulate. Our possessions will become a source of harmful actions, trapping us in a cycle of dissatisfaction. We will resemble pretas who hoard treasures but are unable to benefit from them. Observe those who appear wealthy. If they do not use their resources generously to support the Dharma—the true source of happiness and well-being in this life and future lives—or even to meet basic needs like food and clothing, they are, in reality, poorer than the poor. Why is that? Because although the poor lack wealth, they don't feel the internal pressure to accumulate and guard wealth, allowing them to live a more relaxed life. In contrast, some wealthy individuals are reluctant to even spend their money on themselves, let alone on the Dharma, and thus currently experience the preta's effect similar to the cause.

The *Commentary on the Introduction to the Middle Way*⁹ mentions a type of preta that guards treasures but cannot use what it guards. Similarly, the treasurer of a large corporation or the cashier in a bank is busy counting money every day, with large sums passing through their hands, yet what this person has in their own pocket is very limited.

The current preta-like experience is a karmic effect similar to the cause, resulting from past impure generosity. The *Sutra on the Questions of Vyāsa*¹⁰ covers thirty-three types of impure generosity, such as offering meat. You should consult the text at your convenience. If you engaged in impure generosity in a previous life, you may become a “slave of money” in this life, handling money daily while being deprived and having no control over it.

To summarize, it is crucial for us as practitioners to be content with what we have and refrain from excessive desires. Furthermore, we must be mindful of the karmic consequences of our past actions. If we possess the necessary merit, we may acquire wealth effortlessly, and it is perfectly acceptable to enjoy our prosperity. However, if we lack merit, no matter how hard we strive in this lifetime, we may

⁹ The English version of the commentary is *Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakīrti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Jamgön Mipham*, published by Shambhala, 2005.

¹⁰ Skt. Vyāsaparipṛcchā

not achieve our desires. In such cases, there is no need to feel distressed. As long as we can support ourselves, we should avoid harboring excessive desires, as they will only lead to unhappiness.

Many people today, including some Tibetans, are excessively greedy. They desire not only this but also that. They want too much, and sometimes, if they lack sufficient merit to obtain what they desire, they resort to acquiring money through inappropriate and even illegal means. This ultimately leads to their own suffering. In reality, the key to a person's happiness lies in their mind. If the mind is "well-tuned," it can effectively cope with both favorable and unfavorable situations life presents. However, if the mind is consumed by desires, no matter how much we possess, we may still lack contentment.

Some people have scattered thoughts, perhaps as a result of their past karmic actions. They often contemplate unrealistic ideas, such as, "I've heard there's a wish-fulfilling tree in the Thirty-Three Heaven. How can I obtain it?" or "America is said to be a paradise for the wealthy. I must immigrate there and become rich. Then, I'll buy a private jet. How will I fuel the jet? I should search on Google and prepare in advance; otherwise, it might be too late when the time comes..." Alas! They may not achieve these plans even after many lifetimes, let alone within this life. However, they are making plans every day, which sounds highly unrealistic.

Therefore, we should lead a relatively simple life according to our circumstances and avoid excessive desires. Albert Einstein said, "I believe that a simple and unassuming manner of life is best for everyone, both for the body and the mind."

Whether we become wealthy or not also depends on the merit accumulated from previous lifetimes. Knowing this, we should neither become overly excited when we become rich nor overly upset when we become poor. It is important to make the best of whatever we have. This is very important.



Lesson 66

“Sexual misconduct. To have indulged ... disturbed by deceit and misconceptions.” [page 114–116]

We are currently studying the section on “the effects of the ten negative actions.” Each negative action produces four types of karmic effects: the fully ripened effect, the effect similar to the cause, the conditioning effect, and the proliferating effect. Yesterday, we discussed the effect similar to the cause regarding the negative actions of “taking life” and “taking what is not given,” and today we will begin with the effect similar to the cause concerning “sexual misconduct.”

♦ Sexual misconduct

If someone engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior in a past life, it is believed that in a future life, they may end up with a partner who is not only unattractive but also behaves in a disrespectful or unfriendly manner. The Buddha states in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Sexual misconduct results in rebirth in the three lower realms.

However, if one is reborn as a human, it brings about two consequences: an unfaithful spouse and a disobedient companion.

Many couples in the world deeply miss each other whenever they are apart. This feeling of longing often arises before they get married. When one person in the couple is absent, the other feels extremely unsettled, as if they have lost

a precious treasure. However, after marriage, some couples become adversaries; they constantly argue and may even resort to physical violence. When one spouse is not present, the other feels relaxed and content. When couples argue endlessly and cannot stop fighting, they often blame each other for being unkind, selfish, or failing to take care of the family. In reality, they are experiencing the effect similar to the cause, resulting from the sexual misconduct they committed in the past.

Unlike people in the past who lived in scattered communities, many modern individuals reside in high-density apartment buildings. As a result, a couple's noisy quarrel can easily disturb their neighbors. When the couple is wailing, screaming, and smashing things, their neighbors hear the noises and struggle to find peace.

Such conflicts between couples primarily arise from two reasons. First, the lack of morality and family values in some individuals often leads to discord, causing significant pain for those involved. Second, their lack of understanding of the principle of cause and effect frequently results in them shifting blame onto others instead of reflecting on their own mistakes.

A renowned and beloved Chinese film actress once told me, "By studying the Dharma, especially after reading *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I have experienced significant changes in my mindset. I used to feel it was unfair when unpleasant things happened to me at work and in life. Now I realize that I should not solely attribute everything to others; I should also reflect on myself. I have adopted a new perspective on life."

As you can see, many people have yet to study the Dharma. Once they embark on this path, it can bring profound meaning to their minds. Without this understanding, it becomes extremely challenging for a person to find genuine happiness in material possessions or in another individual.

When a wife and husband argue or fight, they should recognize that they are experiencing the karmic effects of their past negative actions, so it's best to control their anger and avoid losing their temper. Family harmony is very important: if a person can live in harmony with their family, they will be happy, and their actions will hold meaning.

Otherwise, family disharmony may create a vicious cycle. For instance, a school principal may be in a bad mood if he often quarrels with his wife, leading him to become angry and scold the teachers during routine meetings at school. If

the principal reprimands them, the teachers may become upset, and it is likely they will carry their bad mood into the classroom, affecting each student.

This also applies to other organizations and communities. Even if you are just a subordinate, your bad mood caused by family conflict can directly or indirectly impact many people around you.

Therefore, instead of feeling angry or resentful toward each other, the couple should recognize that it is the effect of their past negative actions. Thus, they should be patient with one another. Padampa Sangye says:

Couples are as fleeting as visitors at a marketplace;
Do not engage in harsh words or quarrels, people of Tingri!

When they first spend time together, many couples vow to stay together forever. However, such vows are often impulsive. Many people make these promises today but break up tomorrow. In fact, laypeople should value their relationships and avoid arguing and fighting. Otherwise, when a couple creates a scene, their children and parents may plead for a truce. But no matter how hard they plead, until the couple's anger subsides, others can do little to calm them down.

Many couples argue over trivial matters. It is rare for them to argue about significant issues or differing aspirations, such as, "You aspire to attain Arhathood, while I am generating the Mahayana bodhicitta." Arguing and fighting seem to be an integral part of many laypeople's lives. Recently, a Dharma master from Larung Gar visited my hometown to teach. He asked the assembly, "Who can guarantee that they will not quarrel at home? Please raise your hand!" Only one person raised his hand, while those around him whispered, "Is it even possible? His family members are always arguing." Later, the master rephrased the question: "Who is certain to quarrel with your family? Please raise your hand!" Everyone raised their hands.

It is not easy to put Padampa Sangye's instructions for the people of Tingri into practice. Nevertheless, it is still very important to understand these teachings. Some individuals have begun studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva* or *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and their non-Buddhist partners have expressed gratitude to me, saying that their spouse now quarrels less with them. Although the couples still experience conflict at times, they are beginning to understand and tolerate each other.

This is very significant! It is not feasible for every Buddhist to divorce and become a monk or nun. When you have a family life, ensure that you maintain harmony with your family members. After all, family is a fundamental unit of society. Only when the family is in harmony can society be at peace.

From a Buddhist perspective, your partner may have been your enemy in a previous life, bringing obstacles to your practice in this life, or a Dharma friend across lifetimes, providing favorable conditions for your practice now. Since you are together, this in itself is a form of affinity, so you should strive to understand and appreciate each other. Doing so can also enhance your Dharma practice.

However, many couples do not recognize this. They often focus solely on present conflicts, placing all the blame on the other's faults, and rarely reflect on their own faults. As a result, conflicts frequently arise at home. How unfortunate!

♦ Lying

The experience similar to the cause from having lied in past lives is that one not only faces frequent criticism and disrespect but is also often deceived by others. The Buddha states in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Lying results in rebirth in the three lower realms. However,
if one is reborn as a human, it leads to two consequences:
frequently being slandered and being deceived.

Some of you are often deceived by others. For instance, when shopping, you may end up purchasing counterfeit products. Additionally, you are often falsely accused and criticized. Please be aware that your experiences cannot be solely attributed to others; they are also the result of your past lies. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

If a person lies,
They will soon be despised and belittled,
Kind people will abandon them,
And gods won't protect them.

Therefore, when we are deceived or slandered, it is important not to become angry and hurl insults at those who speak such things about us. Instead, we should be grateful to them for helping us exhaust the effects of our past negative actions

related to slandering and lying to others. What they do to us has actually advanced our spiritual practice. Thus, we should feel happy.

A good practitioner remains steadfast when faced with slander. Some individuals, however, struggle with this; they cannot tolerate even a slight misunderstanding and exclaim, “I never stole anything, but he accused me of being a thief. I really want to beat him up!”

Jigme Lingpa says:

An enemy’s harm in return for your kindness enhances your practice.

Their unjust blame acts like a whip, guiding you toward virtue.

They are the teachers who destroy your attachment and desire.

Acknowledge their immense kindness that you can never repay.

By cultivating patience toward our enemies, our Dharma practice will advance, and we may even attain realization. Even when we have done nothing wrong, others may falsely accuse us, which can help eliminate our attachments and desires for worldly pursuits and inspire us to practice with great diligence. Therefore, those who bring various difficulties and obstacles to us are our most valuable teachers, as they aid in breaking our attachment to worldly pursuits.

In this regard, they are no different from our root guru. We can never fully repay their kindness. When faced with slander or accusations, a true practitioner will embrace such opportunities for practice and transform them into part of their spiritual path.

Of course, even though slander can be transformed into the path, we must not lie when communicating with others. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

Honesty is the foremost virtue,

Lying is the foremost vice;

A person who abandons vice and adopts virtue

Is the most supreme among others.

If you lie to someone once, they will always be suspicious of your words, as the adage goes, “once bitten, twice shy.” Therefore, it is crucial to be honest. In *The Way*

of *Living*, Mipham Rinpoche discusses the great qualities of honesty. Being honest can bring significant benefits to one's worldly and spiritual life.

♦ Sowing discord

The effect similar to the cause of sowing discord is that not only do a person's companions and helpers struggle to get along with each other, but they also tend to be quarrelsome and stubborn toward this person. The Buddha says in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Sowing discord results in rebirth in the three lower realms, but
if one is reborn a human, it brings about two consequences: a
recalcitrant entourage and bickering followers.

Most of the time, monastics who follow lamas, the attendants of a leader, or household servants do not get along with each other. Often, when asked to do something, they refuse to listen and instead argue or act stubbornly. I've noticed that certain monastery abbots and corporate executives are quite upset because their subordinates do not listen to them at all. These leaders struggle to exert any influence in their positions because no one follows their instructions, even if they repeat them a hundred times. To make matters worse, the subordinates often create significant commotion. It would be better for these organizations to dissolve, but in reality, they are unable to do so due to karma. As a result, they find themselves in an uncomfortable predicament, with continual arguments taking place, which is quite distressing.

When household owners ask their hired servants to perform tasks, even simple ones, the servants often act as if they don't hear and ignore the request. The household owner has to repeat the instructions two or three times, and only when they finally lose their temper and speak harshly do the servants reluctantly and slowly carry out the work. Even after completing the task, they don't bother to report back. The servants are constantly in a bad mood.

The household owner is simply experiencing the effects of causing conflict and discord in the past. Instead of blaming others, they should feel remorse for their own past negative actions and make an effort to resolve disagreements, both for themselves and others.

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

Whoever sows discord,
 Is not praised by good people;
 They will be born in lowly places,
 And grow up in poor conditions.

Thanks to the blessings of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, the fourfold Dharma assemblies generally maintain harmonious relations, whether at Larung Gar or within the Buddhist association for lay practitioners. Of course, we do not live in the Western Pure Land, and not everyone is a bodhisattva who has attained at least the first bhumi, making minor conflicts inevitable. However, we have never faced any major conflicts that cannot be resolved.

Therefore, it is crucial for monastics and lay practitioners to foster good relationships with others. If a Mahayanist struggles to get along with others, they are merely paying lip service to “cultivating patience.” Our society greatly needs patience and forgiveness. If we can be less self-centered and more empathetic and forgiving toward others, even when they make mistakes, this Mahayana principle will positively impact society.

I recently met some people from South Korea who were planning a cultural festival of Buddhism in honor of the 1,000th anniversary of the publication of the Koryo Tripitaka. They wanted to understand what the Tripitaka has contributed to humanity, so they interviewed me. I told them sincerely:

“The Tripitaka is indeed the only wish-fulfilling jewel in this world. Why is that? Consider this: How many people’s worldviews and values are positively influenced by classical scriptures, such as the Diamond Sutra, the Amitabha Sutra, the Heart Sutra, the Shurangama Sutra, and more. If a few sutras can have such a profound impact, imagine the significance of all the sutras in the Tripitaka.

“If one were to study, understand, and practice the teachings in the Tripitaka, how meaningful that would be! Take the Tibetan region, for example. Why does it attract so many Buddhists and scholars from both the West and the East? This is because the Tibetan region has preserved and transmitted the complete study of the Tripitaka, which has truly benefited countless people.

“There is a vast array of books and scriptures in this world, but I still believe that the Buddha’s words are the only true treasure for humanity. The teachings that the Buddha imparted over 2,500 years ago are not preserved in audio or video format; they have survived and remained intact solely in texts. However, even if you

grasp the teachings only to a small extent, you will experience genuine happiness, and the society, community, or family you belong to will also benefit.

Everyone is in pursuit of happiness, which is not based on material abundance but on mental contentment. Just studying a few sutras is enough to help us achieve such happiness. As stated in the *Water-Tree Treatises: Hundred Waves of Elegant Sayings & Hundred Branches of Elegant Sayings*, to relieve thirst, a person who is extremely thirsty doesn't need to drink the entire river; simply drinking some water from the river is sufficient. Therefore, studying the Tripitaka is very important for mankind."

In short, sowing discord is a significant fault. If we have engaged in this negative action, we should, on one hand, confess it with regret. On the other hand, we should strive to resolve conflicts with others and work toward reconciling individuals who are at odds with each other.

It is said that some schoolteachers find excitement in student fights. They watch the fights with amusement and, instead of mediating between students, even encourage more altercations. Their actions are truly detrimental, and the karmic consequences they will face in the future will be terrifying—everyone must be cautious!

♦ Harsh words

If a person has used harsh words in past lives, they may perceive everything others say as rude or hurtful, potentially causing their own words to lead to conflicts or disagreements. The Buddha states in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Harsh words result in rebirth in the three lower realms. However, if one is reborn as a human, it brings about two consequences: first, they constantly hear unpleasant words; second, whatever they say often leads to disputes.

Using harsh words is the most harmful of the four negative actions of speech. As a Tibetan saying goes:

Words wield neither arrows nor swords, yet they can shatter a person's mind.

A Chinese saying states:

A kind word can warm a person for three winters,
While a harsh word can chill them in the middle of summer.

Another saying goes:

A wound caused by a sharp knife heals easily,
But the pain caused by harsh words hardly diminishes.

A bad practitioner, in particular, may not remember a single verse after listening to a master's teachings for one hundred days. However, if the master scolds them for ten minutes, they remember it vividly and often hold a grudge, saying, "Ah! Your scolding has completely broken my heart!"

Some female Dharma friends tend to be very sensitive. If their teacher does not pay extra attention, they may become easily offended. Sometimes a teacher does not intend to scold a female Dharma practitioner, but something said may deeply upset a sensitive student, leading her to exclaim, "The guru is scolding me! Ah! It's the end of the world! The sky is falling, the earth is splitting open, and the entire world is plunged into darkness! I am hopeless, and I must leave here!"

In fact, the sky, being an unconditioned phenomenon, cannot truly fall; there is no earthquake occurring, and the earth won't split open for no reason. However, in her discursive thoughts, the master's remark is enough to bring about the end of her world.

Therefore, I refrain from criticizing female practitioners, and most of the time, I simply praise them, as they seem quite sensitive and can be easily hurt by certain words.

Harsh words can indeed create significant faults. If you suddenly provoke hatred in another person, or—even worse—say something offensive to a sublime being, it can lead to many lifetimes in the lower realms without a chance of escape. For example, there's a story about a brahmin named Kapila who insulted monks during the time of Buddha Kasyapa. He called them names like "horse-head" and "ox-head." As a consequence, he was reborn as a sea monster with eighteen heads and remained in that form for an entire kalpa. Even after that, he ultimately ended up in hell.

Here is the story in great detail, as recorded in the *Mula-Sarvastivada Vinaya*:

Once, during a grand festival in Vaishali, five hundred fishermen caught a

massive Makara fish—a sea monster—with the help of many others. This creature had thirty-six eyes and eighteen heads, including a human head, a horse head, an elephant head, and an ox head, among others. The fishermen and their helpers were awed by the sight of the fish, and their word spread rapidly, attracting a large crowd of onlookers.

The Buddha brought the sangha to the river and blessed the Makara fish with his miraculous power, allowing it to recall its past life. The Buddha then shared the fish's past life with the sangha. In its previous existence, the fish had been a brahmin named Kapila during the time of Buddha Kasyapa, when human lifespans were twenty thousand years. Kapila's father was a highly learned and intelligent brahmin, surpassing everyone except for the Buddha's shravaka disciples.

As Kapila grew up, his father, on his deathbed, advised him, "After my death, you may engage in any debates, except those with the Buddha Kasyapa's shravaka disciples. Their doctrines are so profound and unfathomable that no worldly knowledge can overcome them, and no mundane wisdom can comprehend them. Do not debate with them; otherwise, you can hardly win."

Later, the king organized a large-scale debate in which Kapila outperformed everyone and defeated the other contestants. As a result, Kapila retained the family's property. However, Kapila's mother worried that the shravakas would eventually defeat him, which could lead to his losing the property. She urged Kapila to ignore his father's last words and challenge the shravaka monks.

Kapila attempted to do so, only to discover that he was unable to defeat the monks in a debate. Following his mother's insistence, Kapila became a monk himself, planning to debate the monks again after completing his studies of the Tripitaka.

Kapila engaged in extensive study of the Tripitaka and became a master with exceptional debating ability. Then his mother urged him to debate and vanquish the shravaka monks. Kapila replied that he was merely learned but not realized, while the other monks were both learned and realized, making it very difficult to defeat them. Nevertheless, his mother insisted.

Kapila had no choice but to sit on a Dharma seat and begin his teachings. He first spoke about the authentic Dharma, followed by the wrong Dharma, which led to criticism and scolding from the monks.

Seeing this, Kapila's mother had an idea. She suggested that Kapila speak of

the wrong Dharma again, and when the monks scolded him, he would retaliate with harsh words. When the monks heard the curses, they would fall silent, leading the audience to believe the monks had been defeated in the debate and were left without a response.

Kapila, being an obedient son, followed his mother's advice. During a subsequent debate, when he had no valid argument to present, he began cursing the monks, comparing their mouths to those of a horse, a camel, a lion, and more. Indeed, the monks fell silent, and the audience concluded that Kapila had won the debate. [In general, when a bad-tempered person curses others, a wise person remains unresponsive.]

Kapila's mother was very pleased and urged him to disrobe. However, having been in the sangha for a long time and having developed faith in the Dharma, Kapila was reluctant to return home. He also vowed not to encounter such a mother again in his samsaric existence. Unfortunately, due to his insults toward the monks, he was reborn as a Makara fish, enduring infinite suffering.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche frequently shared this karmic story, as did his root guru Thubga Rinpoche. They both urged their entourages and disciples not to assign derogatory nicknames to others. When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* at Larung Gar, he genuinely wished for more people to receive the teachings. However, some Dharma practitioners may have perceived the sutra as a mere collection of easily understandable stories, leading them to make excuses and step away. This greatly saddened the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. It is important to note that using harsh words has severe karmic consequences. Without understanding this fundamental principle of cause and effect, our efforts on the spiritual path are ultimately futile, regardless of how many tantric teachings we have received. Thus, we must refrain from saying harsh words in the future.

There is another story about a nun who called another nun a "bitch" and was reborn as a female dog five hundred times. This story is from the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*:

At the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, there was a female dog who had been a nun during the time of Buddha Kasyapa. This nun was very skilled at teaching the Dharma, which earned her many offerings. Eventually, she set out to support the monks and nuns with the offerings she received. Once, she asked the sangha for

help in an emergency, but everyone was busy chanting prayers, and no one paused to assist her.

The nun, feeling angry, insulted the sangha, saying, “I have made offerings to you and taken care of everything, but when I am in need, none of you are willing to help. Where is your conscience? You are just like dogs!” Because of these harsh words, the nun was reborn as a female dog for five hundred lifetimes. Many similar stories exist.

As I mentioned in the teachings of the *Aspiration to Be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*, whether you are a lay practitioner or a monastic, it is important not to insult others by comparing them to certain animals or mocking them by calling them “blind,” “fat,” or similar names.

When I was in elementary school, there was a child with poor eyesight. Many kids gave him a hurtful nickname and laughed at him. As a result, this child developed low self-esteem and lost motivation in life, leading to a very pitiful existence. Therefore, when you encounter a person with disabilities, please be mindful not to use harsh words that may hurt their feelings.

You should also refrain from saying anything that may upset others. For example, if someone notices that a patient looks pale and wrinkled, they might say, “Ah! You really don’t look well. Look at your gray hair and wrinkled skin. Alas! There’s no hope for you now.”

This person completely overlooks the patient’s positive qualities and only emphasizes their flaws. If that individual becomes particularly fixated on such comments, they may feel very sad, thinking, “Ah! Everyone thinks I’m old!”

Therefore, it is very important for us Mahayanists to have a caring concern for others’ feelings. Meanwhile, we must not speak harsh words. *The Sutra of Accepting the Ten Good Karmas as Precepts* says:

If one can avoid saying harsh words,
They are referred to as a truly noble person,
Someone who is upright among others,
And whom everyone delights in seeing.

When a person is eloquent but critical, others may hesitate to approach them, as they may focus on finding faults rather than offering praise. When discussing others’ shortcomings, such a person is most eloquent, whereas when talking about

others' great qualities, they remain silent. This behavior is deemed improper. Therefore, it is important for us to speak with gentleness and kindness, avoiding harsh words.

There are many stories like this. Therefore, we should always strive to speak gently. Additionally, since we cannot discern who is a sublime being or a bodhisattva, we should maintain a pure perception of all beings. Great beings appear just like ordinary people; they experience sickness and suffering and must eat and walk like everyone else. They blend in with the crowd, making it impossible for anyone to recognize who they truly are. Thus, we should learn to appreciate and celebrate the good qualities and accomplishments of others. It is said that insulting or speaking harshly to a bodhisattva is far worse than harming all living beings in the three realms. As Karma Chagme Rinpoche states in the *Aspiration to Be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*:

Insulting a bodhisattva is a much worse wrongdoing
Than killing all beings in the three worlds;
I confess all such serious and futile faults I've committed.

Once there was a Chan master who was highly skilled at painting. He had a peculiar practice of requiring buyers to pay in advance before he began a painting, which left many people perplexed and often led to complaints about him. Moreover, the master was willing to paint anything in exchange for money.

One day, someone attempted to humiliate him by asking if he would paint on a woman's skirt. Surprisingly, the master agreed but requested a higher payment. People were left wondering about his seemingly strong attachment to money and why he would accept such an insulting request.

Later, people discovered the reason behind the Chan master's need for money. The region where he lived was prone to famine, and the wealthy were unwilling to assist the poor. As a result, the master constructed a granary to store grain for hunger relief. Additionally, he was building a temple according to his master's wishes. Given these circumstances, the Chan master was determined to achieve his goals by any means necessary, without concern for being insulted.

Once both goals were accomplished, the Chan master immediately ceased painting and withdrew to a secluded mountain. He never painted again, stating:

When painting a tiger, it is easy to depict its appearance, but

difficult to depict its skeletal structure.

When painting a person, it is easy to depict their facial features,
but difficult to depict their innermost qualities.

Only then did people realize that he was truly a great master and that his actions were for the Dharma and for all living beings. Therefore, we cannot judge a person solely based on their appearance. An ordinary individual could be the embodiment of Bodhisattva Manjushri or Avalokiteshvara. We cannot determine a person's true nature based on external appearances.

Some people from the Han regions of China believe that a highly enlightened master must be chubby, leading some frauds to intentionally increase their food intake to gain weight. How absurd! Nowhere in the sutras does it state that being chubby is necessary for a bodhisattva. If that were true, pigs would be the most likely manifestations of bodhisattvas.

Thus, we must maintain a pure perception of all beings to avoid making mistakes. However, this can be challenging for some, as they tend to see everyone except themselves as flawed. From this perspective, it becomes easy for them to belittle a bodhisattva who manifests in an ordinary form. Consequently, practitioners aspiring for liberation should refrain from engaging in such pointless misconduct.

♦ Worthless chatter

The effect similar to the cause of worthless chatter is that a person's words hold little weight, and they struggle with decision-making and self-confidence. Even when they speak the truth, others may not believe them, leaving them feeling uncertain when addressing an audience. The Buddha states in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Worthless chatter results in rebirth in the three lower realms.

However, if one is reborn as a human, worthless chatter leads
to two consequences: one's words will not be trusted, and
one's speech will be unclear.

Thus, we should engage in meaningful conversations on topics such as Buddhist teachings or helping others. There is no need to dwell endlessly on trivial subjects. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* also states:

If one regards worthless chatter as a knife,
 One will always stay away from it,
 And consistently practice right speech;
 This will lead to a good rebirth.

Worthless chatter is like a sharp knife that can harm ourselves and others, resulting in no benefit. Therefore, we should focus our speech on liberation from the cycles of life and death. By doing so, we can ensure a favorable rebirth. In contrast, worthless chatter brings severe karmic consequences.

♦ Covetousness

The effect of covetousness is that a person not only fails to obtain what they desire most but also finds themselves facing the very situations they hoped to avoid. The Buddha states in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Covetousness results in rebirth in the three lower realms.
 However, if one is reborn as a human, it leads to two
 consequences: greed and insatiability.

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* also states:

Covetousness is like a malignant boil;
 If it takes root in a person's mind,
 They will be consumed by greed;
 Thus, they will find no happiness day or night.

Even if gold, silver, and all other kinds of goods rain down, a covetous person will never feel satisfied. The *Madhyama Agama* states:

It rains valuable treasures,
 But a covetous person remains insatiable.
 Covetousness brings pain but not happiness,
 Which a wise person should know.

Therefore, a wise person should recognize that covetousness can only bring suffering, never happiness. Knowing this, we should not desperately strive for money every day, but rather aim to live a life of contentment with fewer desires.

♦ Wishing harm on others

The karmic effect of wishing harm on others is that one will not only always feel afraid but also frequently suffer harm. The Buddha says in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Wishing harm on others results in rebirth in the three lower realms. However, if one is reborn as a human, it brings about two consequences: haggling over everything and being harmed by others.

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

The mind creates the foremost hatred,
And this hatred is the most evil of all.

Therefore, hatred or the mind of wishing harm on others is the greatest evil in this world. Conversely, as stated in the *Sutra of the Great Assembly*:

Forbearance is the best of all in the world,
Forbearance is the path to happiness.

♦ Wrong views

The effect of harboring wrong views is that one not only maintains harmful beliefs but also confuses the mind with lies and misconceptions. The Buddha says in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Wrong views result in rebirth in the three lower realms. However, if one is reborn as a human, it leads to two consequences: being born into a family with wrong views and becoming deceitful and tricky.

In particular, those who commit wrongdoings and lack merit will easily develop wrong views in this life. The opposite is true for those with merit and virtuous dispositions. At Larung Gar, meritorious individuals can readily cultivate right views; after studying one or two Buddhist texts, they come to believe in the principle of cause and effect and understand the doctrine of emptiness. However, no matter how many sutras and shastras those lacking merit have studied, how

many teachers they've followed, or how many tears they've shed, their wrong views remain deeply rooted and unshaken.

The *Lotus Sutra* states:

People with little virtue and few merits
Are compelled and tortured by sufferings
And fall into the dense forest of wrong views.

Such individuals are burdened by hardships and difficulties: falling ill today and facing troubles tomorrow, being bullied today and experiencing breakups tomorrow. Additionally, they find fault with everyone, claiming the guru is wrong, Dharma friends are wrong, and even the Buddha is wrong. Once, a person told me, "If Buddha Shakyamuni were still alive, I would have truly wanted to debate him." Alas! This reflects the effect similar to the cause of wrong views.

In conclusion, I hope we can be free from covetousness, wishing harm on others, and wrong views in this life and in many lives to come. We must sever these three terrible mental afflictions.

Even if we cannot yet uproot them, we should recognize their faults. By hearing, contemplating, and meditating on right views, we will strive to eliminate our covetousness, wishing harm on others, and wrong views.



Lesson 67

“The conditioning effect acts on our environment ... multiply, bringing you uninterrupted good fortune.” [page 116–118]

The Words of My Perfect Teacher contains rich content, making its study a significant undertaking. For me, completing the teaching of this text is the most important task of my life. For you, receiving the complete teachings would be beneficial. If you missed any previous classes, I hope you can catch up through audio or video recordings and transcripts to ensure that your transmission is complete.

As long as you have faith and determination, you should be able to complete the remaining teachings without difficulty. By receiving the entire teaching and the full transmission, you can establish a solid foundation for your lifelong practice.

Meanwhile, when listening to the teachings, ensure that you are focused; it is best to receive the teachings with joy and reverence. If you cannot adopt such an attitude, at the very least, maintain proper conduct while listening. Otherwise, no matter how much Dharma you’ve studied, the teachings may not be beneficial to you. The Buddha said:

Do not teach those who do not respect the Dharma.

As you can see, anyone who wishes to can listen to Dharma teachings as long as they are respectful. However, if a person lacks both respect and joy toward the Dharma, they should not be given the teachings.

Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar demonstrate proper conduct while listening to the teachings, thanks to their years of experience in hearing and contemplation. Unfortunately, some lay practitioners do not share this approach. When receiving teachings via video, they often engage in distracting behaviors such as using the restroom, talking on the phone, sending text messages, eating, and similar activities.

When listening to Dharma teachings, you may drink water, but all other worldly activities should be set aside. While some lay practitioners lead busy lives and have many obligations, each session of my Dharma teaching lasts no longer than one hour. If, during this time, you are unable to turn off your mobile device and calm your mind, the study of Dharma will become merely a formality.

Furthermore, regardless of which Dharma class you choose to attend in the future, it is essential to maintain impeccable conduct. Inconsistent attendance—such as coming today and skipping tomorrow or participating only in the first half and leaving during the second half—reflects a lack of consideration for the principle of cause and effect. If you exhibit inappropriate conduct, it is important to work gradually toward changing it.

Of course, most people are doing quite well. When I visited cities to give teachings in the past, I often felt disheartened by the audience's demeanor. In recent years, as the Dharma has been effectively propagated via the internet, many people have learned the proper conduct for listening to teachings and have begun to behave appropriately, which is truly gratifying.

However, minor issues persist regarding the conduct of a few individuals when they listen to the teachings. They may still be unaware of the proper guidelines, or perhaps they once knew them but have since forgotten, or maybe afflictive emotions arise during class. We must strive to maintain impeccable conduct while listening to teachings.

Next, we will continue our study of the effects of the ten negative actions. We have completed “the fully ripened effect” and “the effect similar to the cause.” Today, we will begin with “the conditioning effect.”

2.1.4.1.4.3. The Conditioning Effect

The conditioning effect acts on our environment. Of course, this doesn't imply

that our actions solely manifest in external elements such as earth, water, fire, and wind. Rather, it means that our actions impact our own environment.

Consider prison as an example: it is an environment shaped by the negative actions of the criminals incarcerated there. This does not mean that after committing a crime, their negative karma simply ripens in the form of an external prison, and they themselves do not bear any karmic consequences on their own mental continuum. The *Ekottara Agama* also states:

Due to the effect of the ten negative actions,
Even external things deteriorate,
Let alone internal phenomena.

Thus, the ten negative actions can affect the doer's external environment.

In fact, the material world we inhabit is formed by the collective karma of all living beings. The *Treasury of Abhidharma* mentions that in the first age of this kalpa, like all other beings in the form realm, humans naturally glowed and did not require food. Later, as humans began to desire earth-cake¹¹ and wealth, their minds became increasingly corrupted, leading to the deterioration of their external surroundings. Therefore, our minds and the external environment interact with each other. If a person becomes greatly afflicted in their mind, the outer world will appear particularly unpleasant to them. This is a natural law.

Here, “the conditioning effect” primarily refers to karmic retribution related to our environment; that is, the effect of our actions on our environment. What are the conditioning effects of the ten negative actions, respectively?

♦ Taking life

Taking life causes rebirth in bleak, desolate places filled with perilous cliffs and ravines.

♦ Taking what is not given

Taking what is not given causes rebirth in regions frequently plagued by famine, where frost and hail ruin crops, and trees fail to bear fruit.

Recently, I had to contact some farmers regarding issues related to their children's education. One farmer told me that each year, just as the crops were

¹¹ Skt. *parpataka*

nearly ready for harvest, a hailstorm would strike his region, destroying the crops, so they had harvested almost nothing for many years.

This illustrates the karmic effect of the local farmers' collective actions. It's similar to those wealthy individuals who live in luxurious mansions surrounded by beautiful scenery and extremely favorable living conditions, whereas some villagers reside in shabby, small cabins amid a filthy environment and poor living conditions. This disparity may reflect the common karmic effect of the rich compared to the poor, stemming from their respective actions.

Therefore, whenever I visit a pleasant place, I naturally think, "The residents here must have engaged in some of the ten positive actions. Their happiness is worth rejoicing!" When I encounter an unpleasant place, I consider, "This is the collective karmic effect of the locals' negative actions." This serves as an example of how we can reflect on the conditioning effect of the environment.

♦ Sexual misconduct

Sexual misconduct forces us to inhabit disgusting environments filled with filth and waste, muddy swamps, and so forth.

Many migrant workers in China often live in places with unsanitary conditions near bustling cities as a karmic result of their past actions of sexual misconduct. Even in the same area, some people live in very comfortable conditions, whereas others live in filthy houses near public toilets. This has something to do with the conditioning effect of their past actions.

♦ Lying

Lying leads to financial instability, persistent anxiety, and exposure to frightening events and situations. Some people live highly unstable lives, such as doing temporary labor one day and something else the next, without any financial security. Often, these individuals also experience mental insecurity and become flustered, frequently facing distressing situations.

♦ Sowing discord

Sowing discord causes us to dwell in areas that are hard to traverse, filled with steep ravines, rocky canyons, and so forth.

Some Tibetan communities are situated alongside a river, with towering

cliffs above them. There is only one access point between these cliffs, making both driving and walking extremely challenging. The residents can only see the sky above and the river below, with little else in view. Even fetching water can be a hazardous task. However, they do not feel deprived and find it acceptable to live in such locations throughout their lives.

♦ **Harsh speech**

Harsh speech leads to rebirth in a troubled, chaotic environment, akin to a barren wasteland filled with rocks, stones, and thorns.

Some areas around Lhasa reflect this. Although the Potala Palace, Samye Chimpu, and other sacred sites are inviting, certain mountains near Ngari and Sagya are desolate, in contrast to regions with lush greenery and wooded mountains. When I visited those places, I reflected on their corresponding conditioning effects.

♦ **Worthless chatter**

Worthless chatter leads to rebirth on barren and infertile land that yields nothing despite effort; the seasons are erratic and unpredictable.

During my visit to the farming area, I met another farmer and asked him about the local harvest. “It’s very tough,” he said. “We work hard throughout the year, but the harvest can only sustain our family’s basic needs. The grain is just enough for our own consumption, and there is nothing extra to sell for money.”

If you have never been a herdsman or a farmer, it may be difficult for you to empathize with them. However, when you truly understand their lifestyle, as well as the climate, living conditions, and daily tasks they face, you will realize that the karmic outcomes experienced by living beings are truly diverse. Regardless of our intelligence and abilities, the place of our rebirth greatly influences our lives, and it is the conditioning effect of our actions in previous lives.

So please refrain from engaging in careless actions and have faith in the Dharma. A wise person should be mindful of their actions and the resulting karmic consequences. If you genuinely care about yourself, you will not commit negative actions thoughtlessly. Otherwise, you will be reborn in undesirable places life after life, and by then it will be too late to change your situation.

♦ **Covetousness**

Covetousness leads to barren harvests and the many hardships typical of unwelcoming places and difficult times. Many people in the world have no clothes to wear, and their land yields no harvests. Additionally, they suffer from numerous illnesses and ongoing warfare.

♦ Wishing harm on others

Wishing harm on others results in rebirth in places of perpetual fear and countless torments. As reported in the news, countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq are constantly engulfed in famine and conflict.

♦ Wrong views

Harboring wrong views leads to rebirth in destitute conditions, devoid of any refuge or protectors. Some rural areas produce neither fruits nor vegetables and face challenges related to transportation, water scarcity, and a lack of natural resources. Moreover, these regions are fraught with unfavorable conditions for human life, including thorny plants, poisonous flora, and harsh living conditions.

When the residents of these areas come across any fruit, they eagerly seize it as if they have discovered a wish-fulfilling jewel. This situation may have improved by now. It has been reported that in the past, fruits were not readily available in these rural areas, leading residents to harbor envy toward locations in southern China.

We have just covered the conditioning effects of the ten negative actions. Naturally, there are also many other karmic effects that correspond to these actions, including indifference to the Dharma teachings. The *Sutra of the Great Assembly* states:

Those who committed the ten negative actions
Lack merit and will receive no offerings;
They do not savor the flavor of the Dharma,
And their dedication to practicing it is weak.

I recalled this verse yesterday while listening to your oral presentation for the semester exam. Some sangha members can effortlessly recite various texts, take written tests, and deliver oral presentations; they do not merely engage in empty rhetoric. The Dharma has truly penetrated their minds, allowing them to savor its true essence. Why is this so? It is the karmic result of their ten positive actions from the past.

Some people wish they could do the same, but they sometimes develop wrong views, suffer from illness, or become upset—disliking this Dharma practitioner or becoming angry with that sangha member. These are the karmic results of their ten negative actions in previous lives.

As I mentioned earlier, about ten years ago¹² I underwent medical treatment in a southern city in China. During my hospital stay, I encountered a young nurse who always wore a stern expression and had a difficult temperament. The head nurse explained that she was unhappy simply because someone had not called her. Consequently, she would become angry and direct her frustration toward the patients. Each time she administered an injection, she would forcefully push the needle and quickly inject the medicine into me. The entire process lasted only a few seconds. My experience during the treatment was truly unpleasant. Even now, I feel a bit afraid whenever I remember her face. It seemed that she viewed the entire world through a dark lens.

Therefore, our state of mind can greatly influence how we perceive the external world. For example, when we engage in positive actions, we feel happy, and our perception of the external environment becomes pleasant. Conversely, when we feel miserable inside, even if we are in heaven, we still find the environment unpleasant. This is the conditioning effect.

In today's world, natural and man-made disasters occur frequently; this is also the conditioning effect of the ten negative actions by humans. According to some experts, these disasters happen so often because the Earth is currently in a seismically active period, as explained by the quake cluster theory. However, Buddhist teachings offer a deeper explanation, focusing on the principle of cause and effect. In recent years, many disasters have occurred, including the Wenchuan earthquake and Yushu earthquake in China, the Chile earthquake, the Haiti earthquake, drought in five provinces in southwest China, floods in southern China, and various mining disasters. Why is this happening? It is because people are committing negative actions such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and more. The conditioning effect of these negative actions affects the external environment.

Al Gore, the former vice president of the United States, wrote a book on global environmental issues titled *An Inconvenient Truth*, which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize. In the book, Gore discusses the causes, urgency, and moral obligations

¹² In the late 1990s.

related to climate change. He emphasizes that global warming is not just a debate about scientific evidence and partisan politics—it is an issue of ethical concern, morality, and spiritual transformation.

Gore believes that morality impacts environmental protection, but this perspective only partially addresses the issue and lacks depth from a Buddhist standpoint. We must understand that if people worldwide engage in positive actions, it could potentially help prevent or alleviate various disasters. Unfortunately, in today's world, people are more inclined toward negative actions and show little interest in positive ones. It is crucial for us to promote the ten positive actions and refrain from the ten negative actions.

In one lecture I delivered to a group of high school teachers and university professors, I emphasized that intellectuals must be aware of the faults of the ten negative actions and the merits of the ten positive actions; otherwise, they can hardly be considered truly kind-hearted individuals. It would be beneficial if the *Sutra of the Path of the Ten Good Karmas* were taught in schools.

Some Dharma masters have emphasized the importance of studying this sutra in the past. After reading it, I realized that the text is not excessively long. It briefly discusses the ten positive actions and primarily emphasizes the benefits of performing good deeds and refraining from bad ones. This teaching should be shared with schools and families. Recently, I asked some students and teachers to identify the ten positive actions. If a student has graduated from university but is still unfamiliar with the ten positive actions, it is highly unlikely that they will become a person who can contribute positively to society. Therefore, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of this important concept.

2.1.4.1.4.4. The Proliferating Effect

This effect corresponds to the Sanskrit term *puruṣakāraphala*. As detailed in the *Theravada Abhidhamma* and the *Mahayana Abhidharma*, *puruṣa* refers to “a person or individual being,” *kāra* means “performing,” and *phala* translates to “fruit or result.” When combined, *puruṣakāraphala* signifies “the fruit or result of human effort.” For instance, a farmer plants and then harvests crops, an entrepreneur manages a business and subsequently earns a profit, and a craftsman applies their skill to produce an item. Similarly, when all necessary causes and conditions (physical, verbal, and mental) come together, a killer takes action and successfully

ends a life, resulting in the consequences of their actions. This entire process can be likened to a potter crafting a pot—the potter must exert specific effort to achieve the outcome of having a pot. For this reason, this effect is referred to as “the fruit of human effort.”

However, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* provides a different definition of this effect, as stated in the text:

The proliferating effect is that whatever action we did before, we tend to repeat again and again. This brings an endless succession of suffering throughout all our subsequent lives. Our negative actions proliferate yet further and cause us to wander endlessly in samsara.¹³

Therefore, this definition is not just about “the fruit or result of human effort.” It also concerns how our actions, both negative and positive, will proliferate if they are not interrupted. This is akin to the idea that the longer we keep our money in a bank, the more interest we’ll gain. If we don’t purify our negative actions as soon as possible, the ripening effect of our actions will increase over time, leading to an endless succession of suffering life after life.

The *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* includes a story about a layperson who insulted his brother, a monk, by saying the brother merely sat every day like a cripple and waited for his offerings. As a result of this insult, the layperson was reborn as a cripple in many lives.

Thus, even if a negative action lasts only for a split second, its karmic effect is unimaginable. Without purifying the negative action, the karmic effect will proliferate, trapping us in the endless cycle of samsara, life after life.

This concludes the teaching on the ten negative actions. I hope you’ll first understand the teaching and then examine yourself accordingly. Ensure you refrain from committing any of the negative actions. Otherwise, once you engage in wrongdoing, the negative karmic effect will ripen sooner or later, much like swallowing a deadly toxin will inevitably lead to poisoning.

2.1.4.2. Positive Actions to be Adopted

The ten positive actions involve making an unconditional vow to abstain from

¹³ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 116.

the ten negative actions, such as taking life and taking what is not given, and so on, after understanding their harmful effects.

Taking such a vow does not necessarily require the presence of a teacher or preceptor; simply resolving on your own to refrain from taking life from now on—or to avoid killing in specific locations, at certain times, or targeting particular animals—constitutes a positive action in itself.

If you find it difficult to completely abstain from the ten negative actions, such as not taking life, you may make vows like “I won’t kill during X time or at Y place,” or “I won’t kill tigers, dinosaurs, whales, a president, or the secretary-general of the United Nations,” and so on.

For example, if you are in conflict with someone, you might say to them directly: “I swear I won’t kill you!” While you are fighting, you can make such a vow. Although upon hearing this, the other person may think you actually want to kill them, which could make them angrier.

In the past, when some Dharma masters held Dharma assemblies in the Tibetan region, they asked butchers who slaughtered animals daily to vow that they would never kill a snow lion, a dinosaur, or an American, the latter because they had no opportunity to travel abroad. Making a vow like this also generates merit.

However, making such a commitment in the presence of a teacher, a spiritual companion, or a representation of the Three Jewels adds significant strength to the promise. This practice holds special importance in Tibetan Buddhism and is increasingly being adopted by followers of Chinese Buddhism as well. Many practitioners, when encountering a teacher, pledge to engage in positive actions and avoid negative ones. This not only reflects their deep respect and serves as a Dharma offering to the teacher but also allows them to receive the teacher’s blessings, which can carry extraordinary power.

Some time ago, I met a drug rehab patient who was so addicted that he would have a seizure if he didn’t take the drug in time. Later, he came to Larung Gar for various reasons and immediately vowed to quit drugs. Now, half a year has passed, and he hasn’t had any urge to use drugs—not even for a split second—and he has truly felt the extraordinary power of the Dharma.

Therefore, you should vow to quit your bad actions, such as killing, lying, smoking, or drinking, in the presence of a teacher. Once, an alcoholic wanted to make a vow not to kill in the presence of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche,

but he mistakenly said, “I vow not to drink anymore.” Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche responded, “Good,” and granted him blessings. Only after receiving the blessing did the man realize that he had made the wrong vow (*the audience laughs*).

Of course, it is not enough to merely think about stopping negative actions such as taking life. What truly matters is making a firm, unwavering commitment to avoid such actions, regardless of the circumstances.

If the teacher is present, you should make the promise before them. If the teacher is not available, you should make the promise in front of a representation of the Three Jewels or during a visit to a monastery. Tibetans have a good tradition: when they want to see a teacher or go on pilgrimage to a monastery, they make a vow in their minds, saying, “I will recite the Vajrasattva mantra one hundred thousand times” or “I aspire to visit Lhasa.”

Some people, including Buddhists, do not follow this practice. The first thing they do upon arriving at the Potala Palace is pull out a camera and take photos everywhere. Some laypeople came to Larung Gar, but they only took a few photos before leaving.

It is a great pity that in the presence of such supreme objects, they did not make a vow, such as reciting a mantra one hundred thousand times, quitting meat, never ordering live animals for food, or committing to just one good deed.

Once, I gave a teaching to some schoolteachers and students. After my talk, they approached me, and some vowed never to take life, some vowed never to lie, and so on. Everyone made a vow according to their own situation. Of course, a monastic is expected to have already taken the precepts to refrain from all negative actions, so they do not need to make the promise again. As for laypeople, even if you cannot eliminate all negative actions, abstaining from one or two already brings great merit.

Why is that? The Buddha teaches that all great qualities are achieved through the ten positive actions. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* states:

From being born as a human as desired,
To enjoying the bliss of meditation at the summit of the highest
heaven,
To taking the path of pratyekabuddha, shravaka, and the
Buddha,

All come to exist from the ten positive actions.

The ten positive actions encompass the most fundamental principles of our conduct, which greatly benefit our society and families. Therefore, we must be committed to practicing the ten positive actions.

To take a step back, if laypeople cannot completely abstain from killing, they can vow not to take any life for a specific duration, such as a year or three years. Alternatively, they can avoid killing during certain months, like the first month (known as the Month of Miracle) or the fourth month (Vaisakha), or on specific days of each month, such as the 8th, 10th, 15th, 25th, 29th, and 30th. As stated in Buddhist scriptures, these significant dates offer great benefit, so we should engage in virtuous deeds on those days, including taking the one-day precept. If this is not possible, one may vow not to kill for a certain period, which can still yield significant benefits.

I recently read the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* in Tibetan, and here is a story from the sutra:

Once, Mahakasyapa asked the Buddha, “Since you already knew that Sunaksatra would develop wrong views and fall into the hell realm, why did you allow him to become a monk?”

The Buddha replied, “If I had not permitted him to take ordination, he would have inherited the throne and become so powerful that he would have destroyed Buddhism. In that case, he would have had to remain in the lower realms longer. Although I know he will eventually develop wrong views, by becoming a monk, he has planted meritorious seeds within himself, and he will ultimately achieve the supreme fruition of Buddhahood.”

Therefore, we should not assume that because Sunaksatra might generate wrong views, it would have been better if he hadn’t taken ordination. Even if the monastic precepts last only one day, they can still generate merit. Thus, we should recognize the benefit of taking precepts, even for a brief period.

Long ago, a village butcher made a vow before the noble Katyayana, promising not to kill during the night. He was reborn in one of the ephemeral hells, where he endured torment in a blazing metal house during the day. However, each night, he found himself in a luxurious palace, surrounded by four goddesses, enjoying happiness and comfort.

This butcher's story is found in the *Carma-vastu* section of the *Mula-Sarvastivada Vinaya*, and here are the details:

Once, a man, the son of a venerable elder, went treasure hunting in the sea and lost his way. At dusk, he came upon an illusory celestial palace, where a god was enjoying a joyful time with four goddesses. Noticing that the man was hungry and thirsty, the god provided him with delicacies, bathed him in the palace, and accommodated him for the night.

At dawn, as soon as the sun rose, the four goddesses transformed into ferocious black dogs that attacked and tore apart the god in a palace of red-hot metal. In the evening, as soon as the sun set, the dogs reverted to goddesses and continued their playful enjoyment with the god.

The man witnessed what happened and asked the god, "What did you do in the past that brought you here?"

The god replied, "The people of Jambudvipa are suspicious, so even if I tell you, you may not believe me."

The man said, "I saw it with my own eyes. How could I not believe it?"

Then the god recited a verse: "I used to take lives during the day and hold precepts while diligently practicing at night. Because of this, I was reborn here, and now I am experiencing the bad and good karmic effects."

The man did not understand the verse, so he asked for an explanation.

The god explained, "I was once a village butcher who made a living by slaughtering sheep and selling meat. Venerable Katyayana tried to persuade me not to kill, but I did not listen. Then he asked me to take a vow not to kill during the night, and I promised to do so. Because of this, in this life, I was reborn in one of the ephemeral hells, where throughout the day I am tormented in a house of red-hot metal, and at night I enjoy my time in the palace, in the company of four goddesses."

In fact, there are also cases in the human world with similar karmic results. I once met a patient who was perfectly healthy during the day but always suffered from nightmares and excruciating pain at night. There was another patient who felt happy and healthy in the morning but irritable and dreadful in the afternoon. These patients might have committed similar actions to those of the village butcher.

Therefore, if we carefully examine what has happened in this world with our wisdom, we will notice countless karmic consequences, both positive and negative,

continuously ripening upon ourselves and in the external environment. Unfortunately, individuals who do not embrace the principle of cause and effect do not believe that these consequences are karmic; instead, they perceive them as random occurrences. Thus, when one understands the principle of cause and effect, it is very important to share it with others.

The term “the education of the Buddha” refers to the Buddha transmitting the truths he has realized to his followers. Similarly, as followers of the Buddha, we should also make every effort to share these teachings with others while striving to practice them ourselves. *The Meeting of Father and Son* says:

Commit no vicious deeds,
Engage in virtuous deeds,
Also persuade others,
To do virtuous deeds with diligence.

This is the spirit of Buddhism. Now let’s talk about the ten positive actions.

The ten positive actions consist of renouncing the ten negative actions and practicing their positive antidotes.

Specifically, the three positive actions of the body are:

- 1) To give up killing and instead protect living beings by practicing actions such as releasing captured animals and adopting a vegetarian diet.
- 2) To refrain from taking what is not given and instead practice generosity. If you are affluent, you should engage in acts of charity and make offerings while avoiding ostentation. When making donations, some individuals first display the bills as if they were a deck of cards and then place the money on the shrine or in the donation box, which is unnecessary.
- 3) To abstain from sexual misconduct and instead adhere to the precepts.

The four positive actions of speech are:

- 1) To refrain from lying and instead tell the truth;
- 2) To abandon sowing discord and instead reconcile disputes;
- 3) To refrain from using harsh words and instead speak gently;

- 4) To give up worthless chatter and instead recite prayers and discuss ways to propagate the Dharma, benefit others, and reflect on one's own Dharma practice.

I noticed that some Dharma friends recite the texts exceptionally well. They must have dedicated considerable effort, which suggests they do not engage in idle talk. Otherwise, it would be quite challenging for them to successfully memorize and recite such a large number of texts. Yesterday, during the recitation test on *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, there were a few pauses. After the test, some participants cried, and I asked why. They said, "We didn't recite well. We're so sorry we wasted your time."

In fact, they did a great job! I used to take the recitation test myself. Before the test, I would feel stressed, but afterward, I would feel relaxed and could sleep well.

This time, many Dharma friends must have spent a great deal of time memorizing texts, including *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and more. This is no easy task, except for very few individuals. When you commit yourself to memorizing texts, you will undoubtedly reflect on their meaning. This will ensure that the impact of the texts on you throughout your life is especially profound. As for the texts I memorized twenty years ago, even though I may no longer recite them word-for-word, my recollection of them differs greatly from those texts I never tried to memorize—I can easily remember those I previously memorized. It's truly the happiest thing for us to listen to, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma.

The three positive actions of the mind are:

- 1) To relinquish covetousness and instead cultivate generosity and desireless.
- 2) To stop wishing harm upon others and develop a genuine desire to help them, and to foster loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta.
- 3) To eliminate wrong views and instead cultivate the true and authentic views on emptiness, cause and effect, equanimity, and the like.

Here are the four types of karmic effects of the ten positive actions.

The fully ripened effect of these actions is rebirth in one of the three higher realms. The effect similar to the cause as action is that a person delights in doing

good throughout their subsequent lives, resulting in a continuous increase in their merit.

The effects similar to the cause as experience for each of the ten positive actions are as follows: abstaining from taking life leads to a long, healthy life with few illnesses; refraining from taking what is not given brings prosperity and protection from enemies or thieves; avoiding sexual misconduct results in having an attractive partner and few competitors; renouncing lies earns praise and affection from others; abstaining from sowing discord fosters a respectful circle of friends and loyal companions; avoiding harsh speech ensures hearing only kind words; giving up worthless chatter leads to being taken seriously when speaking; abandoning covetousness fulfills your desires; not wishing harm upon others ensures safety from harm; and rejecting wrong views promotes the growth of right view in your mind.

In each case, the conditioning effect is the opposite of the corresponding negative effect: one is born in places where all the most ideal conditions are present.

Positive actions bring auspiciousness, while negative actions bring the opposite. This is not just a Buddhist perspective; many religions and philosophies share the same view. For example, the *I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, of Confucianism says:

A household that accumulates good deeds will enjoy blessings
in abundance, while one that piles up evils will inevitably face
a host of sufferings.¹⁴

The Daoist text, *The Supreme Exhortation of the Response and Retribution*, states:

When a person commits virtuous deeds,
The heaven will grant him merit.

Thus, after performing good deeds, the external environment becomes pleasant and comfortable, and the Dharma protectors, gods, and those around will bring many favorable circumstances. In contrast, after committing bad deeds, people, non-humans, and the environment will present many unpleasant challenges.

¹⁴ *I Ching: The Book of Change*, translated and edited by John Blofeld, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1965, p. 91.

A good person can easily accept this principle, but a bad person may resist it; no matter how much you try to advise them, they may still refuse to listen.

The proliferating effect is that any positive actions a person takes will multiply, leading to continuous good fortune. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

It's easy for a good person to do good,
It's hard for a bad person to do good.
It's easy for a bad person to do bad,
It's hard for a good person to do bad.

I really like this verse. A good person, no matter how hard someone tries to persuade them to engage in negative actions such as breaking precepts or taking life, will never do so. However, a bad person, with even the slightest encouragement to commit negative actions like lying and stealing, may comply immediately. Each of us truly has very different karma.

There are many individuals who effortlessly achieve their goals. I have encountered students who typically don't perform well in school but excel in exams, as well as those who are intelligent and usually study diligently yet consistently struggle with exams, family relationships, and other matters. This is related to their individual karma.

In summary, each of us should engage in good practices and meditate on the right view of cause and effect. When our understanding of the principle of cause and effect is firmly established, we will be easily motivated to engage in positive actions.

Conversely, if we waver on the principle of cause and effect, even the highest empowerment or the most profound pith instructions may not yield lasting benefits. Therefore, it is crucial for us to give appropriate importance to the principle of cause and effect and to apply it in our daily lives.



Lesson 68

“In all their inconceivable variety, ... previous lives as a Bodhisattva.” [page 118–120]

Today, we will cover the third section of the principle of cause and effect: the all-determining quality of actions.

This aspect of the teaching is crucial. Many people have taken refuge, are studying the Dharma, and consider themselves experienced Buddhists. However, if they were to examine their minds with wisdom, they might realize that they do not fully understand the principle of cause and effect; they may harbor doubts about the law of karma and lack motivation to engage in virtuous actions. The reason for their condition is that they do not truly possess conviction in the principle of cause and effect.

Therefore, we must study, contemplate, and regularly practice the undeniable principle of cause and effect. Otherwise, even if you appear to have received a refuge certificate, follow a teacher, read Buddhist texts, and observe precepts, if you do not believe in this principle, you are not yet a true Buddhist.

Now that you have faith in Buddhism, ensure that this faith is not a form of superstition or blind worship, which is quite common in both Tibetan and Han areas. In fact, Buddhism is not a belief system based on superstitions; its doctrines consist of truths.

However, some Buddhists are either unaware of this or have not reflected upon it, leading to their views potentially being tainted with incorrect thoughts and their faith being influenced by superstition. If they encounter unfavorable circumstances

or negative influences, their views and actions may shift to the wrong side, much like a low-quality product losing color and deteriorating.

So, what do Buddhists need the most? They need to internalize the teachings of the Buddha. I have emphasized this repeatedly, and it is also my own experience gained through years of practicing the Dharma. If you can assimilate Mahayana teachings or any Buddhist teachings within your mind, it is more valuable than possessing money and wealth. As a practitioner, if you possess the wish-fulfilling jewel of right views, even if you are penniless, you are still very “wealthy.”

What are the most crucial steps a Buddhist should take to achieve this? They should first listen to and contemplate the Dharma, then put the teachings into practice repeatedly. By following this sequence, no matter what obstacles and difficulties one faces, their faith and wisdom will not regress. Is it worth pursuing this state of non-regression? Yes, of course.

If the teachings of the Buddha were inconsistent with the truth, like some worldly knowledge and philosophies that are incorrect and do not bring happiness in this life or the next, then it would be acceptable for one’s faith to regress. However, Buddhism’s doctrines are not like this. Countless empirical examples have validated that the Dharma can indeed bring unimaginable benefits from life to life. Therefore, to cultivate genuine faith in the Dharma, we Buddhists must not ignore or despise foundational teachings, such as the principle of cause and effect, following a qualified teacher, and others. Otherwise, even if an ordinary Buddhist has received the highest teachings, it will be of little help to their spiritual advancement because they have abandoned the most essential and fundamental aspects. Of course, this may not apply to those practitioners with the most superior faculties.

I have great faith in the profound state of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) and the Great Seal (Mahamudra). Thanks to the compassion of my teachers, I received many of these profound teachings from them when I was young. Since then, I have regarded those teachings as wish-fulfilling jewels and have always strived to put them into practice whenever possible.

I do not deny the importance of high teachings. The reason I urge you not to pursue high teachings too early is not that I want to keep you focused solely on preliminary practices or only the Sutrayana teachings, or to deter you from seeking the more profound pith instructions. My real intention is to remind you

that in order to receive high teachings, you must first establish a solid foundation by studying the foundational teachings. Please keep this in mind.

2.1.4.3. The All-determining Quality of Actions

In their countless forms, the pleasure and suffering experienced by every living being—from the highest existence of the god realm to the lowest abyss of the hell realm—arise solely from the positive and negative actions that each being has accumulated in the past.

Of course, we are not promoting fatalism, the philosophical belief that everything that happens is predetermined and cannot be changed. Instead, we refer to the truth that all the happiness and suffering we experience in this life primarily result from our actions in previous lives, with our actions and aspirations in this life serving as supporting conditions. This has been clearly explained in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*.

All living beings, from the summit of existence to the Hell of Ultimate Torment, lead different lives. For example, even among siblings from the same family, some live happy lives, some live miserable lives, and some lead mediocre lives. Their varied experiences, both good and bad, are inseparably connected to the positive and negative actions they have taken in the past.

Take humans, for example: Some people effortlessly possess material abundance, talents, and noble qualities, while others, despite working hard their entire lives, encounter nothing but misery in the end. Why do their experiences differ so greatly? This disparity arises from their actions in previous lives. It is stated in the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*:

The pleasure and suffering of all beings,
The Buddha said, arise from their actions.
The variety of actions
Create the variety of beings,
Leading them to wander through samsara.
Vast and boundless is this net of actions!

Through his nondual wisdom, the Buddha has revealed to us the truth that our happiness and suffering stem from our past actions. Our actions were driven by various thoughts. Some actions were motivated by afflictive thoughts such as greed,

hatred, ignorance, envy, and pride; others were inspired by virtuous thoughts like faith, compassion, wisdom, and renunciation; and some actions were motivated by both afflictive and virtuous thoughts. Different thoughts lead to different actions, which in turn result in the diverse existence of living beings who subsequently have varied experiences.

Some of you are living happy lives, like Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol, who never encountered obstacles in his practice and whose Dharma activities were extensive. However, others seem to be living difficult lives, plagued by poor health, negative moods, and a bad temperament.

I have noticed that some of my class participants often wear a worried expression and frequently voice complaints, saying things like, “What should I do? I’m not in good health. I have a terrible headache and chest pain...”

These individuals are engulfed in misery. They neither eat well nor dress appropriately; they appear disheveled and often stumble over rocks while walking. Unlike their fortunate Dharma friends, they seem immune to success and happiness, which reflects the karmic result of their past actions.

In the endless cycles of life and death, the web of karma is indeed vast. Worldly people believe that satellite communications and the internet are extensive due to their global coverage. In reality, they are not as vast since they can only reach locations where the necessary equipment is available. They cannot extend to every corner of the oceans, outer space, or the realms of all living beings.

However, the net of actions encompasses everything. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

The net of actions that brings forth infinite worlds,
Arises from the seeds of our minds;
It’s difficult to ascertain exactly how actions accumulate in the
mind,
Except for the buddhas.

The net of actions originates from our minds. Different minds have accumulated the karma of various actions, resulting in the diversity of our environments and living beings. These subtle causal conditions are beyond the comprehension of ordinary beings, and even arhats and bodhisattvas cannot grasp the complete picture concerning all causes and conditions. Only the Buddha,

who has completely eliminated afflictive and cognitive obscurations, can truly understand all.

Therefore, regarding matters of causality, please refrain from making blunt assertions and jumping to conclusions, such as stating that “negative actions lead to no consequences, and positive actions do not bring happiness.” Such denials of the principle of cause and effect are indeed foolish.

No matter how much strength, power, wealth, or possessions we may currently have, none of these accompany us after death. The only things we carry with us are the positive and negative actions we have accumulated throughout our lives, which then determine our rebirth in higher or lower realms within the cycle of samsara. The *Sutra of Instructions to the King* states:

When the time arrives for your death, O King,
Neither possession nor friends and family can follow.
Yet, wherever beings come and go,
Their actions follow them like a shadow.

This instruction to the king also applies to everyone, including the head of government and the secretary-general of the United Nations. At the moment of our death, everything will be left behind, including our most cherished body. Only the actions we took will follow us, like our own shadows. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

Family and friends will eventually part, but our karma never
leaves;
Good and bad deeds follow us into future lives at all times.

Many people are born into environments where they are surrounded by family and friends who hold wrong views. Due to this external influence and the impact of their families, they also develop erroneous beliefs. Even if they have accumulated merit from past lives and received blessings from the Buddha, and even if faith and wisdom occasionally arise within them, they can still be easily blinded by the dark clouds of wrong views that envelop them.

Therefore, it is crucial that we constantly discipline ourselves with mindfulness and vigilance. We should not engage in various wrongdoings under the influence of others, nor should we fall under the false impression that “I have never believed

your so-called right views since I was young.” If we succumb to these influences, we will also be led to lower realms. How truly sad!

The effects of our positive or negative actions may not be immediately evident or identifiable. The consequences won’t manifest as quickly as the bleeding one might experience from a cut. Instead, they are like growing crops: it takes time after the farmer sows seeds for the grain to be ready for harvest. Another analogy is that it takes several years for a student to finally graduate from school and to apply their professional training in real life.

A cause and its effect do not arise in the same lifetime. Sometimes the effect of an action manifests in this life, sometimes in the next, and sometimes tens of thousands of years later. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the effect will eventually arise. We will experience the effects of our actions when the appropriate conditions align, as the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* states:

Beings’ actions will never fade away,
Though a hundred kalpas may pass.
When the right conditions align,
Their fruits will surely ripen.

A similar verse can also be found in the *Ksudrakavastu* section of the *Mula-Sarvastivada Vinaya*.

We must study such important teachings. Otherwise, given the challenging and complex circumstances we face, the light of our right views can easily be obscured by the dark clouds of unfavorable environments, preventing us from seeing the truth.

Since my youth, I have had an innate correct understanding of the principle of cause and effect. Because of this, I have never doubted its validity. However, many people I know, including young Tibetans, are skeptical about this principle.

In fact, their doubt is unfounded. It is akin to a person who knows nothing about farming doubting that a seed will bear fruit if planted. An experienced farmer, however, has no doubt that a seed, unless destroyed by fire or water, will certainly bear fruit when the right conditions are met.

Therefore, it is crucial for today’s youth to study the Dharma, which encompasses ultimate truths. Some individuals place immense importance on grammar, poetry, and performance, devoting significant time and energy to these

pursuits. This is acceptable, as in a broader context, we should have a well-rounded understanding of the five major sciences or the ten sciences in our quest for enlightenment.

On the other hand, our human lives are fleeting, making it impossible for us to fully grasp a wide range of transcendental teachings and worldly knowledge. Consequently, we must prioritize the most essential Dharma teachings that can free us from the cycles of life and death. Otherwise, we will deeply regret not having done so at the moment of our passing.

A government official from a nearby county once had a special connection with the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute. She has been studying the Dharma for years, and her views and practice are commendable. Recently, she insisted on meeting me, expressing that she had some Dharma-related questions to ask. I then scheduled the meeting.

As she passed through the main gate of the Institute on her way here, a deep sense of faith in the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and the Dharma arose within her. That night, she had a dream in which the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche told her, “Now that you have encountered such a great guru and the Dharma, why not engage in diligent study? In the future, even if you wish to study, the Dharma may not be available anymore.” Upon waking, she reflected on this remark, which greatly helped guide the direction of her life.

Each of us may embark on the pursuit of the Dharma for different reasons and opportunities. Regardless, the chance to encounter both the Dharma and qualified teachers is far more precious than any worldly achievement. Many people believe that stumbling upon a good business opportunity, a pleasant colleague, or a great enterprise to work for is a stroke of luck. However, I believe that encountering the Dharma is the greatest fortune because it can bring immense benefits to this life and future lives. Without a good start in this life characterized by virtuous actions and the abandonment of negativity, driven by past actions, it remains uncertain when we will finally come across the Dharma and liberate ourselves from the cyclical suffering of samsara. Once our karmic consequences manifest, there is no escape. Even if the Buddha himself were to appear, some fixed karma remains irreversible.

The *Vinaya* says:

The inconceivable force of karma, though distant, inevitably
draws one in;

When the karmic consequence comes to fruition, there is no escape regardless of one's attempts to evade it.

So even if you wish to escape the karmic consequence, you surely won't succeed. Eventually, the effects of your actions will ripen upon you.

Jigme Lingpa says the following in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

When the golden garuda soars high in the sky,
Though its shadow may momentarily vanish from sight,
It remains inseparable from its body.
Likewise, when causes and conditions come together,
The effects of actions will inevitably manifest.

When a bird takes off and soars high into the sky, its shadow seems to disappear. However, this does not mean that the shadow ceases to exist. Wherever the bird eventually lands, its shadow reappears, just as dark and distinct as before. Similarly, although our past actions, whether good or bad, may be invisible for now, they are bound to return to us eventually. Consequently, our past good actions will bring us happiness, while our bad actions will lead to suffering.

The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* contains a verse that uses the simile of a bird to illustrate the karmic effect:

It is like a bird tied with a rope;
No matter how far it flies, the bird will be pulled back.
Sentient beings are bound by the rope of karma,
Thus, their situation is the same (as that of the bird).

Consequently, the ropes of positive and negative actions have tightly bound us, and no one can escape their effects. Even if the karmic effects have not yet ripened, it is only a matter of time unless we have attained enlightenment, as stated in Master Yongjia's *Song of Realization*:

When the true nature of reality is realized,
There is neither (the self of) person nor phenomena;
The actions leading to hell are purified in an instant.

Enlightenment burns all karmic seeds, alleviating or even removing karmic

effects. However, living beings who have not attained enlightenment cannot escape the bonds of karma.

Many relevant stories on this topic exist in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as in other schools of Buddhism. One such story is found in the *Record of Pointing to the Moon* in the *Supplement to the Buddhist Canon*:

Once, there was a Dharma master named Wen Tonghui who, in his youth, served as a novice monk at Baiyun Temple in Kaifeng City, Henan Province. During that time, his responsibilities included caring for the temple's basin. One day, a fish vendor washed his hands in the basin, which greatly upset Wen Tonghui. This led to a dispute between the two, and unfortunately, Wen Tonghui accidentally killed the vendor.

Due to this incident, Wen Tonghui fled to avoid punishment. He sought refuge at Zongchi Temple, located in Huazhou, Shanxi Province. He resided there for twenty years, diligently practicing the Dharma, until he attained enlightenment. Eventually, Wen Tonghui became the abbot of the temple.

One day, Wen Tonghui suddenly told his disciples, "Witness me resolving a case from twenty years ago." The sangha asked for more information, and Wen Tonghui replied, "You'll find out at noon." He then sat in the lotus posture, waiting.

Around noon, a soldier entered the temple. Upon seeing Wen Tonghui, the soldier inexplicably became angry and drew his bow, aiming to shoot the Dharma master.

Wen Tonghui placed his palms together and said, "I have been expecting you for quite some time."

Surprised, the soldier asked, "We don't know each other, but why did I get angry when I saw you, and why did I want to kill you?"

Wen Tonghui answered, "You have already been reborn into this life, so of course you don't remember your past life. I have not been reborn yet, so I do remember. If one owes money, one should pay it back; if one owes a life, one should repay it with one's own life. So, please kill me right away."

Then the Dharma master told the soldier what had happened between them in the past.

After listening, the soldier had a moment of realization and suddenly exclaimed: "Revenge leads to more revenge; when will it ever end?"

“The entanglement has stretched across many lifetimes; how can it be mere coincidence?

“It is better to seek a resolution with the master.

Now I shall head straight to the Land of the West.”

Having said that, the soldier passed away while standing, with the bow and arrows in his hands.

Wen Tonghui rose from his seat and requested the four essential items of the study: a calligraphy brush, ink, paper, and an ink stone. He then wrote a verse that read:

I have wandered for thirty-three years,
And changed my identities a few times;
Who would have thought that the person I once killed
Chose not to seek vengeance against me.

He then set down his brush and entered parinirvana while seated.

From this story, we can see that our karma follows us like our own shadows, and this is indeed true. Some individuals have never harmed others in this lifetime, yet they are often falsely accused and insulted without justification. This is the karmic result of their past actions. As they carry unresolved karmic debts from previous lives, they must simply endure the consequences in this life.

At the relative level, the principle of cause and effect is undeniable. So, how could this not apply to ordinary individuals like us, when even buddhas and arhats, who have completely freed themselves from all karmic and emotional defilements, still experience the consequences of their past actions?

A truly wise person will not arbitrarily act against the principle of cause and effect, just as a person who understands the law will not carelessly take a life. In contrast, those who know nothing of this principle often boast and believe they are exempt from it, engaging in wrongful acts such as smoking, drinking, and killing. Ultimately, they will face severe karmic consequences.

Here is a story recorded in both the *Ekottara Agama* and the *Dhammapada*:

One day, Virudhaka, the king of Sravasti, marched with a large army to invade Kapilavastu, the homeland of the Sakya clan.¹⁵ On two previous occasions, the king

¹⁵ The Buddha's clan lived on the borders of present-day India and Nepal.

had sent his forces, but the Buddha had managed to convince him to withdraw. This time, however, the Buddha declared, “The past karma of the Sakya clan has now come to fruition, and they must face the consequences.” In the end, King Virudhaka’s troops mercilessly slaughtered eighty thousand members¹⁶ of the Sakya clan. At that very moment, the Buddha was overcome with a severe headache, the pain so intense that it felt as though Mount Meru itself was pressing down upon his head.

When his disciples inquired about the reason for this, the Buddha explained:

“Many lifetimes ago, those Sakyas were fishermen¹⁷ who made their living by killing and consuming countless fish. On one occasion, they captured two large fish but chose not to kill them immediately, instead leaving them tied to a pole. As the two fish struggled in pain, stranded out of water, they thought, ‘These men are harming us even though we have done nothing to them. May the time come when we can harm them in return, without them having caused us any harm.’

“The effect of the thoughts of the two large fish was their rebirth as King Virudhaka and his minister Matropakara, while the rest of the fish killed by the fishermen were reborn as their soldiers. These forces have now massacred the Sakyas.

“At that time, I was the child of one of those fishermen. When I saw the two fish tied up and writhing in unbearable pain as they dried, I laughed. The effect of that action is the headache I suffer today. However, if I had not cultivated the virtues I now possess, I too would have been killed by Virudhaka’s troops.”

Therefore, we must not rejoice in the actions of others that result in killing. Even the Buddha himself had to experience the karmic effect of rejoicing in the killing of the fish in his previous life, let alone we ordinary beings.

Why do many practitioners often say, “I have heavy karmic debts?” It’s because, since beginningless time, we must have committed all kinds of wrongdoings, including killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, holding wrong views, wishing harm on others, and the like. Not to mention our negative actions in previous lives, there are numerous wrongdoings from this life that we can remember, from our

¹⁶ This number varies across different sutras.

¹⁷ Khenpo Sodargye added, “Fishermen and butchers are ‘candidates’ to become future beings in hell. These individuals often appear more miserable than the animals they capture and slaughter because, once those animals are killed, their lives and sufferings come to an end. However, the people who killed them will, in future lives, have to repay with their own lives repeatedly for the lives they have taken, and the suffering they will endure will last a very long time.”

birth until now. If we don't confess and purify them now, it may be too late for us to do so in the future.

The *Sutra of the Ten Causes* contains several other stories about the karmic effects the Buddha experienced.

The story of Sundarī slandering the Buddha: Prostitute Sundarī was deeply unhappy with the Buddha when she noticed that many people, including her lovers and patrons, were following him and becoming ordained as monks. At that time, Buddhism was flourishing more than any other religion. Some tirthikas, seeking to destroy Buddhism, approached Sundarī and asked her to pretend to be pregnant and spread rumors that her unborn child belonged to the Buddha.

The rumors eventually reached the king, who sent someone to investigate. Fearing their conspiracy would be uncovered, the tirthikas murdered Sundarī. However, the king still managed to uncover the truth.

The sangha questioned why the Buddha had to endure this, and he explained that it was the karmic consequence of his past actions. In one of his previous lives, the Buddha had killed a prostitute and placed her body in the room of a pratyekabuddha, almost leading to the death penalty for the pratyekabuddha. As a result, even after attaining Buddhahood, the Buddha himself was slandered.

The story of the Buddha eating grain for horses: Once, for ninety days, the Buddha had to live on grain intended for horses, along with five hundred arhats. Why was this? During the time of Buddha Vipassī, a brahmin who was one of Buddha Shakyamuni's past lives, noticed a sick monk accepting food offerings and became very jealous. The brahmin said, "The bald-headed monk should eat grain for horses instead of gourmet food." The five hundred disciples of the brahmin agreed and echoed the same sentiment.

As a result, after the Buddha and his five hundred arhats attained realization, they still had to experience the karmic effect of their statements against the sick monk¹⁸.

The story of Chinchā framing the Buddha: Chinchā, the daughter of a brahmin, tied a bowl to her belly and claimed to be pregnant with the Buddha. She announced that she would give birth soon and asked the Buddha for some butter to raise the baby.

¹⁸ The sick monk was one of the previous incarnations of Bodhisattva Maitreya.

The god Indra had enough of Chinchā's defamation of the Buddha, so he transformed into a rat, got into her clothes, gnawed the rope, and suddenly the bowl fell to the ground. When the crowd saw this, they cheered loudly, saying, "Rejoice! Your baby has been born."

Regarding the cause of this incident, the Buddha stated that during the time of Buddha All-Conquering, there were two monks—one named Invincible and the other named Always Joyful—who frequently received offerings from a female patron named Illusory. Invincible had freed himself from afflictive thoughts, so his offerings were plentiful, whereas Always Joyful was still consumed by his afflictions, resulting in meager offerings.

Always Joyful became envious and slandered Invincible by claiming that he had an affair with Illusory. Monk Always Joyful was Buddha Shakyamuni in a past life, and Illusory was Chinchā. Due to this past action, the Buddha was slandered by others, even after attaining Buddhahood.

As such, sometimes we may harbor no animosity toward others, yet we are falsely accused and slandered, seemingly without reason. This is undoubtedly the consequence of our past actions. Buddhists should have a deep understanding of the principle of cause and effect.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche emphasized the importance of the principle of cause and effect to us, his disciples. Whenever he imparted this teaching, we would remember it for a long time and contemplate it deeply. Consequently, whatever circumstances we encounter in life, whether favorable or unfavorable, we naturally attribute them to the karmic outcomes of our past actions.

The story of the Buddha's foot being injured by a splinter: On another occasion, the Buddha suffered an injury to his foot from an acacia splinter—an effect of having killed the Black Spearman in a past life when he was a bodhisattva.

According to an account in another sutra, the act of killing was not directed toward the Black Spearman but toward a merchant. Here is the story:

Many kalpas ago, there were two merchants, each accompanied by five hundred men, who set sail in search of treasures. The island they arrived at was filled with abundant provisions. Upon arrival, one merchant decided to stay, while the other wished to return home. A goddess then appeared in the air and warned

them, “You should not linger here for too long, as the island will be submerged in water within seven days.”

A demoness, who desired to end everyone’s life on the island, refuted the goddess’s warning, stating, “This place is filled with happiness and abundance. How could it possibly be flooded? What the goddess just said is nothing more than a falsehood. You should not believe it.”

The merchant who wanted to return home followed the goddess’s advice, directing his men to prepare the boat and refrain from coveting anything on the island. After seven days, a flood indeed arrived. By the time the island was submerged, the merchant and his men had already boarded the boat.

The merchant who wished to remain did not prepare for the flood, so he engaged in a fight with the other merchant over the boat. In the course of the struggle, he was killed by the merchant on the boat, who was one of the past lives of Buddha Shakyamuni.

As a result, the merchant who committed the act of killing had to endure the karmic consequences for numerous lifetimes. Despite the Buddha having attained the vajra body, his foot was still injured by a splinter from an acacia tree.

The acacia splinter had been following the Buddha from the human realm to the god realm. Wherever the Buddha went, the splinter followed. Eventually, the Buddha dismissed his sangha, extended his right foot, and allowed the splinter to pass through it. As the Buddha’s foot bled, Ananda entered the room. Upon seeing the wound on the Buddha’s foot, Ananda fainted and collapsed to the ground.

Of course, the Buddha has attained full enlightenment, which exempts him from karmic retribution. Thus, some scriptures state that the Buddha experiencing the residual karmic effect is merely a provisional teaching. Nevertheless, we do not discuss this issue here, as it may be beyond the comprehension of our ordinary minds.

According to Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha did indeed appear sick at times.

Here is the **story of the Buddha experiencing joint pain.**

Once, the Buddha endured excruciating pain in one of his joints. This suffering stemmed from a past action when he worked as a doctor and intentionally prescribed the wrong medicine to a patient who refused to pay for his previous treatment. Tragically, the patient lost his life due to the incorrect medicine.

Therefore, we must understand that our actions will definitely yield corresponding karmic results. The *Ekottara Agama* states:

Doing bad or good,
The consequence will correspond to the action;
It's like sowing grains,
The harvest will correspond to the seed.

If you sow a pea, it will only yield peas, not wheat or corn. Similarly, your positive actions won't lead to pain, and your negative actions won't result in happiness.

Thus, it is crucial for everyone to firmly believe in the principle of cause and effect. It is not enough to merely discuss it; we must truly understand it and apply it in our daily lives. This way, we will know what to do and what to avoid. Currently, our society is filled with misguided views and values, and many individuals engage in wrongful actions driven by selfish motives. Their actions will inevitably lead to negative consequences in the future, which is terrifying. Therefore, we must always remain vigilant regarding our actions and the karmic effects they may produce.



Lesson 69

“Maudgalyayana, of all the Buddha’s Shravaka disciples ...
Can set alight a mountain of hay.” [page 120–123]

Before today’s teaching, I want to emphasize two points:

First, every time you attend a Dharma class, please remember to generate bodhicitta, thinking, “I listen to this class for the sake of benefiting all sentient beings.” This mindset is crucial, as it represents the first of the three supreme methods.

Second, make sure to maintain a pure perception. This is not mere lip service; rather, you should regard the class setting—whether it is the Dharma hall, a layperson’s home, or other meditation centers—as the Pure Land of Padmasambhava, Avalokiteshvara, or Amitabha, and see your Dharma friends as Mahayanists with supreme affinity, bodhisattvas, or dakas and dakinis. Avoid thinking, “The person next to me is a bad person, and that person is not good either,” as if everyone else is merely ordinary while you are somehow exceptional. Instead, view the teacher as the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, Padmasambhava, and others. Ultimately, from the perspective of primordial purity, all phenomena are inherently pure; thus, we are not merely forcing ourselves to see impurity as purity.

Please make an effort to maintain this pure perception. If you cannot consistently uphold these five aspects of pure perception, at the very least, strive to do so throughout the class. By doing this, the teachings in that class will internalize within you, and the blessings you receive will be significantly different from when

you do not have pure perception. This is a profound pith instruction of Vajrayana Buddhism. Some dedicated practitioners can derive immense benefit from participating in just one class. Remember not to forget the two points mentioned above when listening to teachings.

Now, let's continue with the section on "the all-determining quality of actions." Yesterday, we studied the fact that even the Buddha had to experience karmic results. Today, we will discuss cases of arhats.

Maudgalyayana possessed incredible miraculous powers among all the Buddha's Shravaka disciples. However, despite these powers, he was killed by the Parivrajikas due to the effects of his past actions. Here's how it happened:

Sariputra, another highly respected disciple, and Maudgalyayana often traveled to different realms, such as hell or the realm of the pretas, to benefit the beings suffering there.

One day, they went to the Hell of Ultimate Torment, where countless beings were enduring the agony of burning. The two masters used their miraculous powers to bring rain to hell, providing relief to the tormented beings.

On another occasion, while visiting a hell, they encountered a tirthika teacher named Purnakasyapa, who had been reborn there due to his teachings of wrong views and was undergoing a multitude of torments, including the sensation of five hundred iron plows furrowing his tongue.

Purnakasyapa said to them, "Noble masters, when you return to the human realm, please tell my former disciples that their teacher, Purnakasyapa, has been reborn in hell. Please convey my message to them that the path of the Parivrajikas is not the right path. The true path of virtue is found in the teachings of the Sakya Buddha. Our path is a wrong one; they should abandon it and begin following Buddha Shakyamuni. Most importantly, tell them that every time they make offerings at the shrine they built for my bones, it causes molten metal to rain down on me. I beg you, please ask them to stop making those offerings."

When Sariputra and Maudgalyayana returned to the human realm, they encountered the tirthika disciples on their way back. The tirthikas resented them because the two had once been non-Buddhists, but after taking refuge in Buddhism, they inspired many people with their spiritual virtues, significantly undermining the reputation of the tirthikas' religions. Consequently, the tirthika

disciples said among themselves, “If the two monks praise our religion, we’ll do nothing; otherwise, we’ll beat them severely.”

Sariputra arrived first and attempted to convey their teacher’s message to the tirthika disciples. However, due to the absence of the necessary karmic conditions, the tirthikas paid no attention to what he said. The tirthika disciples asked Sariputra, “Do Parivrajikas possess virtuous deeds similar to those of Śramaṇas¹⁹ in Buddhism?” Sariputra responded with a verse:

Parivrajikas’ disciples perform no virtuous deeds of Śramaṇas,
Shakyamuni’s sangha perform virtuous deeds of Śramaṇas;
If Arhats have desires,
Then there are no ignorant ordinary people.

Due to their lack of karmic conditions accumulated from previous lives, the tirthika disciples failed to grasp Sariputra’s message. They even believed he was praising their religion, so they didn’t bother him and just let him go.

[As you can see, any conflict or fight arising from interpersonal communication is linked to past actions.]

When Maudgalyayana arrived, he asked Sariputra, “Did you deliver Purnakasyapa’s message to the tirthikas?”

Sariputra replied, “Yes, but they didn’t respond.”

Maudgalyayana said, “If they didn’t understand you, I’ll go and explain it to them myself.” Then he went to tell them what Purnakasyapa had said.

Maudgalyayana told them that their religious path was misguided and that their teacher was suffering in hell. He mentioned that he had witnessed Purnakasyapa’s torment himself, which was why he was delivering their teacher’s message.

However, the tirthikas were furious. They exclaimed, “He is not only insulting us; he is also disrespecting our teacher! Let’s beat him!” They attacked him, relentlessly pummeling him until he was left bruised, broken, and as fragile as shattered reeds.

Maudgalyayana was the best among the Buddha’s disciples in using supernatural powers. Until that moment, not even a combined attack from all the forces of

¹⁹ Śramaṇa means “one who labors, toils, or exerts themselves (for a higher or religious purpose)” or “seeker, one who performs acts of austerity or asceticism.” In this context, it specifically refers to a Buddhist monk.

the three worlds or the strikes from the Parivrajikas could harm a single hair on his head. But at that moment, overwhelmed by the consequences of his past actions, he fell like an ordinary person, covered in bruises and injuries.

“I couldn’t even think about using my magical powers, much less actually use them,” he said. Sariputra then gently wrapped him in his robes and carried him away.

When King Ajatasatru heard the news, he visited Maudgalyayana with his ministers and entourage. The king became furious upon seeing the great master’s wounds and ordered all the tirthikas arrested and burned to death. Maudgalyayana dissuaded the king, explaining that the beating was the karmic result of his own past actions, so it had nothing to do with the tirthikas. The king changed his mind and instead expelled the tirthikas from the country.

The king said to Maudgalyayana, “You possess the greatest miraculous powers among all the Buddha’s disciples, so why were you beaten so severely by those tirthikas?” The great master replied with a verse:

Even after one hundred kalpas,
Being’s actions are never lost;
When the conditions come together,
One must experience the karmic consequences of their own
actions.

The king commanded the country’s skilled doctors to restore the great master’s health within a week. Should they fail, their positions and salaries would be forfeited. The king also instructed his ministers to diligently attend to the master, then returned to his palace.

Then, Maudgalyayana told Sariputra that he would soon enter parinirvana. Sariputra cried out, “We used to study the tirthikas’ religions and later took ordination as Buddhist monks together. We studied the Dharma together and both attained Arhathood. If you pass into nirvana, I will follow you.”

The arhat monk Assaji, who had inspired Maudgalyayana to pursue the Dharma, heard about the incident and paid a visit to Maudgalyayana. Unlike most of us who would bring a bouquet of flowers to visit a patient, Assaji brought nothing—neither flowers nor cash. Instead, he recited two verses:

Neither on a mountain nor in the sea,
Neither anywhere nor in the sky,
There isn't a place that can escape the effect of past actions,
Which is like our own shadow following us everywhere,
And stays nowhere else.
Negative and positive actions never disappear,
This is said by the supreme Sublime One.

Then, Assaji left. For those who've attained a certain state of realization, when visiting a vajra friend in the hospital, you may also recite two verses and then leave—this is a Buddhist way (*the audience laughs*).

Now let's talk about those doctors. They were worried they could not meet the king's request within seven days, so they pleaded with Maudgalyayana, "Dear venerable master, please don't die! Otherwise, the king will deprive us of our positions and salaries!" Maudgalyayana agreed to help, and he asked the doctors to send a message to the king, saying he would go ask for alms in the city seven days later. Indeed, a week later, Maudgalyayana went to the city, begged for alms here and there, and eventually arrived at the entrance of the palace. The king was very pleased, so he invited Maudgalyayana in and presented offerings to the great master.

At this time, Sariputra entered a meditative state to contemplate why Maudgalyayana went asking for alms despite his severe injuries. He discovered that Maudgalyayana intended to pass into parinirvana. Sariputra then approached the Buddha, thinking, "Even hearing about my friend's death would be too painful! How could I bear to watch it happen? Now that he is about to enter parinirvana, I no longer wish to remain in this world either. I will enter parinirvana first."

The Buddha knew what Sariputra was thinking about, so he asked him twice if he truly wished to proceed. Sariputra remained resolute, so the Buddha replied, "All things are impermanent. They are subject to birth and cessation. Let it be!"

Then Sariputra passed away into parinirvana along with eighty thousand arhats. Immediately afterward, Maudgalyayana returned to his hometown, delivered teachings, and then passed beyond suffering with seventy-seven thousand arhats.

This story is not exclusive to Tibetan Buddhism; it is also recorded in the

Ksudrakavastu section of *The Mulasaryastivada Vinaya*, a scripture of Pre-sectarian Buddhism.

According to this sutra, when the sangha witnessed Maudgalyayana passing away into parinirvana after being beaten by tirthikas, they went to ask the Buddha about the cause. The Buddha replied, “Once upon a time, a brahmin’s son married a woman who did not get along well with his mother. The son sided with his wife and became particularly unhappy with his mother. One day, when the wife complained about her mother-in-law to the brahmin’s son, he became angry and said, ‘If only a strong man could beat my mother, leaving her as fragile as shattered reeds!’

As a result, over the next five hundred lifetimes, he himself was repeatedly beaten to be as fragile as shattered reeds. Even after becoming the arhat with the most supernatural powers, he still had to endure the remaining karmic consequences.

As you can see, parents are extremely powerful objects of any action. Not to mention a real act of violence against them, even generating an evil thought or speaking ill of them can lead to terrible karmic results. According to some Buddhist scriptures, Maudgalyayana was a brahmin’s son who gave rise to evil thoughts toward his father and even spoke harsh words to him in one of his previous lives. Other scriptures also state that Maudgalyayana thought of and spoke harsh words to both his parents, leading to dire karmic effects.

I’ve noticed that the *Ksudrakavastu* section of *The Mulasaryastivada Vinaya* mentions that this ill thought was directed toward Maudgalyayana’s mother in a past lifetime. When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche introduced this story, he also mentioned that the lack of respect toward Maudgalyayana’s previous mother resulted in this karmic consequence.

Regardless, we should all pay attention to this story. Why? Because within this lifetime, not to mention our numerous previous lives, we may have harbored negative thoughts about our parents. Even worse, some of us may have physically abused our parents. If this is the case, when will we finally be free from the karmic consequences of such actions? If we do not sincerely repent for our wrongdoings now, from the depths of our hearts, the karmic results will be severe. A person may not take this seriously if they do not believe in the principle of cause and effect. But whether they believe it or not, the principle still operates as it does. Once we

commit negative actions, we will have no choice but to experience the terrible karmic effects.

The *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings* says:

Fools have no right views,
And do not discern sins from merits;
Revolving in the cycles of the three worlds,
They possess nothing but suffering.

Adhering to the principle of cause and effect is crucial in the pursuit of our Dharma studies. Why do I often emphasize, “It is not your priority to immediately pursue the highest teachings. You should first establish a solid foundation for your practice, as this is of utmost importance”? If you have laid a solid foundation through preliminary practices, your practice will remain steady even after eight or ten years, or even twenty to thirty years. Conversely, you may receive the highest teaching or practice from a pith instruction within a day or two, or engage in daily debates to seemingly enhance your wisdom, but in the long run, it will be challenging to achieve any tangible progress in your Dharma practice.

Therefore, we should begin by establishing a solid foundation through the preliminary practices, particularly through the practice of the principle of cause and effect. It is essential to contemplate this Buddhist story repeatedly. Although it may appear to be a tale from ancient times, if you genuinely embrace the principle of cause and effect, you will recognize the immense merit in performing good deeds for your parents, guru, and sangha. Conversely, if you are disrespectful, unfilial, slanderous, or harmful toward them, and have not purified these negative actions, the corresponding karmic effects will surely manifest.

Here is another story:

Once, in Kashmir, there was a monk named Ravati who had many disciples. He possessed miraculous powers and could see things that others couldn't. One day, he was in a thick forest dyeing his robes with saffron. Nearby, a man was searching for his lost calf. He noticed smoke rising from the forest and went to investigate.

When he found the monk tending to a fire, he asked, “What are you doing?”

The monk replied, “I’m dyeing my robes.”

Curious, the man lifted the lid of the dye pot and looked inside. “It’s meat!”

he exclaimed. To his surprise, when the monk looked, he also saw meat in the pot instead of dye.

[The monk didn't steal the calf, but when the karmic effect ripened, he could do nothing about it.]

The man accused the monk of stealing his calf and took him to the king, saying, "Your Majesty, this monk took my calf. Please punish him." The king then ordered the monk, Ravati, to be thrown into a pit.

A few days later, the man's cow found her missing calf on her own. Realizing his mistake, the man returned to the king and said, "Your Majesty, the monk didn't steal my calf after all. Please let him go."

But the king became busy and forgot to free Ravati. For six months, nothing was done.

Then one day, a group of the monk's disciples, who had gained miraculous powers, flew through the air and landed in front of the king. They said, "Ravati is a good and innocent monk. Please release him."

The king went to free the monk, but when he saw how weak and sick Ravati looked, he felt really guilty.

"I wanted to come earlier, but I waited too long," the king said. "I've done something very wrong!"

The monk replied, "It's okay. No harm was done. This is just the effect of my own past actions."

The king asked, "What actions?"

The monk explained, "In a past life, I was a thief. Once, I stole a calf. When the owner chased me, I ran away and left the calf near a pratyekabuddha who was meditating in the forest. The owner caught the pratyekabuddha instead and threw him into a pit for six days. As the fully matured effect of my action, I've suffered in many lifetimes in the lower realms. The suffering I just experienced in this life was the last of that karmic effect."

I found a similar story in the *Sutra of the Miscellaneous Treasures* of Chinese Buddhism. The storyline is essentially identical, although the timeframe varies slightly. What is the story?

There was once an arhat named Ravati, who had five hundred disciples. One

day, while he was dyeing his monk's robe, a man nearby was searching for his lost calf. When the man lifted the lid off the cauldron of dye, he found cowhide instead of the monk's robe, beef instead of dyeing herbs, and blood instead of dyeing liquid.

The man took the monk to the king, who threw him into a prison pit. For twelve years, the monk was forced to perform menial tasks such as feeding horses and cleaning manure.

Ravati's disciples noticed that their guru was missing, so they attempted to use their miraculous powers to locate him, but to no avail. It was not until twelve years later, when Ravati's karmic retribution was finally exhausted, that one of his disciples discovered he was in the king's prison. The disciple hurried to the palace and asked the king to release Ravati.

The king sent someone to check on Ravati in prison. However, there was no sign of a monk, only a disheveled man with long hair and a beard. The king relayed this information to the disciple, who then suggested, "Sire, it would be best to announce that all the monks are set free." The king agreed and issued the decree. By that time, Ravati had exhausted the effects of his karma, causing his hair and beard to fall out naturally. He was wearing a monk's robe and ascended into the sky, displaying eighteen different forms of clairvoyance and extraordinary abilities.

The king was in great awe. He did full prostrations before Ravati and began to confess. Ravati said, "Sire, you did nothing wrong. This was the karmic effect of my own actions."

The king asked for details, and Ravati explained, "In a past life, I lost a calf. While searching for it in a forest, I encountered a pratyekabuddha, and for a day and a night, I accused him of stealing my calf. Because of this, I have endured numerous lives of suffering in the lower realms. Now that I have attained Arhathood, I still have to experience the karmic effect."

Therefore, we must be careful about our actions and their corresponding effects. The stories of sublime beings are shared here to remind us that even the great arhats, bodhisattvas, and the Buddha appear to experience karmic effects, let alone we ordinary beings.

Someone might argue, "Appearances do not inherently exist." However, samsara is a form of appearance, feeling hungry is also a form of appearance, and experiencing suffering is likewise a form of appearance. In the presence of these appearances, the principle of cause and effect operates without question.

Some individuals often say, “All phenomena are empty, so it is acceptable to commit wrongdoings!” Such an argument is outrageous. While the ultimate nature of all phenomena is emptiness, can we, as ordinary beings whose level of realization does not match that of Maudgalyayana, transcend the principle of cause and effect? Even Maudgalyayana himself could not escape the karmic consequences of his actions. Thus, we are all subject to the principle of cause and effect.

During my visits to cities, I frequently encounter Buddhists blindly praising their gurus. They say to the gurus, “Ah! It must be acceptable if you commit wrongdoings. When you consume meat, you must be benefiting living beings; when you kill animals, you must be liberating them. I have complete faith in you!”

However, it is not because of your beliefs that the gurus’ misdeeds can surpass the samsaric cycle. Therefore, each of us must be cautious about our actions. If we are not enlightened sublime beings and engage carelessly in wrongdoings such as consuming meat, drinking alcohol, smoking, killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, and lying, ultimately, we will face the consequences we deserve. Aside from experiencing our karmic retribution, there is no other outcome.

A wise person is deeply concerned about the karmic effects of negative actions, while a fool remains indifferent; this distinction separates the wise from the foolish. The *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings* states:

The foolish take pleasure in committing wrongdoings.
The wise are always cautious;
With true wisdom,
They can perceive the perils and challenges that come with
wrongdoings.

It is akin to how a wise person understands that they must avoid committing a crime; otherwise, they risk imprisonment. Unfortunately, many people today are so ignorant that they fail to recognize that wrongdoings lead to suffering. Due to their superficial understanding of the principle of cause and effect, some even knowingly engage in wrongful acts, resulting in dire consequences. It is essential to have conviction in the principle of cause and effect.

Now let’s share the story of the son of Surabhibhadra, an Indian king:

Nagarjuna, a great bodhisattva, brought many scriptures of the Prajnaparamita to the human realm from the naga’s palace and other realms, and he widely

propagated the teachings among humans. This enraged the Mara King. In an attempt to harm Nagarjuna, the Mara King entered the womb of Surabhibhadra's wife and was born as the prince named Kumara Shaktiman.

One day, Kumara Shaktiman's mother gifted him a beautiful, seamless silken robe. Rather than wear it immediately, the prince said, "I'll wear this on the day I inherit the kingdom and become king."

His mother replied, "You'll never become king. For that to happen, your father, the king, would have to die. But your father and Nagarjuna share the same life force. As long as Nagarjuna lives, your father cannot die. And since Nagarjuna has power over his own lifespan, your father will never die. That's why many of your older brothers have already passed away without ever becoming king."

The prince asked, "What can I do, then?"

His mother said, "Go to Nagarjuna and ask him for his head. He will agree because he is a bodhisattva, a being of great compassion. Other than this, I see no other way."

So, the prince went to Nagarjuna and asked for his head.

Nagarjuna thought, "In his past lives, Buddha Shakyamuni offered his head to others countless times. I should follow in the footsteps of the Buddha. To subdue the Mara King, benefit future beings, and inspire Mahayana Buddhists, I should agree to make this offering."

Then, Nagarjuna said to the prince, "Go ahead, cut it off and take it." The prince picked up a sword and swung it at Nagarjuna's neck, but it was like slicing through air—nothing happened.

Nagarjuna explained, "Weapons can't hurt me because, five hundred lifetimes ago, I completely purified myself of all the fully maturing effects of having used weapons. However, once, while cutting kusa grass, I accidentally killed an insect. The full effect of that action has not ended yet. So, if you use a blade of kusa grass, you can cut off my head."

Then, the prince pulled a blade of kusa grass and used it to sever Nagarjuna's head, which fell to the ground.

At that moment, his blood turned into milk, and Nagarjuna entered nirvana, saying:

Now I am leaving for the Land of Great Bliss;
In the future, I will return to this very body.²⁰

The prince was afraid that Nagarjuna's head and body would merge again, so he carried the head far away. On the way, an ogress snatched the head from him.

Later, because Nagarjuna had obtained the elixir of immortality, neither his head nor his body decayed, and eventually, the two parts turned into two mountains.

In the *Treasury of Lives: Biographies of Himalayan Religious Masters*, Taranatha of the Jonang School mentioned that the two mountains used to be four leagues apart and are gradually coming closer together each year. Now they are only one league apart. Taranatha's guru had seen the two mountains.

Later, shrines were built on the two mountains to commemorate Nagarjuna. When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and I visited southern India, we passed through this area, where there was a huge reservoir, the two sides of the reservoir pointed toward two mountains —Nagarjuna's head and body, respectively. We were short on time, so we didn't approach, merely observing the mountains from afar.

(I wonder how many people from Larung Gar have visited India. Many pilgrims go to the Vajra Seat at Bodhgaya and then return.)

Therefore, no matter what you face in life—such as someone striking you on the head with a stone and causing severe bleeding—it must be connected to your past actions.

Recently, a khenpo from Larung Gar visited India. On his way back, his car overturned, nearly killing him. Believing he was going to die, he repeatedly urged others, "Please do not blame the driver. If I die, it has nothing to do with him!"

This is truly the Buddhist way. If he were an ordinary person, he might have blamed the driver for poor driving.

Especially in some less-developed areas, negative and harmful behaviors and traditions abound. For example, even if a person has only a minor scratch, they will try their hardest to blame the driver. As Mahayanists, we should refrain from

²⁰ Legend has it that the head and body of Nagarjuna transformed into two massive stones, originally positioned a certain distance apart. Over the centuries, these stones at Nagarjuna-konda in South India have been slowly converging. The prophecy holds that Nagarjuna will be resurrected when these two stones finally merge.

blaming others when we are hurt. Even if someone intentionally cuts us with a knife or strikes us with a club, we should recognize it as our own fault and think, “I must have done something to you in the past. It’s fine. Thank you for helping me exhaust my karmic effects!”

In fact, whether one is a sublime being or an ordinary person, they will eventually have to experience karmic effects. Those past actions will not simply vanish without reason. Therefore, we should remember this when we encounter similar situations.

However, some people disregard the principle of cause and effect. Even when it’s nobody’s fault but their own, they will still accuse others, revealing their lack of understanding of the principle of cause and effect. *The Sutra of the Cause of Creation Taught by the Buddha* states:

Worldly people’s actions,
Be they positive or negative,
Will eventually ripen on themselves,
And they will never perish or disappear.

So, when we experience karmic results, we shouldn’t blame others. Instead, we should acknowledge our own faults.

If such extraordinary individuals still face the effects of their past actions, what chance do we ordinary beings have to break free from the endless cycle of suffering? We have been accumulating negative actions since time without beginning, wandering through the realms of samsara. If we continue to accumulate negative actions, even escaping the lower realms will be a challenge, let alone breaking free from samsara.

This is similar to the fact that when a farmer plants a seed, whether bitter or sweet, it will eventually yield its corresponding fruit. Likewise, when we perform an action, whether helping or harming someone, the consequence will eventually arise. As stated in the *Samyukta Agama*:

It’s like when a seed is planted,
The fruits will yield according to what is sown;
Now that you are planting the seed of suffering,
You will surely experience the suffering later.

Therefore, positive and negative actions are the causes of happiness and suffering. However, many people are so ignorant that they don't know this at all. What a pity!

Thus, as practitioners, we must first discern positive and negative actions by listening to and contemplating the Dharma. Then, we should make every effort to avoid even the tiniest wrongdoings and dedicate ourselves to performing good deeds, no matter how insignificant they may seem. For example, we can recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra once, turn a prayer wheel for three minutes, show reverence to a stupa by removing our hat, joining our palms together, prostrating, and circumambulating it once, or reflect on the Buddha's great qualities whenever possible. By engaging in these activities, we will gradually accumulate positive actions little by little, day by day, and eventually have the opportunity to attain realization.

Many millionaires accumulate their wealth starting with modest amounts, placing great importance on even the smallest sums of money. Similarly, practitioners should emphasize even the tiniest actions, while those individuals lacking karmic merit often remain indifferent.

If we do not make the effort with small actions, then each moment of negative action can lead to countless lifetimes in the lower realms. Never underestimate the impact of the smallest wrongdoing, such as speaking ill of others, harming animals, consuming alcohol, or smoking a cigarette, thinking that it cannot cause much harm.

As Shantideva says:

If through the evil action of a single instant
I must spend an aeon in the hell of Unrelenting Pain,
The evils in samsara stored from time without beginning—
No need to say that they will keep me from the states of bliss!²¹

And, as it says in the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*:

Do not take lightly the impact of minor wrongdoings,
Thinking they are harmless and insignificant.
Though a spark of fire may be tiny,

²¹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 4, verse 21.

It can set ablaze a mountain of hay.

Recently, there were massive fires in the Siberian forests of eastern Russia, resulting in nearly two hundred aircraft being reduced to ruins. Yet, the source of the fire must have been quite small. Similarly, the negative actions we commit may seem insignificant at first glance, but they can lead to significant suffering for ourselves.

Therefore, we must be mindful of the karmic effects of our good and bad actions. Some people commit misdeeds out of ignorance that has persisted since beginningless time. At times, their misdeeds stem from a lack of understanding of the principle of cause and effect. On other occasions, they may understand the principle but, due to strong defilements, cannot help but commit wrongdoing. Nevertheless, we must recognize that misdeeds are truly harmful, and we should make every effort to relinquish them.

If you find it difficult to control your actions, at the very least, refrain from acting recklessly. Once you commit a misdeed, you must repent by reciting mantras repeatedly in the presence of your guru and the Three Jewels. A wise person would strive to avoid any misdeed; or, if they have inadvertently committed one, they will do their utmost to purify the action and eliminate its karmic effects so that it does not taint their mindstream.

Overall, the view of the all-determining quality of actions is crucial for us. Many people often say, “This is my karmic result!” or “This is my karma from a previous life.” They are quite right. Everything we encounter, including the strange events that happen to us and our joyful and painful experiences, is certainly related to our past actions.

Once, a great master taught:

The world we live in is a world of karma. Since this life is very short and future lives are very long, we must do good things now for our future lives.

His words carry profound meaning. I invite you to reflect carefully on the following questions: How long have you been living in this world? During your time here, have you taken the principle of cause and effect seriously? How do you plan to live for the rest of your life? You should answer these questions for yourselves.



Lesson 70

“In the same way, even the smallest positive acts ... out of desire, hatred or ignorance, are not permitted for anyone.”
[page 123–125]

Previously, we learned never to underestimate the smallest wrongful deed, as its karmic effects can be severe. We practitioners should examine and discipline ourselves with wisdom. If we inadvertently commit a wrongful act, we are bound to experience the suffering—the corresponding karmic consequence—alone, as no one else can bear that suffering on our behalf.

Let’s continue:

Similarly, even the smallest positive actions can yield significant benefits. Do not dismiss them as too insignificant to matter. Some of our actions may seem minor, such as turning a prayer wheel, holding mala beads, offering a butter lamp or a bouquet of flowers, making a single prostration, or circumambulating a stupa or a Buddha statue. However, these seemingly small positive acts can lead to vast positive consequences.

Unless purified in a timely manner, the effects of both positive and negative actions will inevitably ripen. Individuals who lack an understanding of the principle of cause and effect remain ignorant, regardless of their talents or wealth. Why? Because no one can effectively undermine or challenge this principle with valid reasoning. Even if you do not adhere to Buddhism, it is still advantageous to familiarize yourself with the principle of cause and effect through various means, as it will greatly benefit both your present and future life.

Here is an example:

In a previous life, King Mandhatri lived as a poor man. One day, while carrying a handful of beans on his way to a wedding, he encountered Buddha Ksantisarana, who was traveling to the village. Moved by profound devotion, he threw the beans and offered them to the Buddha. Four beans landed in the Buddha's begging bowl, while two others touched his heart.

The fruition of this act led to his rebirth as a universal emperor ruling the continent of Jambudvīpa. The four beans that fell into the bowl granted him dominion over the four continents for eighty thousand years. One of the two beans that touched the Buddha's heart bestowed upon him sovereignty over the realm of the Four Great Kings for another eighty thousand years, while the second bean allowed him to share equal rule with thirty-seven successive Indras over the Heaven of the Thirty-three.

The stories of King Mandhatri can be found in many sutras, such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the *Dirgha Āgama*, the *Madhyama Āgama*, the *Sūtra on the Great Conflagration*, and *Mandhātāvadāna*. A similar version of the aforementioned story can also be found in the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish*, and here it is:

Once, a brahmin was celebrating his son's wedding with a fistful of beans in his hand, which he intended to throw to the bride. At that moment, he happened to encounter the Buddha Purna and felt an intense devotion to the Buddha. Consequently, the brahmin threw his beans to the Buddha instead. Four beans fell into the Buddha's begging bowl, and one touched his crown.

As a result, the brahmin was blessed with countless merits in his future lives. Because of the four beans that fell into the bowl, he reigned over the four continents. Due to the bean that touched the Buddha's crown, he enjoyed happiness in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings and the Heaven of the Thirty-three.

The story told in the *Mandhātāvadāna* is somewhat different:

Once, a merchant's son encountered Buddha Vipasyin on the street and threw beans to the Buddha. Four beans fell into the Buddha's begging bowl, and one bean touched the bowl, made a noise, and then fell to the ground. Because of the four beans that fell into the bowl, he reigned over the four continents.

Due to the bean that touched the bowl, made a noise, and fell to the ground, he was reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-three. Had the bean fallen into the bowl,

he would have become the king of the god realm. However, because the bean fell to the ground, he could only reign over the human realm instead of the god realm.

After offering the beans to the Buddha, the merchant's son developed great devotion and vowed in the presence of Buddha Purna:

With this vast cause of generosity,
May I attain the primordial wisdom of the Buddha,
Swiftly transcend the stream of life and death,
And liberate all beings who have not yet been liberated by the
past buddhas.

King Mandhatri, a previous incarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni, was this merchant's son in a past life.

Therefore, whenever you, as a monastic or a layperson, have a little money or possessions, you should make generous offerings to a sangha, a monastery, a great master, or a true practitioner, with joy and respect. Remember that even a small offering can lead to great benefit.

King Ashoka's daughter, until she was five years old, kept her right hand clenched into a fist. It turned out that a gold coin was nestled in the princess's palm, and whenever the coin was taken away, a new one would appear. Why was this happening?

The princess, in a past life, was a maid in King Ashoka's palace. The maid rejoiced in the king's acts of charity and his offerings, which amassed vast merit. She felt sad that she had no money to make offerings herself.

Once, while sweeping the floor, she found a copper coin. Seizing the opportunity, she happily offered the coin to the sangha. Because of this, she was reborn as a princess and enjoyed endless wealth in her next life.

Therefore, we shouldn't disparage others' small positive acts; instead, we should sincerely rejoice in them. Those who don't understand the principle of cause and effect may consider this foolish—an idea I refuted in a recent university talk.

Many college students, due to a lack of education on the principle of cause and effect, believe that many invisible things, such as karma, do not exist or consider the principle of cause and effect to be invalid. Such thoughts are simply erroneous.

We should make every effort to challenge their wrong views; otherwise, they will bring harm to themselves and others.

Many of you were influenced by atheism, materialism, and nihilism at a young age through the education you received. Nihilism, in particular, is prevalent in today's society and inevitably leads to wrongful actions. In fact, the view on cause and effect is the most crucial right view among the doctrines of Buddhism. A true Buddhist should first grasp how cause and effect operates through various means.

By studying the teachings of past great masters and classical Buddhist scriptures, we can grasp the profound principle of cause and effect. This understanding reveals that regardless of who we are—man or woman, rich or poor—we cannot escape the karmic net of our actions. Whenever we attempt to defy cause and effect through wrongdoing, we are bound to face corresponding karmic outcomes.

Conversely, engaging in acts such as visualizing the Buddha, feeling joy toward a Buddha statue, or simply tossing a flower in the air as an offering can yield immeasurable merit. Even seemingly small actions like these can lead to vast positive results, such as sharing in Indra's reign for a duration that is difficult to fathom.

Some people believe that presidents of the largest countries or the secretary-general of the United Nations must have accumulated great merit in past lives. However, this is not necessarily the case. They may have only committed small positive acts, but because they had strong aspirations and encountered a supreme object of action, they had the opportunity to become leaders in this life.

Therefore, I always emphasize that we should cultivate the habit of not taking small positive acts lightly in our daily lives. For example, every morning we should offer and prostrate to the Buddha. Whenever we see an image of the Buddha, we should make offerings with devotion. While walking or riding in a car, we should visualize the Buddha, the guru, or the deity above us in the air and make mental offerings of flowers, mountains, rivers, and other great objects.

When we come across a beautiful place with flowers, forests, and springs, we should recite "Offer to the Three Jewels" and make the offerings in our minds. If we can do this often—day after day, year after year—the accumulated merits will be incredible.

The Sutra of the Great Assembly also says:

If true faith has arisen,
 It can destroy the paths to the three lower realms;
 If one fragrant flower is offered to the Buddha,
 It can bring great celestial happiness for infinite kalpas.

Therefore, once you give rise to genuine faith in the guru and the Three Jewels, you can transcend the three lower realms. If you offer a single fragrant flower in front of a Buddha statue, this small offering can bring you immense happiness in the god realm for infinite kalpas.

For example, some multibillionaires possess mansions, cars, and vast wealth, but they may not have performed many good deeds or accumulated significant merit in their past lives. Sometimes, simply presenting a flower or incense before a Buddha statue can be sufficient to attain such possessions in a future life. Therefore, when you visit a temple or monastery, it is important to make offerings to a Buddha statue.

However, some intellectuals find such behavior irrational, which only demonstrates their lack of understanding of Buddhist doctrines. If they grasp the principle of cause and effect, they will not look down on others' positive actions, including reciting a single mantra.

I have noticed that some members of the sangha from Larung Gar always carry their mala beads with them wherever they go. Every time they need to speak or work on a task, they mark their place on the mala beads; once finished, they resume counting the beads while reciting mantras. How wonderful! This habit is well preserved in the Tibetan region. In contrast, in other parts of China, it is rare to see people recite mantras, except during a Dharma assembly. Even if individuals have the time and opportunity, they may not necessarily have the habit.

We should strive to cultivate the habit of engaging in positive actions anytime and anywhere, not just at specific times. Regardless of our location or activities, we can always turn our minds toward virtuous deeds and perform good deeds, more or less. We must not underestimate small positive actions, as they can accumulate into something significant. This is why the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* states:

Do not consider small good deeds insignificant
 And thus dismiss them;
 Just as drops of water, when collected over time,

Can gradually fill a large vessel.

This verse is also found in the *Udanavarga*. Therefore, we practitioners should begin by committing to small positive acts.

Today, many people aspire to reach the top and achieve realization immediately. While this aspiration is commendable, there is often a gap between desire and reality. It is akin to an elementary school student expecting to earn a doctorate degree instantly; it is impossible unless he is a genius. We must begin our good deeds incrementally and ensure we remain on the right path. By doing so, over time, the desired outcome will surely emerge.

The Treasury of Precious Qualities says:

An ashota seed, as tiny as a mustard grain,
Can grow into a tall tree, with its branches
Stretching a league in length in a year.
Yet, the growth of good and evil deeds is even more immense.

The seed of an ashota tree, though as tiny as a mustard seed, grows so rapidly that its branches can extend a league in just one year. Yet, even this analogy falls short of capturing the vast and abundant growth that arises from the fruits of both positive and negative actions.

This is similar to the example of King Mandhatri who, in a previous life, offered six beans to the Buddha and was subsequently blessed with boundless merits upon being reborn in celestial or human realms. The same principle applies to a situation where an individual experiences a burst of anger or takes someone's life, resulting in their subsequent suffering in the lower realms for countless kalpas.

Therefore, when considering the principle of cause and effect, those who understand it may feel they are walking on thin ice and experience great fear of misdeeds. Even the slightest transgression of the precepts can lead to significant negative consequences. However, according to the *Vinaya*, if one feels shame and remorse during the process of committing misdeeds, the karmic effect may not be too severe. In contrast, if one commits misdeeds recklessly and without regret, the karmic effect will be quite dire.

Patrul Rinpoche used the story of Elapatra, the king of nagas, to elaborate on this point. The referenced story can be found in the *Ksudrakavastu of Mula-sarvas-*

tivada Vinaya and the *Collection of Sutra Passages on Correct Practice that Cover One with Merit*. As you can see, the stories that Patrul Rinpoche used in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* are primarily derived from sutras and other well-recognized texts.

When some Chinese Buddhists first encountered the teachings of this text, they thought, “*The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is a tantric teaching. I don’t want to study it. My master is also against it. I’d better focus on traditional Chan Buddhism or the Pure Land School. I dare not approach Vajrayana!”

In reality, there is no need to fear Vajrayana. What you and your master truly dislike and seek to avoid are misdeeds. Tibetan Buddhism does not contain any texts that oppose Chinese Buddhism, so it will not harm you like a high-voltage wire or a bomb. Those who do not understand the doctrines of Buddhism tend to focus on trivial matters while neglecting what truly deserves their attention. For example, issues related to the sangha’s possessions or the act of slandering others are very serious, yet these individuals show little concern. Meanwhile, some teachings in Tibetan Buddhism are exceptionally valuable, but these individuals try to avoid them as much as possible. Alas!

During my teaching, I will do my utmost to introduce you to the sources of each story told in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. In fact, those who have already studied the entire text know that the stories are not solely about Tibetan traditions but about essential teachings that Buddhists must understand. These stories may also be found in the Tripitaka, but many people are unaware of this or do not have the time to locate the references. Therefore, it is crucial for us to comprehend these important teachings through the pith instructions of our lineage masters.

Now, let’s move on to the story:

One day, Elapatra, king of the nagas, visited the Buddha in the guise of a universal emperor. At that time, the Buddha was teaching the Dharma to his sangha at Sarnath. The naga king wanted to approach the Buddha and make offerings, but if he appeared as a naga, he might encounter many enemies. Therefore, he transformed into a universal emperor, fully adorned, and approached the Buddha with his large entourage of armies and attendants.

The sangha members noticed the universal emperor and asked each other, “Who is this universal emperor? He looks magnificent!”

The Buddha replied, “He is not a universal emperor. You’ll find out shortly.”

At that moment, the naga king came to the Buddha and began to prostrate.

The Buddha scolded him, saying, “Haven’t you already caused enough damage to the teachings of Buddha Kasyapa? Now you intend to harm mine as well? Listen to the Dharma in your true form!”

The naga king responded, “If I do this, too many beings will harm me.” To address this concern, the Buddha placed the naga under the protection of Vajrapani. At that moment, the naga transformed into an enormous serpent with seven heads, stretching several leagues in length. On each of its heads grew a massive elapatra tree, whose immense weight pressed down on the naga, causing great pain. To make matters worse, the roots of the trees were infested with insects, adding to the naga’s torment.

The naga king pleaded with the Buddha to save him and asked when he could finally escape the lower realms. The Buddha replied, “In the future, when human lifespan reaches eighty thousand years, Buddha Maitreya will come to the world. This Buddha will tell you when you can finally cease being a naga.” Upon hearing this, the naga king wailed and wept profusely.

Ananda asked the Buddha why the naga king was like this. The Buddha responded, “Long ago, during the time of Buddha Kasyapa, when human lifespans were twenty thousand years, there was a monk who had been practicing in seclusion for many years. His mind was usually quite calm. One day, his meditation lasted so long that by the time he finished, midday had already passed. He then went to the village to ask for alms.

Someone scolded him for going on his alms round at an inappropriate time, which upset him. As he was returning to the hermitage, his robe snagged on a large elapatra tree by the path and was torn away. Overcome with intense anger, he broke his precepts and chopped down the tree. The karmic effects of that action are what you witness today.”

According to the *Collection of Sutra Passages on Correct Practice that Cover One with Merit*, while the monk was meditating, the leaves from a nearby elapatra tree constantly hit his forehead.

One day, he was not in a good mood and lost the ability to control himself. When the leaves fell on him again, he angrily snatched them off and threw them on the ground.

He then complained, “It is fine that Buddha Kasyapa established precepts for living beings. What’s the point of setting up precepts forbidding us from destroying

non-living beings? I have suffered for nothing!” Because of this, he had to face the karmic results of his actions.

After the Buddha told the sangha about the cause, he shared with everyone:

After innumerable kalpas,
One’s actions still cannot be destroyed.
When the effects ripen,
One must experience them for sure.

All of us should reflect on this verse repeatedly. In terms of its verbal meaning, there isn’t anything particularly profound in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, so we can easily grasp the message. But have we truly contemplated its deeper significance? Have we ever considered the meaning of the text? Take, for example, the principle of cause and effect, which we currently meditate on every day. Have you realized that this principle is not a legend or a myth, but a truth that manifests in our daily lives? It has been evident to countless beings in the past, and none of us can escape the karmic effects of our actions.

Some ignorant people possess only a partial understanding of worldly knowledge or know nothing of transcendental wisdom. However, once they act contrary to Buddhist teachings or precepts, they must face the inevitable karmic consequences, whether they accept the principle of cause and effect or not. *The Compilation of Essential Buddhist Texts* states:

If one goes against the Buddha’s teachings,
One is an ignorant person
Who will experience infinite suffering,
And cannot attain liberation for a very long time.

This is because, without accepting the principle of cause and effect, an individual will commit wrongdoings, which inevitably leads to suffering.

Whoever you are—whether you are among the fourfold assembly attending the live teachings or among the Buddhist students receiving the teachings later via audio or video recordings—I sincerely hope you will develop conviction about the principle of cause and effect. Then, regardless of what happens and where it happens, you will consciously discipline yourselves by saying, “I must not commit any misdeed. Otherwise, I won’t have a happy future!”

As we know, unless one is a bodhisattva who chooses to suffer for infinite kalpas to benefit living beings, we ordinary beings typically pursue happiness and avoid suffering. We may talk grandly, but when it comes to ourselves, for instance, when we are sick, most of us wish to find a cure as soon as possible, so we are willing to try everything, including Chinese medicine, Tibetan medicine, and Western medicine.

We may often say:

May the sufferings of all sentient beings ripen on me. If my sickness is beneficial to all living beings, let me get sick; if my death is beneficial to all living beings, let me die; if my suffering is beneficial to all living beings, let me experience all torments.

This is what we've studied in *The Seven Points of Mind Training*.

But when we actually do get sick, will we still be thinking of sentient beings? We know ourselves best, so we should be aware of our state of practice. Therefore, solely for our own happiness, we ought to believe in the principle of cause and effect and take the future into consideration.

Recently, I have been emphasizing the importance of the common preliminary practices. Whether you are alone or in a crowd, you should frequently reflect on whether the principle of cause and effect truly operates in this manner. If you believe it does not, you are free to disregard the principle, as you have the freedom of speech. However, if you engage in a debate with others about it, you will find that no learned scholar has ever refuted the principle of cause and effect. If you lack sound reasoning but simply want to negate it, that doesn't make any sense.

The intention behind any action, whether good or bad, is the most crucial factor in determining its nature—positive or negative, significant or minor. It's similar to a tree: if the root is medicinal, the trunk and leaves will also be medicinal. Conversely, if the root is poisonous, the trunk and leaves will be poisonous as well. Medicinal leaves cannot grow from a poisonous root. Similarly, if an intention arises from aggression or attachment and is therefore impure, the resulting action will inevitably be negative, regardless of how positive it may appear. Conversely, if the intention is pure, even actions that seem negative will actually be positive.

Therefore, whether our actions are positive or negative is determined by our intentions, as Nagarjuna says in the *Precious Garland of the Middle Way*:

Desire, hatred, ignorance, and
 The actions they generate are non-virtues.
 Non-desire, non-hatred, non-ignorance,
 And the actions they generate are virtues.²²

In the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*, it says:

If the root is medicinal, then its shoots will also be medicinal.
 If the root is poisonous, without doubt its shoots will also be
 poisonous.
 What determines whether an action is positive or negative is not
 its appearance or scale,
 But rather the good or bad intention behind it.

Therefore, the nature of the root determines the nature of the leaves. Here is a story from the *Udanavarga*:

Once, there was a large, lush tree in the Jeta Grove of Shravasti, under which visitors liked to rest and enjoy the cool shade. However, those who stayed under the tree would suffer from severe headaches or back pain, and some even died on the spot. Later, a gardener discovered that it was a poisonous tree, so he cut off all its branches and leaves.

But soon, the tree grew new branches and leaves, becoming even more thriving than before. It attracted even more people seeking shade, and of course, more people suffered because of it.

The gardener had to trim the tree constantly, but it always regrew its branches and leaves. A wise man kindly advised the gardener, “You should uproot the tree,” which sparked a moment of realization for the gardener. He removed the root of the poisonous tree, which halted the growth of new branches and leaves.

Therefore, if the root is poisonous, the trunk and leaves will also be poisonous. Similarly, if the intention is bad, no matter how good the action appears, it will only initiate a vicious cycle leading to negative karmic results.

Thus, when undertaking any action in the future, we should follow the advice of the great masters from the past and first examine our minds to see whether they are influenced by greed, anger, or ignorance. If our actions stem from these

²² Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion, 2007, verse 20.

afflictions, the resulting karma will not be favorable. Conversely, if our actions are motivated by pure, joyful, and altruistic intentions, even if the actions may seem somewhat improper, they will actually be meritorious.

Therefore, when the intention is good, the action is good; when the intention is bad, the action is bad. The mind plays a crucial role in the principle of cause and effect. For this reason, bodhisattvas are sometimes permitted to perform the seven negative actions of body and speech, provided their minds remain pure and free from selfish motives. This principle is illustrated in stories such as that of Captain Compassionate Heart, who killed Black Spearman, and the young brahmin Lover of the Stars, who broke his vow of chastity with a young brahmin girl.

Let's briefly talk about the two stories:

1) Captain Compassionate Heart Killed Black Spearman

This story can be found in the Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels and the Sutra of the Questions of the Bodhisattva Supreme Knowledge. In some sutras that record teachings similar to Vajrayana, killing and sexual misconduct under special circumstances are permitted as expedient means.

In one of Buddha Shakyamuni's past lives, during the time of Buddha, he was a captain named Compassionate Heart. One day, he was sailing across the ocean with five hundred merchants when a ruthless pirate named Black Spearman appeared and threatened to kill everyone on board. One night, the captain dreamed that the ocean god revealed to him that the merchants were all non-returning bodhisattvas. He realized that if the pirate killed them, he would suffer in hell for countless kalpas.

Filled with deep compassion, the captain thought, "If I kill the pirate, I can spare him from hell, even if it means I will be reborn in hell myself." With great courage, he killed Black Spearman, an act that earned him as much merit as would normally take seventy thousand kalpas to achieve.

Although the act appeared harmful since the captain seemed to have killed the pirate, it was entirely selfless. In the short term, it saved the five hundred merchants. In the long term, it spared the pirate from unimaginable suffering in hell. Thus, it was actually an immensely positive act.

Such an act is often referred to as "the activity of subjugating"²³ in Vajrayana,

²³ Subjugating (Skt. abhicāra, Tib. རྒྱལ་པོ་, Wyl. drag po) hostile forces.

which means that with great compassion and extraordinary wisdom, while remaining in the union of compassion and wisdom, one may kill evil beings who commit very harmful misdeeds and who are primarily from the three lower realms. Therefore, subjugation is also permitted in Sutrayana, which is consistent with Tantrayana.

Some people know very little about Tantrayana and even believe that some tantric actions are not impeccable and do not stem from the Buddha's teachings. If this is the case, they may need to re-evaluate the Sutrayana teachings in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*.

2) Brahmin Lover of the Stars Married a Brahmin Girl

A brahmin named Lover of the Stars spent many years in the forest, faithfully observing his vow of chastity. One day, while begging in a village, a brahmin girl became so infatuated with him that she nearly took her own life. Initially, the brahmin girl insisted on marrying him, threatening to choose death if he refused. He first rejected her, not wanting to jeopardize his years of practice, and walked away. However, after taking seven steps, he felt compassion for her, thinking, "If I reject her, she will die because of me. If I accept her, I will fall into a lower realm due to violating my precept. Well, it's better that I suffer than let others suffer."

Out of compassion for her, he married her, an act that earned him forty thousand kalpas of merit. They lived together for twelve years. Because of his compassion, not only did his action not bring negative karmic effects, but it also brought him merit that would otherwise take forty thousand kalpas to accumulate.

As documented in Mahayana Buddhism, some actions that may appear harmful, such as breaking precepts or engaging in sexual misconduct, can actually result in great merit. There are instances of accomplished tantric practitioners marrying a dakini and engaging in the union practice²⁴ within Vajrayana. Similar cases can also be found in Sutrayana. If you completely reject this perspective and insist on judging such practices based on the precepts of individual liberation, it will become challenging to make sense of the aforementioned stories.

Additionally, in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, there is a story of a woman named Pure Sunlight who developed a strong romantic longing for a prince

²⁴ The union practice is also referred to as "Karmamudrā" (Sanskrit; "action seal," erroneously: kāmamudrā or "desire seal," Tib. las-kyi phyag-rgya), which is a Vajrayana Buddhist technique of a union practice with a physical or visualized consort. When the consort is visualized, they are known as the jñanamudra.

named Powerful Virtue, a previous incarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni. With her mind tainted by infatuation, Pure Sunlight made offerings to the prince, who was following the bodhisattva path and practicing diligently. Despite her tainted intention, Pure Sunlight still accumulated great merit from her act of generosity. As she made offerings to a Buddhist practitioner, she remained free from the three lower realms for 250 kalpas. Later, she was reborn as a woman named Exceptional Virtues and had the opportunity to encounter the prince once again. Exceptional Virtues desired to become the prince's wife, intending to serve him faithfully. Together, they made the bodhisattva vow in the presence of a Buddha and eventually attained liberation.

The *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* states that Dharmodgata, a bodhisattva who taught the Perfection of Wisdom, often entertained himself with 68,000 maids. However, when the Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita visited Dharmodgata for teachings, he did not develop any wrong views toward him.

Although those bodhisattvas appeared to be householders, they employed the skillful methods of Mahayana Buddhism to benefit all beings. Their actions were not driven by strong desires, as is typical of worldly people. They did not become ensnared in the web of romantic love. In certain situations, they may have seemed to engage in misdeeds with their bodies and words, but in reality, they were performing virtuous acts.

For certain enlightened beings, taking life or breaking a vow of chastity may be permissible. However, if these actions are motivated by selfish intentions—rooted in desire, hatred, or ignorance—they are never acceptable, regardless of who commits them.

You must understand this! Some people use “tantric practice” as an excuse to engage in so-called union practice or “subjugation,” but their actions are entirely driven by selfish motives—killing out of anger or committing sexual misconduct out of lust. Such actions yield no positive results, because whether an act is good or bad depends on the intention: a good intention leads to a good result, and a bad intention leads to a bad result. It is stated in the *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings*:

Living beings engage in positive or negative actions
Will experience happiness or suffering,
Based on the intention behind those actions.

There is absolutely no doubt about this.

In fact, all living beings, except for the most foolish, love themselves; thus, it is impossible for them to disregard their futures. If you truly love yourself, please refrain from committing misdeeds under any pretext before you attain ultimate realization. Of course, if you have reached that level, it's a different matter.

To sum up, it is crucial to understand the karmic effects of your actions. If you can establish a solid foundation while studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, your pursuit of the Dharma will be stable and enduring, and ten or twenty years later, you will undoubtedly become a true practitioner.

Conversely, if you haven't built a solid foundation, you may present yourself as a good practitioner for two or three years, and others may buy into your practitioner persona and even believe that you have achieved extraordinary spiritual advancement. However, as time goes on, your true qualities will become evident, and you may find your spiritual progress reverting to square one. This, of course, relates to the causes and conditions of your past lives, but the main factor is your lack of a foundation established through preliminary practices.

Therefore, among past and present practitioners, those who place great importance on preliminary practices won't regress in their lifelong practice. Moreover, they are less prone to wrong views and will perfect their practices from beginning to end.

Otherwise, any practice that is not grounded on a solid foundation is like a building on ice, which will collapse under even the slightest unfavorable conditions. Therefore, I hope you will reflect on this repeatedly.



Lesson 71

“A Bodhisattva with a vast mind ... vigilance, and not contaminate yourself with even the smallest harmful actions.”
[page 125–128]

Before I begin today’s teaching, I want to emphasize one point. While listening to Dharma teachings, in addition to maintaining a joyful attitude, you should also remember that everything is impermanent.

When I was young, I received teachings from the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and many other esteemed masters. I feel nostalgic when I reflect on those experiences. However, the past is gone, and nothing can return.

Similarly, many of you have gathered here for the Dharma, which brings immeasurable benefits to your lives and is an extremely rare opportunity. Therefore, you must appreciate it, for no one knows when impermanence will strike. If this opportunity disappears, you may find yourself feeling nostalgic years later when recalling the experience of studying the Dharma with everyone here today. With the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, we have this rare opportunity to study the Dharma together, so we must feel joyous and grateful.

Now we are examining the section on when the seven harmful acts of body and speech are permitted. This is a very important topic. Those who haven’t studied the fundamental teachings often become confused and are unsure of what to do or what not to do. Therefore, we must understand when harmful acts are permitted.

Yesterday, we discussed the stories of Captain Compassionate Heart and a brahmin named Lover of the Stars. Bodhisattvas like them possess a profound

altruistic mindset and are free from selfishness, greed, anger, and ignorance. Although their actions may appear to involve unethical killing or sexual misconduct, in reality, their intentions are virtuous. Aryadeva states in *The Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*:

For bodhisattvas, through their intention,
All actions, virtuous and non-virtuous,
Become perfect virtue because
They are in control of their minds.²⁵

Bodhisattvas have a strong intention to benefit sentient beings, so their actions and speech, whether outwardly positive or negative, can all become perfectly virtuous. Why? Because bodhisattvas are altruistic and in control of their minds, they can always act virtuously.

♦ Taking what is not given

Bodhisattvas who are completely free of selfish thoughts and who are courageous, wise, and uphold great righteousness may, in special cases, take wealth from those who are extremely greedy and possessive, in order to offer it on their behalf to the Three Jewels or give it to beggars and the needy.

A Buddhist once told me that his family strongly opposed his studying the Dharma or making offerings, but they fully supported his expenses related to travel and sightseeing. As a result, he often lied to his family, claiming he was about to travel somewhere, and then took part of the money to a temple to contribute to Dharma activities.

Chan Master Yongming Yanshou utilized a significant amount of public funds from the National Treasury for releasing lives before he was ordained as a monk. His misappropriation of public funds was discovered, leading to his death sentence. However, he did not regret his actions, stating, “It is worthwhile to exchange my life for the lives of tens of thousands of beings!” The emperor was so moved that he set the Chan master free.

Thus, if you steal out of selfish motivation but use “helping others” as an excuse, your actions are certainly vicious. However, if your intention is purely to help others, stealing may sometimes be permissible.

²⁵ Aryadeva’s *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

Consequently, some harmful actions we observe or hear about may be the skillful means of bodhisattvas who are benefiting others. Yet, we must not carelessly imitate these actions before we have reached the same high state of realization.

Many people like to quote the first half of a verse that states:

Alcohol and meat go through my stomach,
But the Buddha stays in my heart.

These words from Chan Master Ji Gong are often cited by individuals to justify their compulsive consumption of meat and alcohol. However, most people are only familiar with the first half of this verse and are unaware of the second half, which states:

If worldly people imitate me,
They are entering the demon's path.

Without knowing the second half of Ji Gong's words, they are often misinterpreted, misleading many deluded individuals.

In fact, the profound inner state of Ji Gong²⁶ is beyond the imagination of an ordinary person. For instance, a ministry counselor named Shen sent his servant to deliver two cooked doves and a pot of wine to Ji Gong. The servant secretly ate a dove wing and drank a few sips of wine on the way, believing no one would know, not even a celestial being. However, Ji Gong pointed out what the servant had just done. Of course, the servant denied it. Ji Gong then spat out two pigeons, one of which was missing a wing. Such an extraordinary inner state is incomprehensible to worldly people, so we must not blindly imitate his behavior, lest we deceive both ourselves and others.

In fact, there is a historical account of the saying, "Alcohol and meat go through my stomach, but the Buddha stays in my heart."

According to this account, during a war, Chan Master Poshan of the late Ming

²⁶ Ji Gong (Chinese: , 22 December 1130 – 16 May 1209), born Li Xiuyuan and also known as "Chan Master Daoji" (Chinese:) was a Chan Buddhist monk who lived in the Southern Song. He purportedly possessed supernatural powers, which he used to help the poor and stand up to injustice. However, he was also known for his wild and eccentric behavior and did not follow Buddhist monastic rules by consuming alcohol and meat. By the time of his death, Ji Gong had become a legend in Chinese culture and a deity in Chinese folk religion. He is mentioned by Buddhists in folktales and kōans and sometimes invoked by oracles to assist in worldly affairs.

dynasty had to stay in the military camp of Li Liyang, a grassroots leader of a rebellious assembly. Li Liyang was a bloodthirsty persecutor, so to save the locals, the Chan Master asked him to abstain from unnecessary killing. Li noticed the Chan Master's strict observance of precepts, including his abstention from meat and alcohol, and told the master, "As long as you eat meat, I won't kill anyone anymore."

The Chan Master immediately struck a deal with Li Liyang and began to eat meat and drink alcohol. As a result, many people survived.

Additionally, another monk from the Ming dynasty ate meat and drank alcohol in front of burglars to save refugees in a temple. The burglars offered to release the refugees if the monk consumed their meat and drank their wine. The monk calmly raised the wine cup, saying, "I toast with wine instead of tea," and gulped it down. He then picked up the meat and said, "I replace my vegetables with this meat!" He remained composed throughout. The burglars were surprised, but since they had already promised, they had to set the refugees free.

As you can see, the actions of eating meat and drinking alcohol to benefit others can also be found among great masters of Chinese Buddhism. Nevertheless, this is not a common practice. Not all members of the sangha in each Tibetan monastery can act in such an extraordinary manner.

Those who pursue the Dharma in the Tibetan region should understand the significance Tibetan Buddhism places on the observance of precepts. Before attaining certain levels of realization, no one is permitted to perform extraordinary acts. Those who have engaged in such acts may or may not have reached the necessary level of realization. Therefore, it is essential to know what you can and cannot do. It makes no sense for someone without a state of realization to pretend to have one and thereby commit wrongdoings.

Of course, if you have indeed attained an extraordinary state of realization, it is acceptable to act eccentrically, like a madman or a mute, especially in accordance with the twenty-one acts of the Great Perfection. After all, the Dharma path should not be constrained to a single approach. It certainly does not work if we measure everything by the yardstick of the precepts of individual liberation. Conversely, it also does not make sense to require everyone to practice extraordinary tantric activities, regardless of the practitioner's state of realization. Therefore, it is important to study and understand the fundamentals of these issues.

We have just discussed when the three harmful acts of the body are permitted. Next, we will address when the four harmful acts of speech are permitted.

♦ Lying

Lying is acceptable if it is done to save someone's life or to protect the possessions of the Three Jewels.

For example, if a hunter is pursuing his prey and a practitioner happens to see where the animal is heading, the practitioner may deliberately respond to the hunter's inquiry by saying, "I don't know," to save the animal's life.

To protect the goods belonging to the Three Jewels, a practitioner can lie to burglars by saying, "I don't have the key," or "His possessions are not here." Lying in such circumstances is permitted.

However, it is never right to deceive others for one's own benefit.

During the time of the Buddha, a woman's son suddenly fell ill and died. Unable to accept the reality, she begged the Buddha to bring her son back to life. The Buddha comforted her, saying, "Oh! It's not hard! Go get a mustard seed from a household where no one has ever died, and I will revive your son."

The woman, somewhat naive, went from house to house in search of such a mustard seed. She traveled far and searched for a long time but still couldn't find one. Eventually, she realized that nobody is immortal, and she accepted the reality of her son's death. What the Buddha told her at that time was a skillful lie.

However, it is definitely not permitted to lie if a person has malicious or selfish intentions or has become a habitual liar. Lying in those circumstances leads to significant faults.

♦ Sowing discord

For example, if two close friends are involved—one prone to wrongdoing and the other inclined to do good—it may be justified to sow discord if there is a risk that the stronger negative influence of the wrongdoer could corrupt the virtuous friend.

Regarding the faults of having a bad friend, the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

If one gets close to a vicious person,

One will become a vicious person;
 Therefore, one should distance oneself from wrongdoers
 And abstain from wrongdoing.

Consequently, we should avoid associating with a vicious person; otherwise, we may gradually begin to behave in a similar manner. However, some individuals may choose to remain with wrongdoers and disregard honest advice. In such cases, it is appropriate to sow discord and deliberately separate them from their bad friend. However, it is not acceptable to simply separate two individuals who share a good relationship.

♦ Harsh words

Harsh words may be employed as a more forceful or wrathful method to teach the Dharma to those who do not respond to gentler approaches. They can also be used when guiding a disciple to uncover and address their hidden flaws or weaknesses.

A guru should not always be a “Mr. Nice” or “Mrs. Nice,” avoiding the identification of anyone’s faults. As Atisha states:

The best teacher is one who confronts your hidden flaws;
 The best teaching is that which directly addresses those hidden
 flaws.

However, harsh words spoken solely to insult others are not justified. When a teacher is imparting the Dharma, many disciples may feel that the teacher is criticizing them, perceiving themselves as targets every day. When disciples think this way, it indicates that the instructions have struck at the core of their faults. Conversely, if a disciple finds the teacher’s instructions irrelevant, it becomes impossible to recognize their own faults, leading to a decline in their behavior. Therefore, it is acceptable for a teacher to criticize their disciples.

Although, in terms of their Buddha nature, all beings are equal—with no distinction of inferiority or superiority—from a relative perspective, a disciple’s qualities in the threefold training of discipline, meditation, and wisdom are unlikely to match those of the guru. This is similar to the way that, in any school, students do not earn the same as their teachers.

Thus, it is permissible for a guru to occasionally use harsh words with their

disciples to tame them. One should not think, “The guru speaks harshly, so he must have violated his precepts. According to the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*, one harsh comment results in this or that in the next five hundred lives.” It is unreasonable to judge the guru in this manner.

♦ **Worthless chatter**

It could serve as a skillful means to introduce the Dharma to those who enjoy talking and may not be interested in the Dharma through other avenues.

Some novice Buddhists like to spend considerable time sharing their stories. If you want to engage these talkative individuals but refuse to converse with them, it may demotivate them and hinder their progress on the path. Therefore, at the outset, you should align with their preferences. If such a person enjoys topics like wars or Hollywood films, you may join the conversation.

Once, I met someone who was incredibly enthusiastic about Hollywood films. He would talk continuously all night, and the next morning, he would still be on that topic. In this case, I had to skillfully integrate his interests into our conversations.

During the time of Buddha Kasyapa, a great bodhisattva sought to tame and guide tirthikas, so he deliberately behaved like them and slandered the Buddha, saying, “That bald-headed monk has no path to liberation.” By doing so, the bodhisattva earned the tirthikas’ trust and eventually skillfully guided them onto the path of the Dharma.

Due to his virtuous intentions, his actions accumulated no faults but rather merit. The Bodhisattva Manjushri had a similar experience while propagating Mahayana Buddhism among tirthikas.

The mindset of worldly people is completely different from that of practitioners. If skillful means are not applied and you refuse to say even a worthless word from the beginning, it becomes impossible to truly guide them. Therefore, in order to lead them onto the Buddhist path, it is permissible to use some skillfully crafted worthless chatter. However, if what you say is completely meaningless, causes distractions for yourself, and stirs up greed, anger, and ignorance in others, then such senseless talk is not permitted.

The seven negative actions of body and speech mentioned above are permitted only if they benefit living beings. The three negative actions of mind are never

permitted for anyone, as there is no way for intention to render them positive. Once a negative thought arises, it inevitably leads to something negative. The *Precious Garland of the Middle Way* states:

With greed, anger, and ignorance,
The actions one commits are negative;
Without greed, anger, and ignorance,
The actions one commits are positive.

Therefore, the three negative mental actions are never permitted for anyone.

It is essential to understand that everything arises from the mind. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* states:

All karmas arise from the mind—
That's why it says the mind is illusory.
When freed from the conceptualizations of the mind,
All kinds of existence will cease.

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

Everything is created by the mind,
Everything is caused by the mind.

Thus, it is solely the mind that produces both good and bad. A good mind brings happiness, while a bad mind brings suffering. The *Precious Garland of the Middle Way* says:

Non-virtue leads to all sufferings,
And rebirth in lower realms;
Virtue results in rebirth in higher realms,
Enjoying happiness life after life.

There are many occasions when the thoughts that arise in the mind, even if they are never spoken or acted upon, can have a powerful effect—either deeply positive or significantly negative. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

If one listens to the Dharma, understands the meaning, and

generates a moment of good thought, it can terminate the cycle of life and death in infinite kalpas.

This afternoon, Khenpo Tsultrim Lödro called me and asked, “What are you up to?”

I replied, “In a state of joy!”

“How so?” he asked.

I said, “I read a wonderful verse from the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*, which reminded me that listening to the Dharma is unparalleled compared to anything else.”

He asked, “What exactly does the verse say?”

I recited the verse to him and shared that this instruction from the Buddha is truly profound. He agreed.

Indeed, the most meaningful pursuit is for us to study and contemplate the Dharma. Of course, it is also commendable to work for the benefit of all beings and to tame our own defilements. Beyond that, all worldly trivialities hold little genuine meaning.

People possess diverse values and lifestyles. Those of us who have had the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the environment of listening to and contemplating the Dharma at Larung Gar truly appreciate the emergence of even a single positive thought.

Of all the virtuous deeds, my favorite is teaching the Dharma every day. Why is this? It is because it’s impossible for me to teach the Dharma while harboring negative thoughts. In that moment, all the doors to unwholesome thoughts are closed, creating a precious opportunity.

Similarly, when people attend Dharma class, 70 to 80 percent of the time their minds focus on the teaching. This is quite good for ordinary beings, even if they occasionally generate a few discursive thoughts. You may also take time to contemplate this thoroughly.

As practitioners, we should constantly examine our minds. If our thoughts are positive, we should feel happy and strive to do even better. If they are negative, we should confess them immediately, feeling regret and shame for still harboring such thoughts despite all the teachings we’ve received. We must remind ourselves

to make every effort to prevent such thoughts from arising in the future. If we can achieve this, it is, in itself, a form of practice.

In fact, all the profound and vast teachings from the buddhas of the three times can be summarized into two key principles: positive thoughts and positive actions. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche states in the *Summary of Teachings of the Buddhas of Three Times*:

All the profound and vast teachings
Of the buddhas of the three times,
Can be encompassed by good thoughts and actions—
Those fortunate ones should practice accordingly.

I vividly remember when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited Washington, Boston, and other cities in the United States; he provided many profound instructions to Western audiences. Although Rinpoche's words sounded simple, they brought significant benefits to many listeners. Even though the audience might have heard teachings from numerous great masters, through Rinpoche's instruction, they came to deeply understand that the essence of the 84,000 teachings of the Buddha is the kindness of the mind.

What the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche emphasized during that time is this instruction from Patrul Rinpoche's text. Therefore, we must remember that everything will go well if the mind is positive. Conversely, if the mind is negative, no matter how many positive actions we undertake, they will be in vain.

Regarding the merit of kind-heartedness, here is a story from *The Moral Education of the Past*:

There once was a person named Yuan Zishi, who offered great help to another named Miu Cai. However, Miu Cai was ungrateful and did something hurtful to Yuan Zishi. Angered, Yuan Zishi went out before dawn with a knife, intending to kill Miu Cai.

As he passed by a retreat hut, a good practitioner with clairvoyance named Xuanyuan Weng was reciting morning prayers. The practitioner noticed a few hundred aggressive and oddly shaped ghosts following Yuan Zishi, armed with knives and axes. Soon after, Yuan Zishi returned, this time accompanied by joyful celestial beings wearing gold crowns and jade ornaments, carrying flowers and victory banners.

The practitioner was surprised, so he asked Yuan Zishi what was happening. Yuan Zishi replied, “Miu Cai is a wretched ingrate, and I wanted to kill him. However, when I arrived at his door, I suddenly thought to myself, ‘Although he did something bad to me, his wife and children are innocent. Furthermore, his mother is still alive. If I were to kill him, it would be as if I were killing his entire family.’ I could not bear to think of that, so I changed my mind and came back.”

The practitioner then shared with Yuan Zishi what he had witnessed and praised him, saying, “The gods are aware of your actions, and you will surely be blessed.”

Upon hearing this, Yuan Zishi became more diligent and committed to virtuous actions. Eventually, he excelled in the imperial examinations and was promoted to a high government position. In contrast, Miu Cai led a miserable life and died prematurely.

As you can see, if a person harbors very evil thoughts, demons and non-humans will come to exacerbate the situation. Conversely, if a person nurtures kind thoughts—such as the great compassion of helping all beings, faith in the guru and the Three Jewels, pure perception, and a joyful attitude—then not only will that person be happy, but their surroundings will also become harmonious. Everyone must have a clear understanding of this truth.

Therefore, even when you’re engaging in positive actions, carefully examine your motivation. If your intention is good, proceed. However, if you’re acting to show off, compete, or gain fame, work on changing your mindset and infuse your actions with bodhicitta. If you cannot transform your motivation, it’s better to postpone the positive action until you can do it with the right intention. *The Sutra on the Buddha’s Bequeathed Teaching* states:

Lack of control over the mind
Leads to a cessation of positive actions.

Therefore, if our motivation is not well adjusted, even the most positive actions may yield no real benefits.

One day, Geshe Ben Kungyal was preparing for a visit from many of his benefactors. That morning, he neatly arranged the offerings on his shrine in front of the images of the Three Jewels. However, upon reflecting on his intentions, he realized they were impure—he was merely trying to impress his patrons. So, he

grabbed a handful of dust and scattered it over the offerings, saying, “Monk, stay in your place and don’t pretend to be something you’re not!”

When Padampa Sangye heard this story, he remarked, “That handful of dust Ben Kungyal threw was the finest offering in all of Tibet!”

According to folk customs, Tibetans typically throw dust at demons and evildoers. For example, one throws a handful of dust during an exorcism practice or during the departure of a foe. Although Tibetans are not affluent, they enjoy offering their most cherished possessions to representations of the Three Jewels.

So why did Padampa Sangye comment that Ben Kungyal’s dust was the best offering? This is because Geshe Ben examined his intentions and recognized that they were not pure, so he threw the dust as a self-admonishment.

According to legend, a prankster once called out, “Ben Kungyal is coming!” behind an old woman, but surprisingly, she didn’t move at all. The prankster thought the old woman was undisturbed, but when he went to check on her, he discovered she had already died of fear.

Ben Kungyal had been such a wicked person! Before his ordination, he carried many weapons with him and had numerous enemies. After his ordination, thanks to the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, he carried no weapons, not even a needle, and all his enemies vanished.

So always watch your mind carefully, just as Ben Kungyal did. Once you realize your intention is so evil that you may commit misdeeds, you should confess and avoid any planned actions.

As ordinary beings, it’s inevitable that we will have thoughts and actions driven by negative intentions. Just like Ben Kungyal, despite being ordained and spending many years in retreat, he still frequently contended with afflictions. However, if we can quickly recognize our mistakes, confess them, and commit to not repeating them, we can free ourselves from their grip.

On another occasion, Geshe Ben was visiting the home of some benefactors. When his hosts stepped out of the room, he thought, “I don’t have any tea. I’ll just take a little to brew when I return to my hermitage.”

But as soon as he reached into their bag of tea, he suddenly realized what he was doing and shouted to his hosts, “Come and see what I’m doing! Cut off my hand!”

A person like Ben Kungyal, who could always recognize wrongdoing, is very precious. Yan Hui, the favorite disciple of Confucius, was also able to “blame no one and repeat no mistakes.” Many of us tend to hide our mistakes or blame others when we commit wrongdoings.

The *Di Zi Gui* says:

If one can change the misdeed,
Its fault is gone;
If one hides the misdeed,
One commits one more misdeed.

If a misdeed can be corrected, its fault no longer exists. After all, no one is born a sublime being who commits no misdeeds. However, one may try to cover up a misdeed, saying, “It’s not me who did it! It was him! I am not a wrongdoer, but he is! You may go talk to him!”

By doing so, one simply commits another misdeed.

Atisha once said, “Since I took the precepts of personal liberation, I have not been tainted by even the slightest fault. In following the bodhicitta vows, I have made one or two mistakes. And since taking up Vajrayana, although I have occasionally faltered, I have never allowed any faults or downfalls to remain unresolved for even a full day.”

While traveling, whenever a negative thought arose, he would immediately take up the wooden mandala base he carried to confess the thought and vow never to repeat it.

It is difficult for most of us to emulate Atisha because we often are not concerned when we have a negative thought, or we may not even realize it. Thus, a good practitioner and a bad practitioner act quite differently.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says:

There are two kinds of people in this world
Who are as precious as the Udumbara flower.
One kind are those who never commit wrongdoings,
And the other are those who confess their wrongdoings.
Such people are very rare to find.

These two kinds of people are as rare as the Udumbara flower. The first kind, who never commit any misdeeds in samsara, are like precious lotuses born in the fire. The second kind commit wrongdoings due to their habitual tendencies but can recognize this immediately and purify their negative actions by reciting the Vajrasattva mantra, which is also good.

Recently, a chief of staff at Larung Gar was addressing the sangha in Tibetan. He overlooked the language requirement at our Buddhist Institute that prohibits mixing Tibetan and Chinese in a single talk and used the word “tractor” in Chinese instead of Tibetan. The chief of staff felt a bit embarrassed and promptly recited the Vajrasattva mantra—*Om Vajra Sattva Hum*.

In fact, he didn’t need to recite the mantra merely for saying “tractor” in Chinese. However, when you have a negative thought or speak ill of others, you must recite the mantra.

Yet, many people have not formed this habit. Novice Buddhists, in particular, often do not feel concerned when negative thoughts arise. They rarely think, “I am doing something wrong,” which is quite troubling. In fact, taming the mind is crucial for a practitioner. In particular, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* contains supreme instructions.

Here is another story about watching the mind from Patrul Rinpoche’s text:

One day, Geshe Ben attended a large gathering of geshe at Penyulgyal. During the event, curd was served to the guests. Geshe Ben, sitting in the middle rows, noticed that the monks in the front row were being given generous portions.

“That curd looks so tasty...” he thought, “but I doubt I’ll get my fair share.”

[When it’s time to distribute offerings at Larung Gar, some of you may think like this as well. Especially when I distribute food from my spot, those in the last rows might be thinking, “I don’t think I’ll get my fair share.” Oh, if only we had a Ben Kungyal here!]

Immediately, Geshe Ben caught himself: “You yogurt addict!” he scolded himself and flipped his bowl over. When the server approached and offered him some curd, he declined.

“This greedy mind has already taken its portion,” he explained.

Although there was nothing wrong with wanting to enjoy the feast alongside

the other virtuous monks, it was the self-centeredness in his eager anticipation of that tasty curd that led him to turn it down.

I have read the biography of Geshe Ben in the past. It says that sometimes, when he had a bad thought, he would yell, “Ben Kungyal! Why are you always so self-centered?” Sometimes, he would even hit himself.

The stories about how he dealt with his afflictions are quite fascinating! Some great masters of Chinese Buddhism are like this as well. Therefore, we practitioners must combat our afflictions and consistently examine our minds.

Of course, ordinary people often struggle with strong negative emotions at first. However, if we always examine our minds in this way, choosing what is beneficial and avoiding what is harmful, our minds will become more manageable, and our thoughts will gradually turn positive.

Long ago, there was a brahmin named Ravi who constantly examined his mind. Whenever a negative thought arose, he would set aside a black pebble, and whenever a positive thought emerged, he would set aside a white pebble. Initially, all his pebbles were black. However, as he diligently engaged in positive actions and counteracted negative ones, the number of black and white pebbles eventually became equal. In the end, he was left with only white pebbles.

A similar story can be found in the *Records of the Buddha and the Patriarchs*:

Upagupta, the fourth patriarch of the Chan tradition, adopted the same method at the beginning of his practice. Whenever a bad thought arose, he would put aside a black pebble, and whenever a good thought arose, he would put aside a white pebble. At first, the majority of the pebbles were black, but seven days later, he had only white ones. After this, his teacher gave him the teaching on the Four Noble Truths, which immediately brought him the fruition of sotāpanna, or stream-enterer.

Therefore, we should engage in positive actions as an antidote with mindfulness and vigilance and avoid tainting ourselves with even the slightest negative actions. We should frequently pray for the blessings of the guru, the Three Jewels, and the Dharma protectors. After all, the mind is compounded, and the blessings are incredible. If we can always pray, our minds will surely be transformed.

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

One who becomes a monk but leads a mischievous life

Will lose the Dharma and the title,
Become insignificant as grass,
And be reborn in the lower realms.

Conversely, if you consistently observe your mind with mindfulness and vigilance and maintain the intention to help others and behave impeccably, people will naturally gather around you, just as birds flock to a pleasant pool, as mentioned in the *Water-Tree Treatises*.

Furthermore, in the many lives yet to come, you will be reborn in the higher realms and ultimately attain enlightenment. Therefore, we should all rely on the Dharma to alleviate afflictions, commit virtuous deeds, and eventually embark on the luminous path of liberation.



Lesson 72

“Even if you have not accumulated negative actions
... That our minds may mingle with the Dharma.” [page
128–131]

Today, we’ll cover the final section of the chapter on “The Principle of Cause and Effect.”

Even if we haven’t committed any wrongdoing in this life or can’t recall any misdeeds, we have nonetheless accumulated countless negative actions over endless lifetimes in samsara. These actions are stored in our Alaya consciousness, and we will inevitably confront the unimaginable karmic effects that correspond to them.

Nagarjuna states in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*:

Even when the sea dries up
And Mount Meru vanishes,
Karmic causes and conditions from past lives
Will neither burn away nor come to an end.

Our actions will eventually ripen in our mindstreams. Even if we perform a small good deed, its effect will certainly ripen in due time. Even if we commit a minor wrongdoing, its effect will eventually ripen on our own aggregates,²⁷ bases,²⁸

²⁷ Aggregates or skandhas refer to the five psycho-physical aggregates, which, according to Buddhist philosophy, are the basis for self-grasping. They are form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

²⁸ Bases or ayatana refer to the field of cognition in Buddhist philosophy. Human physical existence consists of twelve ayatanas: the six cognitive faculties (five sense organs and the mind) and the six corresponding categories of objects. This classification of the elements of

and elements,²⁹ rather than on the four external elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, as stated in the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*.

Therefore, you don't need to think, "I have been doing good things since my childhood in this life, and I've never done anything bad. So why do I still have to experience suffering? This is so unfair!" Such a statement indicates a misunderstanding of principle of cause and effect.

There are individuals who, despite wholeheartedly dedicating themselves to virtuous deeds and the practice of Dharma—such as Mahayana's cultivation of bodhicitta and meditation on emptiness, or Vajrayana's generation stages, completion stages, and meditation on the pointing-out instruction on the nature of the mind—still experience suffering. The effects of their actions in past lives, which would have otherwise remained dormant but later led to rebirth in lower realms, manifest due to the antidote they are applying and ripen in this very life. The *Diamond Sutra* states:

Bodhisattvas who practice transcendent wisdom may face intense suffering in this life. This suffering is the karmic effect of past actions that would have caused torments in future lives but have ripened earlier in their current life.

After practicing *Prajnaparamita* or transcendent wisdom, some Buddhists fall ill, encounter hostile enemies, or experience family conflicts. They face various major obstacles and difficulties and suffer significantly more than ordinary people.

Why is that? Does it mean they shouldn't have practiced transcendent wisdom, or that its power cannot counter attacks from the Mara King? Of course not. It is because transcendent wisdom carries great blessings that can lessen the effects of negative actions, causing what would have remained dormant and later resulted in rebirth in the three lower realms to instead manifest in this life as sickness or obstacles.

When we were studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, a few Dharma students dropped out due to family conflicts, poor health, or other reasons. They thought,

the world is based on human experience and is used by Buddhist philosophers to explain how everything in the temporal world is transient and nonsubstantial.

²⁹ Elements or dhatus refer to the eighteen elements used as a classification of all knowable things, which include the six sense objects, the six sense faculties, and the six sense consciousnesses.

“I was pretty healthy before studying this text, but my health deteriorated after the study.”

Many such misconceptions are quite common in the Han areas of China, reflecting a lack of understanding of Buddhism. Some people encounter minor setbacks after studying the Dharma and immediately blame the Dharma, losing their confidence. However, they fail to realize that their suffering is a result of their past actions.

I didn’t understand this very well either before my ordination. At that time, a good practitioner in my hometown fell seriously ill, and I asked a Dharma teacher, “Hasn’t he practiced well? Then why does he have to suffer like this?”

The teacher quoted the aforementioned scriptural evidence from The Diamond Cutter Sutra, explaining that it is normal for even some great masters to appear sick. I kept this quote in mind. It wasn’t until I studied *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* that I realized the quote was from this text.

In fact, there are many similar stories in historical accounts. For example, Xuanzang’s³⁰ teacher, Śīlabhadra,³¹ was a renowned Buddhist monk and the abbot of Nalanda Monastery in India. When Xuanzang arrived in India, Śīlabhadra was over one hundred years old. Upon hearing that Xuanzang had come from the Tang Empire of the East, Śīlabhadra couldn’t help but cry. As it turns out, there was a miraculous story behind it.

Three years before Xuanzang’s arrival, Śīlabhadra suffered from a strange illness and was in great agony. Although he had been a long-term practitioner, he could no longer endure the torment and was contemplating suicide.

That night, Śīlabhadra dreamed of Manjushri, who told him, “Many kalpas ago, you were a king multiple times and committed numerous negative actions against your people. You were destined to fall into the lower realms and experience torments for a very long time, but because you are propagating Mahayana Buddhism and benefiting many beings in this life, the severe consequences of your past actions

³⁰ Xuanzang (602–664), born Chen Hui / Chen Yi, also known as Hiuen Tsang, was a 7th-century Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveler, and translator. He is renowned for his epoch-making contributions to Chinese Buddhism, the travelogue of his journey to India from 629 to 645 CE, his efforts to bring over 657 Indian texts to China, and his translations of some of these texts.

³¹ Śīlabhadra (529–645) was a Buddhist monk and philosopher. He is best known as the abbot of Nalanda Monastery in India, an expert on Yogacara teachings, and the personal tutor of the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang.

have now transformed into the milder pain of the illness you are experiencing. You'd better hang on, because three years from now, a monk from the Tang Empire will come and seek your teachings here. If you teach him the Dharma, you will recover."

After Xuanzang received his teachings, Shīlabhadra indeed recovered from his illness.

This story illustrates that many masters appearing to be ill or encountering obstacles are still in accordance with the principle of cause and effect. Similarly, when ordinary practitioners face difficulties in life after engaging in the profound practice of emptiness or tantric practices, it indicates that the grave effects that would have ripened in a future life have surfaced and lessened in this one. It's akin to those who would otherwise be sentenced to death now receiving a lesser punishment, such as losing a hand or an ear.

This is not only mentioned in the *Diamond Sutra*, but also appears in the *Discourse on Meeting of the Father and the Son*:

After committing many evil deeds,
One will fall into the lower realms;
When encountering a favorable condition,
The severity of karmic retribution may be lessened.

It is not necessarily a negative outcome if a monastic falls ill frequently, or if a Dharma student becomes depressed or even psychotic. Thanks to the blessings of the Three Jewels, if we can exhaust all our karmic debts within this life that would otherwise lead to suffering in the countless kalpas to come, then any torments we face in this life are truly worthwhile. After all, compared to the torments of the three lower realms, those in the human realm are insignificant.

Therefore, we must understand this specific karmic effect. If someone who once had a smooth life now encounters various difficulties after studying the Dharma and practicing emptiness, we can comfort them with this Buddhist teaching so they do not lose faith on the path to enlightenment.

On the other hand, some individuals who consistently harm others might experience the karmic effects of positive actions they committed in the past, even though these effects were meant to ripen much later. For instance, in the land of Aparantaka, a remarkable event unfolded: precious stones rained from the sky

for seven days, followed by seven days of clothing, and then seven days of grain. Ultimately, a deluge of earth fell, crushing everyone to death and causing them to be reborn in hell.

The extended version of this story can be found in the *Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra*:

King Udayana had a beloved consort named Syamavati. One day, as Syamavati danced for the king, he noticed the death sign from her movements and realized she would die seven days later.

Knowing this, Syamavati requested King Udayana to allow her to take the Buddhist nun's ordination. She promised that if she were reborn in the celestial realm, she would visit the king again.

King Udayana was very attached to Syamavati, so he didn't permit her to become a nun until the sixth day. On that day, Syamavati took ordination and upheld sojong, or the one-day precepts. On the morning of the seventh day, Syamavati experienced a stomach cramp due to overconsumption of honey and died. She was reborn as a celestial being. To keep her previous promise, she visited King Udayana.

The king realized that although Syamavati had been a monastic for just one day, she had already been reborn in the celestial realm. As a result, King Udayana developed great faith in the monastic precepts, so he abdicated his throne and passed it to his son Marakata. The king then became a monk and engaged in practice in a secluded place. Soon, he attained Arhathood.

After taking over the throne, Marakata was swayed by bad advice and neglected state affairs. King Udayana was concerned about his son's ignorance and intended to persuade him to act virtuously for the sake of all the citizens.

Marakata was very happy about his father's impending visit, but one devious minister said, "When the former king returns, you must return the throne and will no longer be king. Therefore, you should kill the former king!" Marakata entertained this malicious thought and sent someone to assassinate his father.

The assassin found King Udayana and revealed his intention, saying he didn't want to kill the king because he had often received his favors, but added that if he didn't follow Marakata's orders, he himself wouldn't survive. King Udayana took pity on the assassin and allowed him to carry out his task. However, no matter how the assassin attempted to kill King Udayana, the king remained unharmed.

King Udayana told him, “Please return and convey my words to Marakata, saying that he has committed two crimes with immediate retribution: killing his father and killing an arhat. But if he can confess, perhaps the karmic consequences of his actions will be reduced.” The assassin agreed to do so, and then he decapitated King Udayana and brought his head to the palace.

Marakata noticed that his father’s head remained vivid despite the long journey. He realized his father had attained realization. He cried so sorrowfully that he fainted to the ground. It took a long while before he regained consciousness. Then the assassin shared King Udayana’s last words, deepening the son’s remorse.

The devious minister feared that Marakata would blame him, so he said, “Where on earth are there arhats? Please don’t believe those lies, which only make you miserable.”

Marakata replied, “After my father’s death, his head remained unchanged in color for many days. How is it not possible that he attained realization? Besides, two of his ministers became monks and achieved Arhathood during his reign. I’ve witnessed their miraculous powers. The stupas that contain their relics still stand intact. How can you say these are not true?”

The devious minister answered, “Magic spells and medicinal powers can also produce miracles. The two ministers were not arhats at all. I will prove it to you in a few days.”

The minister dug a hole in each of the two stupas and placed a cat in each one. He trained the cats so that when the ministers’ names were spoken, the cats would come out for food, and when instructed to return to their holes, they would comply. After a period of such training, the cats formed this habit.

Then, the devious minister invited Marakata to the stupas, claiming he would prove whether the two ministers were arhats. He called out the ministers’ names loudly, and the two cats emerged; he instructed the animals to return, and they complied.

Observing this, Marakata no longer believed in the effects of good or bad actions, nor did he trust the noble path. He became increasingly vicious and relentless.

One day, when Marakata was outside the palace, he noticed the Arhat Katyayana meditating in a quiet place. Thinking that arhats didn’t exist at all,

Marakata grew cruel and threw dirt onto the great master's crown. He ordered his men to bury Kātyāyana until the master was completely covered.

A devout minister, a believer in the Three Jewels, immediately removed the earth from Katyayana after everyone had left. Seeing that the great master was untouched by the dirt, the minister was overjoyed and made a long prostration at the master's feet.

Katyayana told the pious minister, "Seven days from now, there will be a rain of earth that will crush everyone to death, including the king and his people."

The minister was distressed and reported this to the king. Meanwhile, he secretly dug a tunnel leading out of the city.

Seven days later, there was a rain of flowers, jewels, and clothing, which delighted the people. The devious minister told Marakata, "This auspicious event occurred because of your merit. The fools said there would be a rain of earth. What nonsense!" Many people heard about the fortunate rain and flocked to Marakata's country.

Suddenly, four metal gates closed off the four entrances to the city, trapping everyone inside. Meanwhile, a rain of earth fell, burying the king and all the people within the city. Marakata's country became a mountain of earth. Only the devout minister and a few fortunate individuals managed to escape alive through the tunnel.

The devout minister went to see Katyayana and asked, "Why did Marakata and his people have to suffer this together?"

Katyayana answered, "Many kalpas ago, the daughter of a venerable elder lived upstairs. One day, while sweeping the floor, she carelessly threw dust outside. A monk on his alms round happened to pass by, and all the dirt fell on his head. Seeing this, the daughter felt no remorse at all.

"Later, she married a good husband. When other women asked why she was able to have such a fortunate marriage, the daughter replied, 'It was nothing special. It's just that when I cleaned my floor upstairs, I happened to sweep the dust onto a monk's head. Because of this, I now have a good husband.'

"All the women followed her example, sweeping dust onto the heads of monks. As a result of their actions, the daughter was reborn as a king, while the other women became citizens of the king's realm. Today, all of them are experiencing the

karmic retribution of being buried in dirt. Thus, it was the result of their collective karma.”

When I was visiting the site of the Yushu³² earthquake, I saw the corpses of many buried people being uncovered. I thought, “These people must have committed a misdeed together in a past life. Now that the karmic effect has ripened, they must suffer the consequences collectively.”

Recently, a wealthy woman from Hong Kong held a birthday banquet in Shanghai. The budget for each guest was 2,000 yuan, and the total cost of the event was several million Chinese yuan. The dinner featured top-class crabs as the main dish. Many celebrities who are Buddhists were also present.

Some media outlets criticized their participation, arguing that they shouldn’t have been there. Just consider how many crabs lost their lives for the banquet. In a few more lifetimes, what karmic result will these guests collectively face? It’s difficult to contemplate.

There was a deadly mudslide in Zhouqu County³³ a few days ago, which killed more than 1,400 people. It rained heavily that day, and around midnight, a mudslide swept through the town, burying at least one village entirely. Regardless of whether it is fourteen hundred people or two hundred, if they jointly commit the same wrongful act, they will inevitably experience the same karmic result. This is unavoidable.

These situations—where those who engage in positive actions suffer and those who commit negative actions prosper—are always the effects of past actions. Our current actions, whether good or bad, may not ripen in this life, but they will certainly have their effects in our next life or in those to follow. Nagarjuna states in *Letter to a Friend*:

Although performing wrong and evil deeds
Does not at once, like a sword, create a gash,
When death arrives, those evil acts will manifest,

³² Yushu (also known as Jyekundo) is a town in Qinghai Province situated on high rolling grasslands at an elevation of 12,100 ft.

³³ The 2010 Gansu mudslide was a deadly disaster in Zhouqu County, Gansu Province, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, China, that occurred at midnight on August 8, 2010. The floods were triggered after decades of clear-cut logging practices had reduced the watershed’s capacity to absorb heavy rainfall.

Their karmic fruit will clearly be revealed.³⁴

The *Abhidharma Treatise on the Establishment of Worlds as Spoken by the Buddha* states:

When an evil deed is just committed,
It's not like a fire that can burn immediately;
It's more like a fire that is covered by ashes
Which gradually burns the evil-doer.

and

When evil deeds are unripe,
Fools think they are pleasant;
When they are ripened,
Fools realize they are painful.

Some fools believe they are exempt from the principle of cause and effect and that there are no karmic repercussions for taking a life. However, they are unaware that the manifestation of these consequences is simply a matter of time. Once the causes and conditions have come together, they will undoubtedly endure the torment of karmic outcomes.

Therefore, it is very important for us to develop a strong conviction about the principle of cause and effect and to always act accordingly. Please refrain from using the Dharma language of the highest views, such as “the good and the bad are indivisible” or “all things are created by mind alone,” to scorn the principle of cause and effect. Padmasambhava once said to Trisong Detsen:

Great King, in this Vajrayana of mine, the view holds utmost importance. However, be cautious not to let your actions slip toward the view. If you do, you may fall into the destructive views of demons, who claim that both goodness and evil are empty. Conversely, do not allow your view to shift toward actions either, or you will become ensnared in materialism and ideology, hindering your attainment of liberation...

³⁴ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

Please remember this quote! The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often cited the verse³⁵ from *A Prayer of Aspiration for the Flourishing and Spread of the Ancient Translation Tradition*. He advised:

A practitioner should embrace Nagarjuna's view of emptiness and nonduality but should act like Shantarakshita,³⁶ who upheld the precepts of individual liberation.

Many people are doing the opposite. They do not even understand the basic views of Shravaka Buddhism, such as the selflessness of person and the Four Dharma Seals. Furthermore, they have yet to cultivate renunciation or develop a conviction regarding the inevitable karmic effects of their actions. However, their actions go far beyond those of tantric practices. This is completely wrong.

Here is a story that many people have been sharing recently:

A Tibetan practitioner told his followers: "Watch me by the lake. The naga king is about to offer me a terma. I am going to take it from the lake." Then he tied a Buddha statue to his legs and entered the lake empty-handed. He intended to untie the statue in the lake and bring it up as a terma. However, he slipped, lost his footing, and drowned. It was only after his body was found that the secret tied to his leg was discovered.

Here is another true story recounted by some government officials:

A practitioner wanted to inspire faith among his followers, so he bound a bronze Buddha statue tightly to his waist with a piece of cloth. A few days later, the mark of the statue remained on his waist, and he showed it to many people, claiming that a buddha's image had naturally appeared on his body...

Such a person doesn't even believe in the fundamental principle of cause and

³⁵ The action of Śāntarakṣita, exquisite scholar of Zahor,
And the view of the unequalled, glorious Nāgārjuna
Integrated as one, seal the tradition of this lineage:
May this teaching of the lotus-born buddha flourish and spread!

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³⁶ Shantarakshita (725–788), whose name translates into English as "protected by the One who is at peace," was an important and influential Indian Buddhist philosopher, particularly within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Shantarakshita was a philosopher of the Madhyamaka school who studied at Nalanda Monastery under Jnanagarbha and became the founder of Samye, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet.

effect, let alone hold the views of the Great Perfection. Even a layperson would not treat a Buddha statue in such a disrespectful manner, yet the so-called practitioners in these stories do so without hesitation. As Padmasambhava said, “They fall into the evil views of demons, prattling on about how goodness is empty, and evil is empty.” What they have done is truly terrible.

Therefore, Padmasambhava’s teachings on the link between view and action are particularly critical, and I hope you will grasp their significance. As a Buddhist, even if you cannot do anything good, at the very least, you must not commit grave misdeeds in the name of Buddhism. Padmasambhava stated,

That is why my view is higher than the sky, but my attention to
my actions and their effects is finer than flour.³⁷

Regardless of how fully one has realized the nature of reality through the practice of the Great Perfection, the Great Middle Way, Mahamudra, Chan, or Pure Land, it is essential to be meticulously mindful of one’s actions and their effects, following the example of many great masters. Thus, we should refrain from even the slightest negative actions and engage in even the smallest positive deeds.

Of course, only the Buddha can fully comprehend the link between causes and effects. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* states:

Though it is empty, it is not nothingness;
Though it continues, it is not permanent;
The faults and merits won’t disappear—
This is the teaching from the Buddha.

Only the Buddha can fully reveal the truth of cause and effect through his wisdom. Its profundity is beyond the grasp of an ordinary person’s conceptual mind. Therefore, we must understand that the truth of causes and effects is incredibly profound.

Someone asked Padampa Sangye, “Once we have realized emptiness, do our negative actions still have effects on us?”

Padampa Sangye responded:

Upon realizing emptiness, engaging in negativity becomes

³⁷ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 129.

inconceivable. True realization of emptiness naturally gives rise to compassion at the same moment.

Therefore, a person who has realized emptiness will certainly pay close attention to their actions and their effects. They will not recklessly commit any misdeeds, such as killing. Thus, we can infer that a person who carelessly engages in wrongdoing and pays no attention to cause and effect has not yet realized emptiness. Nowadays, many people claim to have attained realization, yet they still commit serious negative actions. From this, we can discern their true level of practice.

Of course, there are great enlightened practitioners who, for the benefit of living beings, may act like Monk Ji Gong, who ate meat and drank alcohol. For such great enlightened practitioners, their actions do not impact their state of realization. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

Those who know the principle of cause and effect
Will always pay attention to minute actions and their effects.
Misdeeds will not stain them,
Just as mud does not stain the sky.

This verse in Sutrayana aligns with the views and actions in Vajrayana.

If you truly wish to practice the Dharma sincerely, it is essential to prioritize aligning your actions with the principle of cause and effect. View and action should be cultivated side by side.

As your view becomes increasingly profound, your actions will become more impeccable, and your compassion for living beings will grow stronger. This will demonstrate that you have not deviated from the path.

[Many methods are presented in *The Ten Grounds Sutra* regarding how to infer a person's level of realization based on their actions.]

A true sign that you have grasped this teaching on the effects of actions is to follow the example of Jetsun Milarepa.

One day, his disciple Ngendzong Repa said to him, "Jetsun, the actions we witness you performing are beyond the comprehension of ordinary beings. Precious

Jetsun, weren't you, from the very beginning, an incarnation of Vajradhara, a buddha, or a bodhisattva?"³⁸

Milarepa replied, "If you see me as an incarnation of Vajradhara, a buddha, or a bodhisattva, it means you have faith in me—but that would be one of the greatest misunderstandings of the Dharma!"

Milarepa continued, "I began by committing extremely negative actions, engaging in spells and causing hailstorms. Before long, I realized that escaping rebirth in hell was impossible. This motivated me to practice the Dharma with unwavering diligence. Through the profound methods of Vajrayana, I cultivated exceptional qualities within myself.

If you struggle to develop genuine resolve for Dharma practice, it is because you lack true faith in the principle of cause and effect. Anyone with even a little determination could cultivate the same courage I did—provided they had deep, heartfelt confidence in the effects of their actions. In doing so, they would attain similar accomplishments, and others would regard them as manifestations of Vajradhara, or as a buddha or bodhisattva."

His disciple Sevan Repa also asked Jetsun Milarepa, "When you pursued the Dharma and followed your guru, you demonstrated such great devotion and perseverance. After receiving the teachings, you practiced them in a secluded place with remarkable diligence. There is no way we can do the same. We lack the courage to practice, yet we won't attain liberation from samsara if we don't practice. What should we do?"

Milarepa replied:

Other than having conviction in the principle of cause and effect, I have no other instruction to offer. Anyone who believes in this principle can practice with great diligence, just as I did. With belief in cause and effect, your faith in the guru will naturally grow, and you won't fear any difficulty on the path. Conversely, if you lack

³⁸ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche commented:

This is because Ngendzong Repa believed that only an incarnation of a sublime being could perform such actions, not realizing it was the power of the Dharma. Nowadays, many Buddhists like to say, "My guru is a sublime one, so he can do this. How could I possibly achieve what he can?"

Such a self-deprecating comment reflects a mistaken view of the Dharma. In fact, we can all attain the state of Milarepa if we emulate him by renouncing this life and believing in the karmic effects of actions.

certainty about the principle, you will struggle to find the motivation for virtuous deeds, and your practice will definitely not succeed.

Milarepa's profound conviction in the principle of cause and effect led him to believe that his past misdeeds would result in rebirth in the hell realms. This certainty drove him to practice with such unwavering dedication that few stories, whether from India or Tibet, can compare to the hardships and perseverance he endured.

Here is a story³⁹ in *The Life of Gampopa*:

When Gampopa left, Milarepa bid him farewell on his journey. After offering some valuable advice, Milarepa intended to give Gampopa a profound pith instruction but hesitated, saying, "I have an unusually profound pith instruction, but it is too precious to just give away. I am done now, son. You may go."

Gampopa then crossed a stone bridge over a river, leaving Milarepa standing on the other side. When Gampopa reached a distance barely within earshot of where Milarepa still stood, he heard his guru calling him. Turning, he saw Milarepa, now quite far away, motioning for him to come back. Gampopa returned immediately.

Milarepa said, "Ah! Who else but you deserves to receive this most precious quintessential instruction, even though it is too valuable to give away? Now come here, and I will give it to you!"

Gampopa was overjoyed and asked, "Should I first offer you a mandala?"

Milarepa replied, "No, it is not necessary for you to offer me a mandala. I only ask that you cherish this teaching and never waste it."

He then led Gampopa behind a large nearby rock.

"Now look!" Milarepa said, lifting the back of his robe to reveal his buttocks, covered with lumps of hard callus, like the hooves of an animal, due to having sat for so long on stony ground meditating.

Milarepa stated, "There is no more profound teaching than this. Now you can imagine the hardships I have undergone. My attainment of great realization came from this. It has simply been through persistent effort that I have accumulated merit and gained accomplishment. You need such effort, not any other doctrine.

³⁹ The translation of this story told by Khenpo Sodargye incorporated details from *The Life of Gampopa* by Jampa Mackenzie Stewart, Snow Lion Publication, 2nd Edition (2004).

This is the essence of my teaching. Whether you become a Buddha or not depends on effort. With it, there can be no question about your liberation.”

This teaching left a lasting impression on Gampopa, inspiring and emboldening him on many subsequent occasions. Gampopa held his guru’s instruction close to his heart, and through diligent practice, he also achieved extraordinary accomplishments.

Therefore, we should cultivate a strong confidence in the principle of cause and effect from the bottom of our hearts. We should strive to engage in as many positive actions as possible, no matter how insignificant they may seem, while applying the three supreme methods. Meanwhile, we should commit wholeheartedly to refraining from even the smallest negative deed, even if it means risking our own lives.

In our daily lives, we should always remain mindful and vigilant.

♦ In the morning

When we wake up in the morning, we shouldn’t leap out of bed abruptly like livestock rushing from a pen. Instead, while still lying down, we should relax our minds, turn inward, and reflect carefully: “Did I have a good or bad dream last night?”

If we engaged in any negative actions during the night in our dreams, we should confess and purify them by reciting the Vajrasattva mantra or chanting the hundred-syllable mantra twenty-one times. Many past practitioners had this habit. I have emphasized this repeatedly, but some people still don’t listen. When they wake up, they often behave even worse than a yak. At least a yak wags its tail upon waking, adjusts its posture, and remains in its own “meditative” state. Many people don’t even do this.

On the other hand, if we have done something positive in the dream, we should rejoice and dedicate the merit to the benefit of all beings. We should cultivate bodhicitta by thinking, “Today, I will strive to engage in any positive actions I can while making every effort to refrain from negative actions, so that all sentient beings may attain Buddhahood.”

This is very important! As practitioners, we should be mindful and vigilant upon waking in the morning, particularly examining our dreams. A person’s dreams are closely linked to their practice. If we maintain faith and joy in the guru and the Three Jewels, and cultivate altruism toward all living beings throughout

the day, our dreams at night will involve the guru and the Dharma. Conversely, if we are consumed by greed, anger, and ignorance during the day, we may experience nightmares at night. This is also mentioned in the practice instructions of the Great Perfection. Once practitioners attain a certain state of realization, all of their dreams will be virtuous.

♦ At night

At night, before falling asleep, we should avoid simply drifting off into unconsciousness as if we were lifeless rocks. Instead, we should take a moment to relax in bed and reflect on our day, asking ourselves, “How did I spend my day? Did I do anything positive?”

If we have accomplished something positive, we should rejoice and dedicate the merit to the benefit of all beings, wishing for them to attain Buddhahood. If we have done something wrong, we should acknowledge it with remorse, thinking, “How terrible! I have just been destroying myself!” We should confess the wrongdoing and resolve firmly not to repeat it in the future.

It is very important to train our minds at all times. *The Sutra on Deliverance from Illness* states:

Faults arise from the mind,
 Faults vanish from the mind.
 Mind is heaven,
 Mind is hell.

If the mind is not tamed, the faults of greed, anger, and ignorance will arise. The elimination and transformation of afflictions also stem from the mind. Therefore, mind is heaven, and mind is hell.

To tame the mind, Dharma fellows at Larung Gar are currently engaged in a one-hundred-day retreat. From various sources, I have learned that many have been practicing very well, and their determination is reflected in their speech and actions.

It is indeed necessary for a practitioner to undertake a one-hundred-day retreat each year. Even if one cannot devote an entire day to practice, at least one should engage in two meditation sessions—one in the morning and the other in the evening—each day.

As for me, even though I am very busy with Larung Gar's administration and construction projects, I make it a point to turn off my mobile every afternoon to practice. Otherwise, if I am occupied all day, I may never find the time to practice until I pass away. Therefore, I dedicate a few hours each day to meditation, especially focusing on preliminaries.

Please do not think of ngöndro, or preliminary practice, as a simple beginner's exercise, which may make you reluctant to engage in it. In fact, if you can practice ngöndro—especially the four common preliminaries—repeatedly and diligently, then through praying for the guru's blessings, you can easily attain the state of the Great Perfection and other high teachings.

Of course, unlike the sangha members at Larung Gar who are full-time practitioners, most laypeople cannot forsake everything to enter retreat. But at the very least, you can dedicate one or two hours, or even just half an hour, to meditate each morning and evening. You can also find time to practice during work breaks, which is crucial for your mind training. Otherwise, if you only have an intellectual understanding of the teachings without truly internalizing them through real practice, the Dharma will be of no help when you face challenges.

Regarding morning and evening practice, Patrul Rinpoche clearly explains this in the text. You need to follow the instructions and simply do it.

For more than twenty years, I have been practicing pith instructions on primordial purity and spontaneous presence while also putting into practice the teachings on renunciation and bodhicitta. Regardless of circumstances, my practice habits have remained consistent for decades.

Some individuals are not like this. For example, today they practice tummo, or inner heat yoga, visualizing fire blazing beneath the navel; tomorrow they practice bindu, or essence-drop, visualizing it descending from the crown. Although the practices involving channels, energies, and essences are extraordinary, they are not essential at this time, according to the great Jigme Phuntsok's tradition.

What is the most essential practice? It is the preliminary practices: the four common ones and the five uncommon ones. Only after establishing a solid foundation through these preliminaries will the high state of realization naturally arise.

Some people mistakenly believe that practicing ngöndro is only a tradition of Larung Gar. In fact, different schools of Tibetan Buddhism, such as Nyingma,

Sakya, Gelugpa, and Kagyupa, all have their own traditions of preliminary practices, although they may differ slightly. Additionally, while Chinese Buddhism may not provide direct instructions on preliminary practices, corresponding teachings can be found in the scriptures. In recent years, I have read scriptures from the Chinese Tripitaka and studied instructions from renowned masters of Chinese Buddhism. Many of these great masters share the same understanding of the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, the defects of samsara, and the principle of cause and effect as those in Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, once you receive the transmission and teachings of ngöndro, it is important to focus on the preliminaries and practice diligently.

We should always remain mindful and vigilant, ensuring that we do not become attached to our perceptions of the universe and the beings within it as inherently real and solid. Instead, we should train ourselves to view everything as a dream-like display or an illusion, keeping our minds gentle and adaptable by consistently abiding in virtues and the right path. The *Lankavatara Sutra* states:

The three kinds of existence⁴⁰ are like mirages,
 Illusions, dreams, hairs in vision, and fire wheels.
 Seeing them in this manner,
 Ultimately one can attain liberation.

Finding Rest in Illusion also contains many pith instructions on perceiving everything as a dream or an illusion. Therefore, if we cling too strongly to our perceptions of the universe and the beings within it, we can hardly succeed in our practice. However, we should still “cling to” our own practice to find the right balance between recognizing everything as a dream and the necessity of holding onto our practice.

The preceding commentary summarizes the quintessential teaching on the four thoughts that turn the mind from samsara. This is by far the most extensive teaching I have ever given on this subject. While I do not possess any profound instructions to offer, I have diligently followed great masters and cultivated unwavering faith in this teaching. Furthermore, I have personally experienced tremendous benefits from this teaching. Hence, in my instruction, I have shared everything I know without holding anything back.

⁴⁰ The three kinds of existence refer to those of desire, form, and formlessness, in which karmic rebirths occur.

Meanwhile, when preparing for my teaching, I cross-referenced numerous stories and scriptural evidence from both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, complementing them by consulting the Tripitaka. I also quoted many instructions from the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and other eminent masters. I hope each of you will put the teachings into good practice after listening. If you can genuinely develop the four thoughts, all my effort and hard work will be entirely worthwhile!

What remains in the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* includes “the benefits of liberation” and “how to follow a spiritual friend” in the common preliminaries, along with all the chapters of the uncommon preliminaries, starting from “taking refuge” to “Guru Yoga” as well as “transference of consciousness.” I will provide a briefer and less detailed coverage of these chapters; otherwise, I may not be able to complete the entire text within the next two or three years. If it were to take five or six years to finish the text, I don’t know whether you or I would even live for that long.

However, your perspectives differ. Some Dharma friends have told me, “It’s wonderful that you can give an extensive teaching on the text. There are so many pith instructions! We want to understand the profound meanings word by word.”

On the other hand, some others have complained, “Ah! Each class only covers a few lines in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*! When will we finish it? It’s too much! I can’t stand it! Khenpo should teach us the main practice of the Great Perfection instead of focusing on the preliminaries every day!”

Despite these comments, I may not necessarily pay attention to them. According to my teaching schedule, the section on the four thoughts is more extensive, while the rest will be more succinct.

If we practice the four common preliminaries well in this way, we will remain mindful and vigilant, and all our positive actions will automatically connect with the three supreme methods. We will be like a medicinal plant that benefits anyone who comes near, as it is said:

A virtuous person is like a medicinal plant,
Benefiting all who rely on them.
A wicked person is like a poisonous plant,
Destroying all who rely on them.

By cultivating the right mindset, we can guide those around us toward the

true Dharma, generating immense merit for ourselves and others. We will avoid rebirth in the lower realms, where conditions continually deteriorate, and instead consistently attain the favorable circumstances of a god's or human's life.

The area where the holder of such a teaching resides will be blessed with merit and prosperity, always protected by the gods. Even if there is only one such person, with the blessings of the Dharma protectors and the power of their own aspiration, they can benefit countless living beings. Their Dharma activities will naturally thrive, and all their wishes can be fulfilled. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says:

If one is free from all evil deeds,
and minute wrongdoings,
he is a person of great virtue,
and none of his wishes remains unfulfilled.

Therefore, I hope all of you can develop conviction in the principle of cause and effect from the bottom of your hearts and behave in accordance with the Dharma. By doing so, no one will find fault with you.

As long as you devote yourself wholeheartedly to living beings and the Dharma, your kind intentions and actions will be welcomed by others. Even if you are just an ordinary person, your greatness will eventually stand out among living beings, just as the sun shines in the sky.

We have just explained the importance of the principle of cause and effect. Next is the verse that concludes this chapter:

*I know all the details of karma, yet I struggle to truly
believe in it.*

*I have received many Dharma teachings, yet I never
practice them.*

*Bless me and those like me who have committed
wrongdoings*

That our minds may align with the Dharma.

Patrul Rinpoche expressed this with humility, wishing that everyone could

emulate the great masters of the past, always act in accordance with the principle of cause and effect, and never commit any wrongdoing.

[This concludes *The Principle of Cause and Effect*.]



Lesson 73

“Guided by many learned and accomplished sublime beings, ... Follow such a teacher, and accomplishment comes swiftly.” [page 133–139]

We have already covered “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” “the impermanence of life,” “the defects of samsara,” and “the principle of cause and effect.” We now move to the next section:

2.1.5. THE BENEFITS OF LIBERATION

First, Patrul Rinpoche pays homage to his root guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, with a prayer:

*Guided by many wise and accomplished noble beings,
You have followed and practiced the instructions of your
teachers.
You point out the supreme path of liberation to others
without error.
Peerless guru, at your feet, I humbly bow.*

What exceptional qualities did Patrul Rinpoche’s guru possess? Guided by many learned and accomplished masters, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu followed their instructions and put them into practice. Eventually, he developed the wisdom of selflessness and realized the true nature of all phenomena. Meanwhile, he pointed

out the sublime path of liberation to fortunate beings without error. Patrul Rinpoche bowed with reverence at the feet of his peerless guru.

As practitioners of later generations, we should always take refuge, prostrate, and make offerings to our root guru and all the lineage masters. While doing so, we can recite sadhanas, contemplate the great qualities of the masters, or pray to them. This will help us cultivate fervent faith and appreciation.

This chapter discusses the benefits of liberation.

2.1.5.1. The Definition of Liberation

So, what is liberation? It is to break free from the vast ocean of suffering known as samsara and to attain the level of a shravaka, a pratyekabuddha, or perfect Buddhahood. According to Lama Tsongkhapa's *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* and other Buddhist scriptures, the sequential practice of renunciation, bodhicitta, and nondual wisdom can uproot all mental defilements and eliminate all suffering in the three worlds. Eventually, this leads to liberation.

Of course, worldly people define "liberation" differently. They believe, for example, that getting out of jail is liberation, recovering from illness is liberation, and overcoming difficulties is also liberation. However, these examples represent a form of pseudo-liberation, not true liberation.

Only by eradicating all seeds of afflictions and the causes of suffering can we truly attain liberation. We must yearn for such liberation; otherwise, we are not genuine practitioners.

You must first have an intellectual understanding of the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, then contemplate its meaning and put the teachings into practice repeatedly. Otherwise, you may keep the teachings only on paper rather than in your mind. In such a case, you may feel something when reading the text or listening to the teaching, but once you leave the dharmic environment, your mind may immediately regress, which means your study may be quite ineffective.

Each instruction from a great master, whether in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* or other teachings, can nourish our mindstream and bring us incredible blessings and benefits. However, because people have different dispositions, they derive varying benefits from the Dharma. For example, some individuals can completely eradicate their defilements through these texts and instructions,

while others, even after years of studying the Dharma, struggle with their mental afflictions due to a lack of mindfulness and vigilance.

Therefore, when you study the Dharma, even if you only listen to one class per day, ensure you derive something meaningful from it. For example, after listening to teachings on the principle of cause and effect, strive to recap what you have learned without needing anyone else to prompt you.

You may reflect on the following questions: What is the chapter about? How do the stories and instructions assist me? What was my attitude toward the principle previously? How should I act in accordance with the principle moving forward?

A wise person will consider how the teachings apply to themselves from various perspectives. This is an indispensable practice.

In short, we must first understand what liberation is. Some Buddhists today claim to be in pursuit of liberation, but are they truly seeking the path to liberation? I will pose a significant question mark here.

2.1.5.2. Types of Liberation

2.1.5.2.1. Causes Leading to Liberation

The causes for attaining liberation are twofold. First, we make our minds workable by contemplating the four thoughts that turn the mind away from samsara, beginning with the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. Second, we engage in practices, starting with taking refuge—the foundation of all paths—and continuing with the practice of bodhicitta, Vajrasattva, mandala, and others, until we fully complete the main practice. The benefits of each practice are detailed in the relevant chapters.

In fact, the practice of the four reflections or four thoughts, which include the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, the defects of samsara, and the principle of cause and effect, serves as the foundation for all practices. It enables one to cultivate genuine renunciation. Without this foundation, progress in other practices becomes limited. Even if you have advanced to the practice of high teachings, such as the Great Perfection, Mahamudra, Yamantaka, or the Great Middle Way, the practice itself merely acts as a cause for benefiting this present life.

Causes leading to benefits in this life, as opposed to causes that lead to liberation in future lives, differ significantly. Therefore, an experienced teacher will urge his disciples to first renounce this life by practicing the four common preliminaries; otherwise, their practice will lack stability, and their state of practice will not last. Upon this foundation, the teacher will instruct his disciples to further study and practice each uncommon preliminary. By doing so, the disciples will create the causes for liberation.

The Words of My Perfect Teacher contains a complete and thorough explanation of the causes that lead to liberation.⁴¹ If we can understand how to abandon vices and adopt virtues as explained in the text, genuinely refrain from wrongdoing, and joyfully engage in positive actions, we will experience happiness in this life and certainly attain liberation in the future life. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

If a person refrains from misdeeds,
And engages in good deeds with a joyful attitude,
This person is always happy in this life,
And will definitely attain nirvana—the fruition of liberation.

Therefore, you must understand the importance of the preliminaries, which I have explained in detail in previous classes. I believe you will pay more attention to this; otherwise, your practice will not succeed. However, many people remain unwilling to practice the four common preliminaries. Instead, they are interested in practicing Qigong or yoga, or meditating on a bindu, a Buddha statue, or a seed syllable.

In fact, those practices are not difficult. But if you aspire to become a true Dharma practitioner, you must cultivate conviction about the four thoughts—the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, the defects of samsara, and the principle of cause and effect. Otherwise, whatever you practice will lack a solid foundation and will not endure. Therefore, you must strive to practice the common preliminaries.

2.1.5.2.2. The Result: the Three Levels of Enlightenment

⁴¹ Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says: “Although all the practices of the main part of the path are not formally described in this book, they are there in essence. The book is complete because it contains the entire meaning of the path.”

Whether one achieves the state of a shravaka, a pratyekabuddha, or Buddhahood, the result is peace and tranquility, free from the perilous cycles of samsaric suffering. How truly joyful it is!

Having chosen the Mahayana path above all others, all practices—whether involving the ten virtuous actions, the Four Immeasurables, the six paramitas, the four concentrations, the four formless states, calm abiding (*shamatha*), or profound insight (*vipashyana*)—must be undertaken with the singular aim of attaining perfect Buddhahood. These practices should be carried out in accordance with the three supreme methods: first, cultivating bodhicitta as the preparatory motivation; second, maintaining a state free from conceptual elaboration during the main practice; and third, concluding by dedicating the merits for the benefit of all beings.

No matter what one is doing, an antecedent cause leads to a subsequent result. Similarly, you are all in pursuit of liberation; therefore, if you have the aforementioned causes leading to liberation, you will undoubtedly attain the result of liberation. To achieve this result, we must begin by practicing renunciation and developing the conviction that all emotions are suffering, all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, and the tranquility of no-self is eternal happiness.

Master Yijing of the Tang dynasty translated a very short sutra titled *The Questions of the Naga King Sāgara*. In part, the sutra states:

Once the Buddha was teaching the Dharma to 1,250 monks and many bodhisattvas in the naga's palace.

The naga king asked, "Is there a dharma that is simple yet encompasses everything?"

The Buddha answered, "There is a teaching on the four supreme dharmas. If one can recite it, grasp its meaning, and put it into practice, it is equivalent to reciting all 84,000 teachings. What are the four supreme dharmas?

All conditioned phenomena are impermanent,
 All tainted things are suffering,
 All phenomena are devoid of self,
 Nirvana is beyond extremes.

These are the Four Dharma Seals to which we often refer. If you don't have time to recite long scriptures, I believe it should pose no problem for you to read this

verse once every day. The Buddha said it is the quintessence of his 84,000 teachings. It is essential that you incorporate this verse into your daily prayers, reciting and contemplating it often: “All phenomena are impermanent; all emotions are suffering; when I attain the state devoid of self, I can achieve peaceful and blissful nirvana.”

In fact, “peace and bliss” are the result of liberation, which is the ultimate goal of all living beings in the three worlds. By performing good deeds with the attitude of bodhicitta, we can ultimately attain this supreme result. So please don’t lose sight of the true aim of liberation. Otherwise, no matter how diligently you practice, it will be in vain.

[This concludes *The Benefits of Liberation*.]

2.1.6. HOW TO FOLLOW A TEACHER

2.1.6.1. The Necessity of Following a Teacher

There is no sutra, tantra, or sastra that mentions any being ever attaining perfect Buddhahood without having followed a spiritual teacher. Even Buddha Shakyamuni manifested that he had followed the Great Sage of Shakyas in one of his past lives and listened to teachings from various teachers in different places before eventually attaining perfect enlightenment.

It is clear that no one has ever achieved the realizations belonging to the ten stages and five paths through their own ingenuity and prowess. All great accomplished practitioners, whether from India, the Tibetan region, or the Han region of China, attained realization of the nature of all phenomena because they followed and served qualified teachers. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* states:

In the Dharma realms of the ten directions,
All the Buddha's teachings
Can be accessed through
Serving a qualified teacher.

Some uninformed individuals claim, "Only Tibetan Buddhism places great importance on the teacher and even regards the teacher as the Buddha." They often cite the life stories of Milarepa and other masters to support their argument. In doing so, they carelessly promote their wrong views, which may mislead inexperienced individuals and lead them astray. In reality, these individuals have neither studied the sutras and shastras nor grasped the true meaning of the Buddha's teachings; they have merely heard a few words and then misinterpreted them out of context.

In many sutras, the Buddha stated that after his parinirvana, he would appear as spiritual teachers to benefit countless living beings during the degenerate age.

The Buddha said in the *Sutra of the Great Drum*:

Don't feel sad, Ananda,
Don't lament, Ananda,
In future times I will
Take the form of spiritual teachers,

To help you and others.

Therefore, this view is not exclusive to Tibetan Buddhism. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* also states:

I will also manifest myself in Jambudvīpa as learned teachers,
And teach the naive and ignorant to enter the true Dharma.

From this scriptural evidence, we can see that the Buddha will appear as spiritual teachers in this world to liberate living beings.

Without following a qualified teacher, no matter how intelligent or hardworking you are, you won't even fully understand the terms and practices in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, let alone attain the qualities of the five paths and ten stages.

Some Dharma friends were quite arrogant, believing they could attain Buddhahood through self-study. However, due to their lack of guidance from a qualified teacher, they ended up wasting their time and achieving nothing.

Therefore, following a qualified teacher is extremely important in Buddhism. Without guidance from a teacher, it is impossible for a person to see their innate buddha nature. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* says:

By not being able to get close to a good spiritual adviser,
Despite the fact [that each of them] has buddha nature,
They cannot see it.⁴²

Therefore, if you want to assimilate the profound Dharma, you must rely on a qualified teacher. The *Flower Ornament Sūtra* says:

To achieve omniscience,
One must be determined to follow an authentic qualified
teacher.

and

See the qualified teachers as buddhas.

and

⁴² Blum, Mark L., trans. *The Nirvana Sūtra (Mahāparinirvāṇa-Sūtra)*. Vol. 1. BDK English Tripiṭaka Series. Moraga, CA: BDK America, 2015.

The buddhas are pleased with those
 Who put the instructions of qualified teachers into practice;
 Those who follow the words of qualified teachers
 Are close to omniscience.

There are many such scriptural references in the sutras.

Of course, if you don't pursue the Dharma, that's a different matter. There are many non-Buddhists in this world, including *Lokāyatikas* who are nihilists, and those who believe in Ishvara, meaning a god, supreme being, and the like. Their religions don't require reliance on a teacher.

Currently, some people excessively emphasize the notion of equality. In their opinion, teachers and students should be considered equal, as should fathers and sons, gold and stone, and even gurus and disciples. If this were true, there would be no distinction between good and bad in the world. However, I believe that, from the perspective of relative truth, distinctions must still be made. Therefore, this view of equality should not deceive or confuse us, and we must first acknowledge that it is especially crucial to follow a qualified teacher.

All sentient beings, including ourselves, have been highly adept at committing negative deeds and have mastered every aspect of it since time without beginning. However, when it comes to following the path that leads to liberation and completely perfect enlightenment, we are as confused as a blind person wandering alone in the middle of a deserted plain. The *Sutra of the Great Assembly* states:

Due to the delusions of the mind,
 Sentient beings are trapped in the river of life and death;
 It's just like the blind, who, due to loss of sight,
 Are constantly consumed by challenges.

For ordinary people like us, navigating the path to liberation without the guidance of a spiritual teacher is like trying to reach a treasure-filled island without the help of an experienced navigator. Without following a qualified teacher, the day of our liberation remains distant and elusive. Thus, anyone who aspires to attain ultimate liberation must wholeheartedly and respectfully follow a qualified spiritual teacher. This is accomplished in three phases: first, by examining the teacher; then, by following them; and finally, by emulating their realization and actions.

2.1.6.2. Steps of Following a Teacher

2.1.6.2.1. Examining the Teacher

Most of us, as ordinary individuals, are easily influenced by the people and situations around us. Therefore, it is essential to seek guidance from a qualified spiritual teacher.

In the sandalwood forests of the Malaya mountains, when an ordinary tree falls, its wood gradually absorbs the fragrant scent of the surrounding sandalwood trees. Over time, the once ordinary wood begins to exude the same aroma as sandalwood. Similarly, if we live and study alongside a perfect teacher with great qualities, we will gradually be infused with those qualities. Eventually, our actions and character will naturally reflect the teacher's, just as ordinary wood comes to resemble sandalwood in fragrance. Jigme Lingpa said in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

Just as an ordinary piece of wood
Lying in the forests of the Malaya mountains
Absorbs the sandal fragrance from the moist leaves and
branches,
So too does one who follows a teacher resemble them.

Of course, if a practitioner wants to emulate the teacher's realization and actions, the longer they follow the teacher, the better. It is hardly possible for them to attain realization after following the teacher for only one or two days. Some Dharma students act as if they are collecting "Dharma stamps." They receive an empowerment or transmission today and return to their nine-to-five jobs tomorrow without reviewing or practicing what they have received. They naively believe they are all set, with the "Dharma stamps" collected from the teacher.

It is possible for a Dharma student to quickly attain the supreme state of realization if the teacher possesses impeccable powers of blessing and the student has a close karmic connection with the teacher from past lives, as well as extraordinary faith. There are many stories of such awakenings in the past. Nevertheless, most of us are simply ordinary practitioners, so it is better to follow a teacher for as long as possible.

Here is a story about the importance of avoiding harmful friends and following a qualified teacher, from *The Sutra on the Great Departure*:

After Nanda received ordination, he still showed no interest in the life of a bhikkhu, despite the Buddha's repeated urging. Instead, he befriended misbehaving bhikkhus and engaged in idle talk and gossip all day long.

One day, the Buddha brought Nanda to a fish market and asked him to pick up a handful of straw that had been placed among more than a hundred rotten, stinky fish. The Buddha instructed Nanda to hold the straw in his hand for a while and then throw it away.

The Buddha asked, "Do you smell something in your hand, Nanda?"

Nanda replied, "Yes, teacher. It smells very strongly of fish. It is quite unpleasant."

"Well, it is the same when you associate with unqualified teachers and harmful friends," the Buddha said. "Even if you don't spend too long with them, you will still be tainted by their negative influences. You will adopt bad habits and become notorious."

Then the Buddha took Nanda to an incense shop and asked him to hold an incense bag in his hand for a while before setting it aside.

The Buddha asked, "Do you smell something in your hand, Nanda?"

Nanda replied, "Yes, teacher. It has a pleasant aroma."

"Well, it is the same when you are close to qualified teachers and friends," the Buddha said. "If you rely on a perfect teacher full of good qualities, you will be infused with the fragrance of those qualities. You will cultivate those precious qualities within yourself and become renowned."

[Some practitioners who are not diligent in their practice have a particular fondness for listening to pop music. When their Dharma peers occasionally visit their homes for a meal and hear those worldly songs, they can easily be influenced by this negative habit thereafter. Sometimes I pass by certain Dharma friends' cabins and feel sad for them. Why? Because they are still listening to pop songs. It is acceptable if a layperson does so because they haven't renounced their worldly life. But those Dharma friends have renounced their mundane lives and been ordained, yet they still listen to those songs every day from a radio or stereo. What's the point? It would be better for them to enjoy the Dharma instead.]

However, some individuals still cling to strong worldly habits, so even if they have been ordained and heard many profound teachings, their minds have barely changed. On the surface, they appear to be serene monastics who inspire confidence in others. But internally, they are deeply dissatisfied with themselves. They are the types of practitioners who are ripe on the outside but unripe on the inside, as mentioned in Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*.]

In fact, this is what is described in the old saying, "What's near cinnabar turns red, and what's next to ink turns black." Regardless of who we are, we can easily be influenced by external circumstances. When we come into contact with a good or bad friend, it is highly likely that we will change significantly, no matter how brief the encounter—whether it lasts one day or one month. Some scriptures state that even a realized bodhisattva—a sublime being who has attained one of the ten stages of the bodhisattva path—can also be influenced by their environment and evil friends.⁴³ Therefore, ordinary people must pay extra attention to this danger.

Because it is crucial to follow a teacher, you should first examine them before making your decision to follow them. Otherwise, during this degenerate age, it can be very dangerous to rely on a teacher whom you don't truly know. I once met someone who received empowerment from a teacher he only knew by name.

I asked, "Do you know that teacher?"

The person replied, "Not at all. But others went to the empowerment, and so did I. I received quite a few empowerments. Oh, I am so happy. How splendid! The teacher is so kind!"

I asked, "What great qualities does the teacher possess?"

He responded, "Well, I just feel he is very kind. His appearance attracts me."

He believed this was the quality a teacher should have. How hasty he was in examining a teacher!

In this degenerate age, it has become rare to encounter a teacher who embodies all the qualities outlined in the tantras. Nevertheless, it is essential that the teacher we choose to follow possesses at least the following qualities.

1) *Pure observance of the three types of precepts*. The teacher should uphold the pure precepts, having never broken any of the commitments or prohibitions

⁴³ However, some scriptures also mention that a bodhisattva is immune to such influences.

related to the three types of precepts: the outer precepts of individual liberation, the inner precepts of the bodhisattva vows, and the secret samaya vows.

If the teacher is an ordained monastic, at least they should uphold the precepts of individual liberation specific to ordained practitioners. If the teacher is a householder, they should uphold the complete five precepts for lay people, as the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche mentioned. If no vows are upheld, any great qualities or states of realization would lack foundation.

During this degenerate age, even if a teacher cannot meticulously uphold every single item on the list of precepts of individual liberation, the bodhisattva vows, and the samaya vows, they must at least uphold the root precepts with the attitude of bodhicitta or, at the very least, renunciation. They must not commit any root downfalls of the three types of precepts.

2) *Being learned.* The teacher should be learned and not lacking in knowledge of the sutras, shastras, and tantras. If the teacher lacks Dharma education and knows little—for example, they know few Buddhist scriptures, let alone study them in depth—this is definitely not a good teacher to follow. The teacher should master the knowledge of sutras, shastras, and tantras, including the Five Great Treatises in Sutrayana, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, and instructions on the Great Perfection in Vajrayana if the teacher is from the Nyingma lineage.

3) *Great compassion.* The teacher's heart should be filled with such deep compassion toward all beings that they love each one as if they were their own child.

This is impartial compassion for all beings. It is not appropriate for the teacher to show love and care for their family and friends while ignoring and despising someone with whom they had a conflict. A teacher who acts in such a discriminatory manner lacks both worldly compassion and kindness, not to mention the great compassion and bodhicitta of Mahayana Buddhism.

4) *Skilled in ritual practices of the Tripitaka and tantras.* The teacher should be well-versed in ritual practices, including the outer Tripitaka and the inner four sections of the tantras. The teacher is well-versed due to their Dharma education and practical experience. If a teacher only talks about the teachings yet never puts their meaning into practice, it is impossible for them to guide Dharma students.

5) *Having attained freedom and realization.* The teacher should have

followed their own teacher's practical instructions and the teachings in sutras, shastras, and tantras, and practiced diligently. As a result, this teacher has actualized all the extraordinary achievements of freedom and realization. They have cleared their afflictions and obscurations and realized the ultimate nature of emptiness.

At a minimum, even if the teacher hasn't realized emptiness, they should at least be capable of transforming or suppressing afflictions and attaining certain states of realization. Otherwise, if Dharma students are faithful and experienced in their practice, while the teacher is clinging to the eight worldly concerns and cannot exceed the students in diligence and precious qualities, it is truly laughable.

6) *Possessing the following four ways of attracting beings:*

First, the teacher should be generous. They should benefit beings through the generosity of giving material items and offering the Dharma.

Second, the teacher's language should be pleasant. The teacher delivers the Buddha's teachings so that living beings are willing to accept and follow the teachings. Some people think "pleasant language" refers to speech that caters to Dharma students' preferences, but this is not necessarily so. For example, if a Dharma student likes anger-inducing situations, it would not be helpful for the teacher to tell that student war stories. According to the *Ornament of the Great Vehicle Sutras*, pleasant language refers to instructions related to Dharma practice.

Third, the teacher should teach each individual according to that person's needs. Through this way of attracting beings, the teacher can bring true benefits to Dharma students and transform their minds.

The teacher should genuinely care about the students' needs. The so-called care that worldly people refer to includes giving wealth or praise or maintaining frequent communication. However, here, a caring teacher encourages Dharma students to cultivate the six perfections, which, unlike worldly "care," can truly provide ultimate benefits to the students.

Fourth, the teacher should act in conformity with what they teach. The teacher gives practice instructions to Dharma students and should walk the talk. It doesn't make sense if the teacher only talks the talk. For instance, if a teacher tells students, "You must practice no-self and bodhicitta; make sure you don't become lazy and sluggish," while the teacher sleeps until noon, never practices no-self, and

rarely considers freeing all living beings from suffering, they are merely offering lip service.

Jigme Lingpa summarizes the above qualities in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

One who perfectly possesses all great qualities
 Is hard to find in this degenerate era.
 Such a teacher stands on the ground of pure observance of the
 three precepts,
 With a mindstream nourished by vast learning and great
 compassion.
 They are well-versed in the vast ocean of ritual practices from
 both the sutras and tantras,
 And rich in the fruit—the pristine wisdom attained through
 freedom and realization.
 Adorned with the blossoming flowers of the four ways of
 attraction,
 They naturally attract fortunate disciples who are like bees.

The *Ornament of the Great Vehicle Sutras* also suggests ten qualities of a teacher, which are summarized in one stanza:

One should serve a (spiritual) friend who is disciplined,
 tranquil, serene, outstanding in good qualities, energetic, rich
 in (knowledge of) scripture, awakened to reality, skilled in
 speech, compassionate, and indefatigable.⁴⁴

When I first followed the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche on a pilgrimage to the sacred Mount Wutai in China's Shanxi Province in 1987, I placed the page containing this stanza in my scripture folder and read it from time to time. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often cited this stanza in his teachings.

The ten qualities are stated as follows:

⁴⁴ This verse is quoted from *The Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature* (the title is translated differently here) by Maitreyanatha/Aryasanga, translated from the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese by L. Jamsal, R. Clark, J. Wilson, L. Zwillig, M. Sweet, R. Thurman, co-published with Columbia University's Center for Buddhist Studies and Tibet House US, 2004.

1) *Disciplined*. This quality corresponds to the observance of precepts. It means that the teacher is able to discipline all of their sensory faculties to prevent them from being influenced by external temptations and distractions. Thus, they can take control of their body, speech, and mind through mindfulness and vigilance. If a teacher cannot tame their own mind, often appears ill-mannered, and succumbs to self-indulgence, it is hardly possible for them to properly guide their Dharma students.

2) *Tranquil*. This quality corresponds to meditative concentration. The teacher's mind is internally quieted. Thus, like the bhikkhus described in the Vinaya texts, the teacher behaves in an impressive and dignified manner, which naturally generates faith among their students.

3) *Serene*. This quality corresponds to the discipline of wisdom. The teacher has eradicated their afflictions and cut off all unwholesome actions.

4) *Outstanding in good qualities*. The teacher's qualities and states of realization far exceed those of the students. If they are equal to or even inferior to their students, it is likely that students will refuse to obey the teacher.

5) *Energetic*. The teacher is not indifferent to benefiting living beings; instead, they always diligently strive to do their best. Some teachers stop practicing the Dharma diligently after they've gained status, as if they have attained Buddhahood! This is similar to some graduates of worldly schools: they studied hard at school, yet when they received accreditation and began to work, they became lazy after attaining a certain social status. A teacher shouldn't be like this. They must benefit sentient beings with perseverance and diligence.

6) *Rich in scripture*. The teacher is well-versed in Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings.

7) *Awakened to reality*. The teacher has realized no-self and emptiness and recognized the nature of reality.

8) *Skilled in speech*. The teacher is adept at teaching the Dharma.

9) *Compassionate*. The teacher has deep and vast compassion. They are free from greed for material possessions and fame. All they care about is teaching the authentic Dharma to students. Of course, their compassion is not about earnestly

reminding their students, “Do eat well; do dress warmly; do sleep tight!” Their compassion is to sow the seed of liberation in the students and to benefit them with the Dharma.

10) *Indefatigable*. The teacher is not weary from benefiting living beings; they teach the Dharma continuously and diligently.

Specifically, regarding the profound teachings on the essence of the Vajrayana pith instructions, the type of vajra guru one should rely upon is described as follows, in accordance with the sacred tantras:

1) *Having been brought to maturity through empowerments*. The vajra guru must have been brought to maturity through a series of empowerments, transmitted through an unbroken and continuous lineage. It is not sufficient for the vajra guru to have merely received these empowerments. The empowerments must also be bestowed impeccably, with all the necessary causes and conditions present.

2) *Having kept the samayas*. The vajra guru should not have transgressed the samaya vows they committed to uphold at the time of empowerment. Different tantras require different vows, such as the fourteen root downfalls⁴⁵ or the five root vows,⁴⁶ in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*.

3) *Being peaceful*. The vajra guru should be calm, peaceful, and disciplined, free from the turmoil of negative emotions and thoughts. A person ensnared by mental afflictions and conceptual thoughts is certainly not qualified to be a vajra guru.

4) *Having mastered tantras*. The vajra guru should possess complete mastery over the profound meanings of the ground, path, and fruition as presented in the

⁴⁵ Here, the fourteen root downfalls refer to the fourteen major samayas common to all Anuttarayoga Tantras. They are: 1) disrespecting the vajra master; 2) transgressing the words of the buddhas; 3) insulting one's vajra brothers and sisters; 4) abandoning love for sentient beings; 5) abandoning bodhicitta in aspiration or application; 6) criticizing the teachings of the sutras and tantras; 7) revealing secrets to those who are unworthy; 8) mistreating one's body; 9) abandoning emptiness; 10) keeping bad company; 11) failing to reflect on emptiness; 12) upsetting those who have faith in the teachings; 13) failing to observe the samaya commitments; 14) denigrating women.

⁴⁶ The five root vows are: 1) not to abandon the unsurpassed [vehicle]; 2) to venerate the guru; 3) not to interrupt the [practice of] mantra and mudra; 4) to have loving-kindness for those who enter the genuine path; 5) not to divulge the secret truths to others.

tantras of Vajrayana Buddhism. Otherwise, how can the teacher appropriately deliver tantric teachings to disciples?

5) *Having perfected the practices of the generation and perfection stages.* The vajra guru should have attained all the signs of success in the generation and perfection stages of practice, such as having a vision of the deity. At the very least, the vajra guru should have had visions of the deity in dreams or inner experiences, even if they do not have a direct vision. Additionally, the vajra guru must have perfected the accumulation of the deity's mantra practice and achieved all the signs of success regarding the deity practice.

Therefore, it is not easy to find a guru qualified to offer tantric teachings or empowerment. Sometimes I provide guidance in tantric practice, which makes me quite embarrassed. I have repeatedly stated that my teaching is merely planting virtuous seeds in you and passing on the transmissions. I lack any of the listed qualities, let alone all of them. Not only do I not possess the qualities of a vajra guru, but I am also not even qualified to be a vajra student. As stated in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, it is absurd that one who is not even qualified as a disciple wishes to be a teacher.

6) *Being freed by realization.* Having directly realized and experienced that the nature of all phenomena is emptiness, the vajra guru should have attained the no-self experience and achieved liberation.

7) *Having great compassion and caring only for the benefit of others.* The vajra guru should dedicate themselves entirely to the well-being of others, with a heart filled with great compassion. They focus solely on benefiting others, never prioritizing their own personal gain.

8) *Having few worldly activities.* The vajra guru should have few worldly concerns, as they have renounced any attachment to the ordinary things of this life. Of course, it is permissible for some teachers to utilize ordinary things to propagate the Dharma and benefit beings. Biographies of renowned masters show that they did not avoid ordinary matters that were indispensable to their Dharma activities.

Some staff members at Larung Gar complain about managing too many trivial details throughout the day. However, consider this: Your engagement with those minor details can be quite meaningful if they pertain to activities that benefit

living beings. If the details revolve around your own daily meals, drinks, and indulgences—such as “What will I eat for breakfast? For lunch? For dinner?”—and you even find yourself planning your meals in your dreams, then they hold little significance. Conversely, if you are a volunteer at the staff restaurant planning meals for Dharma friends, it is an entirely different matter.

9) *Focusing solely on diligent practice.* Concentrating on future lives, the vajra guru’s unwavering commitment is solely dedicated to the diligent practice of the Dharma. The vajra guru practices diligently for future lives, having generated renunciation through practicing the four thoughts that turn the mind.

10) *Being weary of this world.* Recognizing that samsara is filled with only suffering, the vajra guru should feel deep sadness and strive to inspire a similar sense of sorrow in others. For example, realized masters, such as Longchenpa, Patrul Rinpoche, Mipham Rinpoche, and many great masters from the Han areas of China, shared their feelings and reflections on the meaninglessness of samsara once they had achieved certain levels of realization.

11) *Being skilled in caring for disciples.* The vajra guru should be adept at caring for their disciples using the appropriate methods, whether through speech or action, tailored to each individual. The vajra guru should skillfully guide and benefit others by presenting themselves in ways that resonate with each person.

12) *Having the blessings of the lineage.* By faithfully following all of the teacher’s instructions without ever considering disobedience, the blessings of the lineage have permeated the vajra guru’s own being. With such incredible blessings, their teaching possesses extraordinary power that can inspire and transform their disciples.

Jigme Lingpa summarizes these twelve qualities in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

The teacher who offers the pith instructions
Has received empowerments, upheld pure samayas, and is
peaceful;
Has mastered the meaning of the ground, path, and fruition in
tantras;
Has all the signs of success in the practice of the generation and

perfection stages and is freed by realization;
Has boundless compassion and cares only for the benefit of
others;
Has few worldly activities and focuses solely on diligent practice;
Is weary of this world and guides others to feel the same;
Is skilled in methods and has the blessings of the lineage.
By following such a teacher, one can attain accomplishment
swiftly.

If you can't remember all the qualities listed above, you may simply remember the three key points summarized by Gampopa: 1) Having let go of attachment to this life; 2) Possessing great wisdom to guide disciples on the path; 3) Having great compassion to never abandon disciples. In summary, these qualities encompass renouncing this life and embodying great wisdom and compassion. Disciples can follow a teacher who possesses these three qualities.

In short, before following a teacher, especially a vajra guru, we must examine them carefully. If the teacher lacks these qualities, it may not be beneficial for you to receive empowerment and tantric teachings from them. Therefore, it is crucial to examine a teacher before committing to follow them.



Lesson 74

“On the other hand, there are certain ... Will be showered the bounty of the higher realms and liberation.” [page 139–143]

We are currently covering the section on “How to Follow a Teacher.” Yesterday, we listed the qualities that a Sutrayana teacher and a Vajrayana teacher should possess. Today, we’ll discuss the characteristics of certain types of teachers we should avoid.

Some teachers today lack the essential qualities, so a Dharma student must examine a teacher before following them. Even if others refer to them as a “guru,” you are not obligated to follow them as your teacher. What types of teachers should you avoid?

Patrul Rinpoche identifies four types of teachers to avoid, which are also elaborated upon in other shastras, such as the *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*, and *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*. I encourage you to read these works frequently to understand the qualities a teacher should have and the types of teachers to avoid.

Without this knowledge, you may find yourself following a charlatan for decades, only to discover their true nature. By then, you might be mentally exhausted and lack the time in this life to seek another teacher. How unfortunate!

Therefore, it is crucial for a practitioner to carefully examine a teacher before committing to follow them. Some Dharma students follow a teacher thoughtlessly,

without knowing much about them, leading to future regret. Eventually, they may even abandon and slander that teacher. This should not happen.

If the teacher is a charlatan who knows little about the Dharma, is ineligible to bestow empowerment and transmission, and acts pretentiously to gain wealth and fame, it may not matter much if the Dharma student abandons them. However, this is difficult to assert because if the charlatan has received oral transmission from attending Dharma classes, then the transmission they provide is at least partly authentic teaching from the Buddha, even if they have their own agenda while teaching. In such a case, it may still be a fault if the student abandons the teacher.

Therefore, examining the teacher before following them is the safest and most reliable approach. Some Dharma students claim they lack the time for a thorough examination.

However, it's not as if they are suffering from acute appendicitis, so why are they so pressed for time? Over the past twenty or thirty years, or even seventy to eighty years, they have chosen to engage in anything but the Dharma. So why are they now suddenly in such a hurry that they cannot find time to examine the teacher? At the very least, they should inquire about the teacher or spend some time around them to assist with certain tasks, which would help them determine whether the teacher is qualified.

Many Buddhists, especially those who have rarely studied the Dharma, often make the following mistakes: They choose to follow a teacher, later discover faults with the teacher, feel regret, and begin to slander them. This can lead to serious consequences. Therefore, please ensure you examine a teacher before deciding to follow them.

Specifically, there are certain types of teachers we should avoid. Their characteristics include the following:

- ◆ Teachers like a millstone made of wood

Some teachers boast of their superiority simply because they come from a sacred place such as Larung Gar or somewhere in Qinghai. Some gullible individuals may be easily misled and consider such people Mahasiddhas—practitioners who have attained supreme spiritual accomplishment. These individuals exclaim, “Really? You are from a sacred place? Then I must follow you as my teacher!” They then spread the word, urging others to attend the teacher’s empowerments or teachings as well.

Others are also deceived when a charlatan, who does not possess the qualities arising from study, reflection, and meditation, claims to be the son, nephew, or grandchild of such and such a lama. However, even if the lama is a highly accomplished practitioner, their family members do not necessarily share similar qualities. For example, Devadatta, the cousin of the Buddha Shakyamuni, was prone to arrogance, anger, and jealousy, which were the exact opposite of the Buddha's qualities.

Even if they have engaged in hearing, contemplating, and meditating on the Buddha's teachings, their intentions are often not pure or aimed at future lives; rather, they are motivated by more mundane concerns, such as fear of losing their status as a teacher. When it comes to training disciples, they are as ill-suited for this role as a wooden millstone.

A wooden millstone may have the appearance of a millstone, but it cannot grind any grain despite the loud noise it generates, and eventually, it only damages itself. In a similar manner, these teachers act sanctimoniously and are more renowned than qualified teachers, but they are merely deceiving others. In the end, their falsehood backfires on them.

A Dharma student who follows such a teacher will not only gain no qualities arising from hearing, contemplating, and meditating but will also eventually fall to the lower realms due to being misled by the teacher. How dangerous! As recorded in many sutras, the Buddha taught that neither the teacher's caste nor their fame is important. What's most important is their *shikshapada*, which means both "precepts" and "states of realization." If a person possesses both aspects of the shikshapada and assimilates the essential teachings of Mahayana and Vajrayana, then even if they appear as a beggar, they are more than worthy of our respect and following.

Sadly, whether in the past or present, there have always been people deceived by the false titles created by charlatans. This is illustrated in the following story from *The Great Canon of Monastic Rules*:⁴⁷

Once, there was a renowned brahmin living in the city of Vārāṇasī. He was the spiritual teacher of the royal family and taught five hundred child-disciples. A servant's son, who was often ordered about by these children, also heard the teachings during his duties and memorized them all.

⁴⁷ Skt. Mahasangha Vinaya

After having a conflict with the children, the servant's son ran away from the brahmin to another country, declared himself the son of the famous brahmin, and took on a new name. The servant's son visited the royal family's teacher in the new country and lied, claiming he had traveled from afar just to follow him. Deeply moved, the teacher immediately accepted him as a disciple.

The servant's son performed exceptionally well because he had already learned the teachings. His teacher was very pleased; not only did he ask the servant's son to teach five hundred of his disciples, but he also married his only daughter to him. Gradually, the servant's son's life became more affluent, but he failed to appreciate it and grew increasingly demanding. He often complained about his wife's cooking, while she never voiced any complaints and even expressed a desire to learn the cuisine of Vārānasī to please him.

Then one day, the famous brahmin from Vārānasī came to the neighboring country to catch the runaway. On his way, he encountered the servant's son, who was walking with a group of disciples. When the servant's son spotted the brahmin approaching from a distance, he was filled with panic. In a hurry, he sent his disciples away and approached the brahmin. He knelt down, greeted him respectfully, and pleaded, "I came here falsely claiming you as my father to gain entry to study under the royal teacher and marry his daughter. Please do not reveal my secret. I promise to serve you faithfully in the future." Hearing his confession, the kind-hearted brahmin decided to forgive the servant's son, saying, "Okay, you are my son!" and followed him back to his home.

Knowing her father-in-law was visiting, the wife was very happy. She prepared a variety of meals. After the meal, she discreetly asked the brahmin, "My husband is not satisfied with my cooking. Could you please show me how to prepare his favorite dishes from Vārānasī?"

Seeing that the servant's son did not appreciate his wife's great efforts, the brahmin told her, "Whenever he complains about your cooking, simply whisper this verse to him: 'Travel to a place with no family, deceive all the people of the world; plain food used to be the daily diet; why become so picky at fine dining?'"

After the brahmin left, the servant's son again expressed dissatisfaction with his wife's cooking. The wife then recited the verse. Hearing it, the servant's son became upset, thinking, "That old man spoke ill of me!" He then spoke gently and

pleasantly to his wife from that point on, fearing that otherwise she would reveal his true identity.

Nowadays, there are numerous charlatans who are like the servant's son. Some of them lack both good character traits and qualities arising from studying and practicing the Dharma, yet they claim superiority over others. Others may possess a few qualities, but they have never given any thought to renunciation and liberation from samsara. The dignified image they present to others is merely for the sake of gaining status, wealth, and other benefits in this life.

Such charlatans only bring harm to themselves and their disciples. Therefore, a Dharma student should first assess whether the teacher they intend to follow possesses the necessary qualities.

♦ Teachers like the frog that lived in a well

These teachers lack the skills necessary to teach or guide their students. They do not possess any distinctive qualities that set them apart from ordinary people—let alone bodhicitta to benefit sentient beings, the wisdom of realizing emptiness, or the skillful means to liberate beings from suffering. In fact, they even lack basic good character.

At times, they are not even comparable to an ordinary person. Many ordinary people, including non-Buddhists, do not lie to deceive others, are genuinely down-to-earth, and speak truthfully. Their character far surpasses that of the frog-like teacher.

Such teachers actually know very little about the Dharma. Yet, some people place them on a pedestal in blind faith, without examining them at all. They carelessly assign titles to these teachers, such as “tulku,” “guru,” “khenpo,” or “Dharmaraja,” seeing them as the sole guides capable of liberating them from samsara.

Feeling overly proud due to the compliments from their disciples and the wealth and recognition they gain, these teachers, despite lacking both Dharma training and worldly knowledge, remain oblivious to the true qualities of great teachers and become quite arrogant. They resemble the frog that lives in a well.

In the early 1990s, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was visiting India, a local Dharma center sent an old lama to meet him. He came across as quite arrogant in front of others. A Khenpo who sat beside me murmured, “This

lama is truly a frog-like teacher, as mentioned in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. He appears to know very little about the Dharma; he can deceive only his ignorant disciples.”

Indeed, when some teachers gain fame and attract more disciples, they can become carried away by their “success.” Yet, as Longchenpa stated in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, even if a teacher has as many disciples as maggots, it may hold little significance. Due to their ignorance, the disciples mistakenly perceive the charlatans as buddhas. These charlatans may be wealthy, famous, or influential. Nevertheless, like ill-mannered individuals, they lack proper conduct. Such a teacher is typically short-sighted, much like a frog that lives in a well.

What is such a frog like? Here is the story:

One day, an old frog who had spent its entire life in a well was visited by another frog from the shores of the vast ocean.

“Where do you come from?” asked the frog living in the well.

“I come from the great ocean,” the visitor answered.

“How big is the ocean?” asked the well frog.

“It’s immense,” replied the ocean frog.

“Is it about a quarter the size of my well?” the well frog asked.

“Oh, much larger than that!” exclaimed the ocean frog.

“Half the size, then?”

“No, still bigger!”

“So, is it the same size as my well?”

“No, no! It’s far, far bigger!”

“That can’t be!” said the well frog. “I must see it for myself.”

The two frogs then left for the ocean together. According to the tale, when the well frog finally saw the ocean, it was so overwhelmed that it fainted, its head split open, and it died.

It says in *The Original Way*, an essay by Tang philosopher Han Yu:

Sitting in a well and
Looking at the sky,

One says, “What a small sky!”
But it is not the sky that is small.

It is not the sky, but one’s frame of vision that is small. As said in Mipham Rinpoche’s *The Way of Living*:

It’s amusing how some individuals, due to their lack of wisdom or experience, believe they are superior to others.

There is a similar story in the *Zhuangzi*:⁴⁸

A frog has been living in a dry well for years and is quite satisfied with his dwelling. Whenever possible, he boasts about his well to others.

One day, a turtle comes from the East Sea. The frog asks the turtle how vast the East Sea is.

The turtle replies, “The East Sea is too wide by one thousand kilometers to be described, and too deep by ten thousand inches to be described. During the time of Great Yu, nine out of ten years had floods, but the sea level didn’t increase at all. During the time of Cheng Tang, seven out of eight years had droughts, but the sea level didn’t decrease at all. This is the East Sea I live in.”

The frog was stunned upon hearing this.

The world is never short of such frog-like teachers. These individuals are often incompetent Dharma students and practitioners who haven’t yet mastered any sutra or shastra from the vast ocean of the Dharma. Due to certain circumstances, some ignorant followers have placed them on a pedestal and rely on them blindly. As a result, these unqualified teachers receive wealth and fame and begin to believe they are true Mahasiddhas. Eventually, the teachers commit many wrongdoings. A Dharma student must avoid such frog-like teachers!

♦ Mad guides

These are teachers who know little about the Dharma, having never dedicated themselves to studying under a learned master or delving into the teachings of the sutras and tantras. Their intense negative emotions, combined with a lack of mindfulness and vigilance, lead them to neglect their vows and samayas.

⁴⁸ The *Zhuangzi* is an ancient Chinese text from the late Warring States period (476–221 BC) that contains stories and anecdotes exemplifying the carefree nature of the ideal Taoist sage. Named after its traditional author, “Master Zhuang” (*Zhuangzi*), the *Zhuangzi* is one of the two foundational texts of Taoism, alongside the *Tao Tê Ching*.

Despite possessing a mindset inferior to that of ordinary individuals, they imitate accomplished practitioners, acting as though their actions were higher than the sky. Filled with anger and envy, they sever the lifeline of love and compassion. Such teachers are referred to as mad guides, and they steer their followers onto erroneous paths.

Such teachers are truly terrible! They barely uphold any precepts, attain little wisdom, and achieve no realization, yet they behave as if they were highly accomplished practitioners. They dare to do whatever they wish, such as eating meat,⁴⁹ drinking alcohol, committing sexual misconduct, and even killing.

In the end, a mad guide must pay their own karmic debts, as described in the *Sutra of the Compendium of Essential Teachings*:

An ignorant person who upholds no precepts
Grows in distraction and mindlessness,
And thus ceaselessly commits various unwholesome actions;
This person is not far from the hell realm.

There are many teachers of this kind currently, including some so-called vajra gurus, who belittle the law of karma, deceive their followers, and sometimes display “crazy wisdom,” as if they were Mahasiddhas. Their behavior is absurd and inevitably hinders people from developing genuine faith and confidence in Buddhism.

Of course, this phenomenon also exists in some Sutrayana communities. I know of a financially affluent Chinese Buddhist temple that offers no opportunities for hearing, contemplating, and meditating. To recruit disciples, the abbot allows monastics to browse the internet and watch TV, with the only requirement being attendance at the daily Dharma assembly every morning and evening.

From the outside, it appears that the temple has many monastics attending the sangha assembly in an orderly and impeccable manner. However, after the morning assembly, the monastics either play cards or eat meat in restaurants. They engage in misconduct instead of studying the Dharma while wearing monastic robes. How disheartening!

However, the conduct of these monastics reflects their own poor character and has nothing to do with Buddhism. The disciplines that a monastic should

⁴⁹ The “meat” here refers to the flesh of a living animal that was slaughtered for food to serve to the teacher. It is not “pure meat”—the meat of an animal that died of old age, sickness, or other natural causes resulting solely from its own past actions.

follow are clearly outlined in Buddhist texts. It is because these monastics neglect these disciplines that people develop negative views toward Buddhism. It is such charlatans, not Buddhism itself, who should be blamed.

Someone asked me today, “Some official documents state that Tibetan Buddhism shall not be introduced into the Han area of China. What do you think of this?”

My answer was, “In fact, Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism are two different traditions formed from the same doctrines. Both emphasize the practice of bodhicitta and emptiness, among other teachings. Buddhism transcends ethnicity, nationality, and region; it encompasses the compassion and wisdom of humankind, making it universal to anyone, anywhere.

It is only because Buddhism is sometimes linked to history, politics, economy, and culture that it is classified into Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism. Even within Tibetan Buddhism, there are different schools or lineages. Nevertheless, they are all Buddhism. If you accept one Buddhist school or tradition but not another, you will certainly commit the fault of abandoning the Dharma. Broadly speaking, the teachings across all Buddhist schools and traditions do not differ fundamentally.

♦ Blind guides

A teacher whose qualities are no better than your own and who lacks the love and compassion of bodhicitta will never be able to guide you in discerning right from wrong. Such teachers are known as blind guides.

There are many majestic monasteries and temples that attract numerous tourists and Buddhists. Each time I visit such a place, I think to myself, “How wonderful it would be if a qualified teacher were also here to give basic Buddhist teachings to the visitors so they could learn a bit of Dharma in addition to sightseeing.”

Sadly, monastic members in those places often merely guide visitors to pray in front of the Buddha statue or to make incense offerings. Most visitors only pray for their own happiness in this life, with no concern for ultimate liberation from samsara. What a great pity! If there were a qualified teacher offering teachings, even just half an hour a day, it could truly benefit the visitors.

Without hearing and contemplating the Dharma, the practice of making

offerings, while meritorious, cannot eradicate mental afflictions or develop wholesome mind states. Moreover, without acquiring the wisdom on how to examine a teacher, people won't be able to discern who is a qualified teacher and who is a charlatan.

I once read a book called *In Search of the Mind*, in which the author depicted many charlatans who pretended to be tulkus. Such a fake tulku would come to the Han areas of China and tell a young female follower, "You were so-and-so dakini in a previous life, so we have a very auspicious connection. If you and I have a tulku son together, he will propagate the Dharma and benefit living beings in such and such a way." Some women even believed his "vajra words" and introduced more people to this "tulku."

Such disciples care about everything except the teacher's state of realization, internal accomplishments, and knowledge of the Dharma. They seem only interested in the teacher's clothing and demeanor. Such a teacher-disciple relationship benefits nobody at all.

But that's just the way it is in the present day. The personal stories that charlatans craft are so fascinating that many people fall for them immediately. If those "stories" were to reach their hometowns, the locals would laugh out loud and not believe them. However, many people living in the Han areas of China find their gurus' stories unquestionable and firmly believe that they are indeed great teachers.

In the book, the author described many ridiculous phenomena. I felt that part of his writing aligned with reality. Regardless of his style, he revealed some true realities throughout the book, which are crucial.

In the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*, Jigme Lingpa summarizes the four types of teachers to avoid as follows:

Like brahmins defending their caste,
Some, fearing the loss of their status,
Engage in hearing and contemplation, not for future
liberation—

Such teachers are like millstones made of wood.

Though no different from ordinary beings,
Some are elevated by the blind faith of the ignorant.

Drunk on offerings and praise, their pride swells—
Such teachers are like frogs living in a well.

Lacking knowledge and breaking their vows and samayas,
Some have low minds, yet their actions are as lofty as the sky.
They sever the lifeline of love and compassion—
Relying on such mad guides only multiplies evil.

Worst of all is to follow those no wiser than yourself,
Who lack bodhicitta and are driven by fame alone—
That would be a grave mistake, as you are following a blind guide.
You will drift deeper into darkness, lost in deception.

Regarding how to follow a teacher, Padmasambhava also warns:

Not examining the teacher
Is like drinking poison;
Not examining the disciple
Is like leaping from a cliff.

It took Kublai Khan⁵⁰ of the Mongol Empire six years to examine Drogön Chögyal Phagpa,⁵¹ before he decided to follow this Sakya master. Kublai Khan stated, “I’ve examined you for six years, and I am assured you are a qualified teacher. Please take me as your disciple.” Phagpa replied, “Now that you’ve examined me for six years, it’s my turn to examine you for six years.”

The Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion states:

In order for the words of honor of neither the guru nor the
disciple to degenerate, there must be a mutual examination

⁵⁰ Kublai was the fifth Khagan (Great Khan) of the Mongol Empire (Ikh Mongol Uls), reigning from 1260 to 1294 (although, due to the division of the empire, this was a nominal position). He also founded the Yuan dynasty in China as a conquest dynasty in 1271 and ruled as the first Yuan emperor until his death in 1294.

⁵¹ Drogön Chögyal Phagpa (1235–15 December 1280) was the fifth leader of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism. He was also the first imperial preceptor of Kublai Khan’s Yuan dynasty, a division of the Mongol Empire, and was concurrently named the director of the Bureau of Buddhist and Tibetan Affairs. Historical tradition remembers him as the first vice-ruler of Tibet under the Mongol Khagan, as well as one of the five Sakya patriarchs. Although this is historically disputed, he played a significant political role.

beforehand, (to determine whether each can) take a guru-disciple relationship.⁵²

When commenting on this verse, Lama Tsongkhapa referenced *The Vajra Garland Tantra* to explain that the examination between a disciple and their guru may last for as long as twelve years.

Let alone twelve years, many people today don't even examine a teacher for as long as twelve days. Such a person may receive a call on their way home, saying that a certain guru is bestowing empowerment, and they make a U-turn to follow the guru immediately. Perhaps their practice on impermanence is so profound that everything seems transitory and fleeting—they may not have the opportunity again in a few days—leaving them no time to examine the teacher.

In reality, we should place our trust in our spiritual teacher for all our future lives. It is the teacher who teaches us on what to do and what not to do. If we fail to conduct a proper examination and instead follow a charlatan, we risk squandering the precious opportunity to accumulate merit over a lifetime. We may also lose the wealth we've gathered over the years, and the rare freedoms and advantages of our human existence will be wasted. This is akin to approaching a tree and mistaking the shadow of a coiled venomous serpent for shade, only to be fatally bitten. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

By failing to carefully examine the teacher,
The faithful squander their accumulated merit.
It is akin to mistaking a venomous snake for the shade of a tree—
They will be deceived and lose their freedoms and advantages.

When encountering a teacher, some people initially perceive him as a great teacher, believing he is without fault. Consequently, they think, "What a blessing to meet such a guru! We must have an affinity from a previous life. I cannot help but cry upon seeing him. Such a compassionate guru must greatly benefit my liberation!" They then offer all they have to the teacher.

Recently, I met a disciple who had great faith in a teacher, despite never having seen him in person. Later, someone claimed to be that teacher, and the disciple believed him. Without informing his family, he deposited a significant amount of

⁵² The translation of the verse is from <https://viewonbuddhism.org/>.

money into that person's bank account. Eventually, when the disciple met another teacher, he realized that the prior "teacher" was merely an impostor.

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

If one follows an evil teacher,
Sufferings will constantly arise,
And one will endure torments in the lower realms,
Which are beyond description.

As the Buddha says, if you follow an evil teacher, not only will your money be wasted, but your time in this lifetime will also be depleted, and the torments you'll face in the lower realms in future lives will be indescribable.

Some people are not inherently bad, but after being misled by an evil teacher, their character deteriorates. One of my schoolteachers once remarked, "Ah! So-and-so committed the crime of corruption! He is not a bad person, but unfortunately, he has been influenced by his surroundings." My teacher's comment makes sense, as stated in the *Ekottara Agama*:

No one is inherently evil;
When one follows an evil teacher,
An evil root will surely be planted,
Which brings one eternal darkness.

Therefore, following an evil teacher inevitably leads to suffering. Thus, before choosing any teacher, we must carefully examine them.

After thoroughly examining and accurately discerning a teacher's qualities, once you determine that they possess all the positive qualities described, you should always regard them as the Buddha in person. Such a teacher, who embodies these qualities, represents the compassionate wisdom of all buddhas in the ten directions, manifesting as an ordinary person solely to guide and benefit sentient beings. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

The teacher with perfect qualities
Embodies the wisdom and compassion of all Buddhas,
Appearing in human form to benefit sentient beings.
Such a teacher is the unparalleled source of all accomplishments.

However, some Buddhists from the Han areas of China do not accept this. They believe it is irrational to view the guru as the Buddha, considering it merely a tantric view of Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, such a thought only reflects a lack of Dharma studies. It is explained in many sutras that teachers are manifestations of the Buddha. For example, the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* states:

Because of [the Buddha's] compassion toward all living beings,
He then manifested in various material forms.

The *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* states:

Therefore, I incarnate hundreds, thousands, or billions of forms,
and tame and liberate them according to their dispositions.

Thus, it is entirely valid that qualified teachers are manifestations of the Buddha. Additionally, some sutras state that the teacher is a true Buddha and should be treated as such. For example, the *Sutra on the Samadhi for Encountering Face-to-Face the Buddhas of the Present* states:

One should venerate the teacher,
Serve him and make offerings to him,
And see him as the Buddha.

The *Flower Ornament Sutra* states:

It's like the bright sun
That appears in this world;
Though those who are born blind cannot see it,
The sun can benefit them, nevertheless.

Though a blind person cannot see the sun in the sky, they can feel the warmth of the sunshine. Similarly, the Buddha comes to this world in the form of a teacher who shows us the path to liberation. Although we may not realize that the teacher is inseparable from the Buddha due to our ignorance, they can still bring us immense benefits.

Some Tibetans and Han Chinese struggle to develop conviction in the view that “the guru is inseparable from the Buddha.” Instead, they think, “My guru is quite small-minded, so I'd better not let him know; otherwise, he may get upset,

as he is as intolerant as a girl,” or “My guru does this or that, and he really likes such and such.”

I hear many people speak about their guru as if he were just an ordinary person. It seems they never consider that their guru has attained the same state as the Buddha.

In the *Jewel Cloud Sutra*, the Buddha says:

See the spiritual teacher as the World Honored One,
Follow and stay with the spiritual teacher;
By following the spiritual teacher, one becomes diligent,
By following the spiritual teacher, one can eradicate all vicious
deeds.

The *Flower Ornament Sutra* also says:

See the spiritual teacher as tathagata.

The *Ekottara Agama* says that all noble deeds arise from following a spiritual teacher and that the Buddha himself also followed spiritual teachers in previous lives and eventually attained enlightenment.

Thus, we should recognize that the wisdom mind of a qualified teacher is no different from that of the Buddha, and that a qualified teacher is the embodiment of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

To skillfully guide ordinary people in need, a truly qualified teacher adapts their outward behavior to resonate with that of ordinary individuals. However, their inner wisdom mind is that of a Buddha, setting them entirely apart from others. Every action taken by the teacher is simply the activity of an enlightened being, perfectly attuned to the needs of those they aim to help. This makes the teacher exceptionally noble. Skilled in dispelling hesitation and doubt, the teacher patiently endures all the ingratitude and discouragement of their disciples, much like a mother caring for her only child. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Expediently, to guide us, he appears no different from us.
Ultimately, he is completely different from all of us.
Possessing profound wisdom, he is supreme among all.
Skillfully dispelling doubts, he patiently endures the misguided

actions of others.

From the expedient perspective, the teacher aims to guide us, so their conduct aligns with that of us ordinary people. From the ultimate perspective, the wisdom mind of the teacher is that of the Buddha, making them entirely distinct from us ordinary beings.

It's similar to the way a kindergarten teacher plays with toddlers to make them happy, but when the children misbehave, the teacher does not conform to their wrongdoings. As said in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*:

What is the outer bearing, you may ask,
Of these sublime and holy ones?
Because they are the guides of all the world,
With everyone they are in harmony.
But since they are beyond the world,
From all they are completely different.
In all the actions of their body, speech, and mind,
Everyone they utterly surpass.⁵³

In fact, the teacher, though outwardly similar to us, is the true manifestation of all buddhas and bodhisattvas, far surpassing us in terms of their state of realization.

A teacher endowed with these qualities is like a great ship, capable of carrying sentient beings across the vast ocean of samsara. Like a skilled navigator, the teacher unfailingly guides us on the path to liberation and completely perfect enlightenment. Like a shower of nectar, the teacher extinguishes the flames of negative actions and destructive emotions. Like the sun and moon, the teacher illuminate the path of Dharma, dispelling the thick darkness of ignorance. Like the earth, the teacher patiently endures all ingratitude and discouragement, while their view and actions remain vast and all-encompassing. Like the wish-fulfilling tree, the teacher is the source of all help in this life and the foundation of all happiness in the next. Like a precious vase, the teacher is the treasury of all the teachings from the inconceivable vehicles and schools, perfectly suited to every need. Like the

⁵³ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

wish-fulfilling jewel, the teacher effortlessly manifests the infinite aspects of the four enlightened activities,⁵⁴ responding to the diverse needs of all beings.

Like a mother or father, the teacher loves every single one of the countless living beings equally, showing no favoritism toward those close to them or resentment toward others. Like a mighty river, their compassion is boundless, encompassing all beings as limitless as space, and so swift that it reaches out to help all who suffer and lack protection. Like the king of mountains, their joy in others' happiness is unshakable, unmoved by jealousy and unshaken by the winds of belief in the inherent existence of all phenomena. Like rain pouring from a cloud, their impartiality remains undisturbed by attachment or aversion.

The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* summarizes:

The teacher is the great ship that carries us across the ocean of
samsara,
The true guide who leads us without error onto the supreme
path,
The shower of nectar that extinguishes the flames of karma and
afflictions,
The sun and moon that dispel the darkness of ignorance,
The earth that encompasses the teachings of all vehicles,
The wish-fulfilling tree that is the source of help and happiness,
And the supreme vase that contains all the treasures of the
Dharma.
The teacher surpasses even a wish-fulfilling jewel.
The teacher loves all beings equally, like a father and mother.
Their compassion is as vast and swift as a mighty river,
Their joy is as steady as the king of mountains,
And their impartiality is unwavering, like rain from a cloud.

Such a teacher is equal to all the buddhas in their compassion and blessings. Those who form a positive connection with the teacher can attain Buddhahood within a single lifetime. Even those who create a negative connection—through slander, harm, hatred, or even physical aggression—will eventually be led out of samsara by the teacher's great compassion. As stated in the sutra:

⁵⁴ The four enlightened activities refer to pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and subjugating.

Such a teacher is equal to all the buddhas.

Even those who harm the teacher are guided onto the path of
happiness.

For those who sincerely trust and follow the teacher,

A rain of all accomplishments will pour down on them.



Lesson 75

“Noble one, you should think of yourself ... But out of the three ways to please him, practice is best.” [page 143–145]

We’ve talked about how to examine a teacher. We should only follow those who possess the proper qualities, and we must not follow teachers who lack those qualities, regardless of the circumstances. The Buddha and the eminent masters have emphasized this, so we should be discerning about whom we choose to follow or avoid in our Dharma practice.

After examining the teacher, the next step is to follow them.

2.1.6.2.2. Following the Teacher

Following spiritual teachers should primarily occur through the Dharma. This means Dharma students should listen to teachings from their teachers, and teachers should provide teachings to their students.

However, many people have a different perspective. They believe that following a teacher simply involves a Dharma student asking, “Can you take me as your disciple?” and the teacher, feeling pleased, agrees, saying, “Okay, you are my disciple.”

If a teacher is not in a good mood, they may decline, leaving Dharma students unable to follow them. As a result, students who receive permission from their teachers feel elated and are eager to share the news with friends. For these students, following teachers often amounts to receiving verbal consent, akin to signing a worldly agreement.

On rare occasions, a teacher's verbal consent may be sufficient to establish a teacher-disciple relationship, as the realization of some awakened masters is inconceivable. Through their immeasurable blessings and wisdom, such great teachers can swiftly guide students with superior faculties onto the path to liberation.

Nevertheless, according to the sutras and shastras, following teachers should be rooted in the Dharma. It is only when teachers transmit the Dharma to students and students receive the teachings that the teacher-disciple relationship is genuinely established.

Some Buddhists have received empowerments, heard teachings, and obtained pith instructions from a Dharma master, yet they refuse to acknowledge that the master is their teacher. Instead, they visit a lama from whom they have never received any teachings and declare, "I am your disciple, and you are my teacher." In this context, it is worth mentioning a story about Mahakasyapa:

Mahakasyapa said to the Buddha, "You are my teacher; I am your disciple." The Buddha replied, "Just so, Kasyapa. I am your teacher, and you are my disciple." Mahakasyapa was fully ordained and eventually became revered as the supreme observer of the precepts.

However, unless you possess faculties as sharp as Mahakasyapa's, which most ordinary beings do not, you cannot truly establish a teacher-disciple relationship if you have not received the teacher's Dharma teachings.

Many Dharma students lack a correct understanding of how to establish a teacher-disciple relationship. Therefore, I hope you will carefully study the relevant Buddhist texts and truly grasp what "following a teacher" really means. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

The person who teaches others
One verse of the virtuous Dharma
Is considered a virtuous teacher and
Shall be respected by all living beings.

Therefore, if someone teaches you at least one verse of the true Dharma, they are considered your teacher. From that point on, you should adjust your attitude to show them respect. Establishing a teacher-disciple relationship through anything other than the Dharma may not align with Buddhist doctrines.

How should Dharma students follow their teacher? The similes in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* provide clear explanations. The sutra states:

Noble one, think of yourself as sick,
And think of spiritual benefactors as physicians;
Think of their instructions as medicines,
And think of the practices as getting rid of disease.⁵⁵

Thus, we should see ourselves as patients with a serious illness, qualified teachers as experienced doctors, the Dharma taught by teachers as medicine, and following the teachers' instructions as the path to recovery. This is a crucial verse to adhere to. Otherwise, even with a qualified teacher, it is of no use if we don't act according to the four metaphors.⁵⁶

After receiving teachings, many Buddhists rarely practice them. It is as if we do not take the medicine prescribed by a doctor, which leaves us with no chance of treating our illness. Without practicing the Dharma, it is unlikely that we can eradicate our afflictions unless the teacher is extraordinarily exceptional and can bring the cure to us through their blessings, without us needing to take medicine. Apart from this, we must follow the doctor's prescriptions or suggestions if we wish to recover from our illness.

Moreover, when we are sick, we should consult the appropriate doctor and take the correct medicine. For example, if we suffer from pneumonia, seeking help from a silversmith or taking a pill for anemia would be as futile as "milking a bull."

Similarly, outer space scientists or academics are not ideal candidates for treating the "illness" of our tormenting mental afflictions. Some people seek relief from these afflictions through other religions or activities—yoga, Qigong, running, knitting, or gardening—but these provide only temporary relief and

⁵⁵ The verse is quoted from the *Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala, revised ed., 1993.

⁵⁶ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's corresponding explanation in class 12:

Furthermore, we should also eliminate the opposite of the four metaphors—the four wrong notions—while listening to teachings by following the four metaphors. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* describes four wrong notions to be avoided, which are the opposites of the four metaphors we have mentioned:

Shallow-tongued men with evil natures
Approach the teacher as if he were a musk-deer.
Having extracted the musk, the perfect Dharma,
Full of joy, they sneer at the samaya.

happiness. Such individuals do not understand how to completely uproot the pervasive sufferings of samsara.

In your journey of pursuing the Dharma, if you are not seeking liberation, you do not need to follow a teacher. However, if you do seek liberation, relying on a qualified teacher is essential. Throughout history, many intelligent individuals have come into this world, but if they sought liberation, they had no choice but to follow a qualified Dharma teacher.

Therefore, if we want to free ourselves from the diseases of mental afflictions and negative emotions and be liberated from the misery of cyclic birth and death, we must follow the prescriptions of an experienced doctor—an authentic teacher—by taking the medicine of the Dharma. Jigme Lingpa states in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

Just as a sick person depends on their doctor,
A traveler on their guide,
A frightened person on their companion,
A merchant on their captain,
A passenger on their ferryman—
So too, those who fear the cycle of birth, death, and afflictions
Should rely on a teacher.

If we wish to be free from the fears of samsara and afflictions, we must follow the analogies described above. We should be like sick people who place their trust in a skilled doctor, travelers on a treacherous path who rely on a courageous guide, those facing dangers from enemies, robbers, or wild animals who seek a companion for protection, merchants seeking treasures on an island who depend on their captain, or passengers wishing to reach the far shore who trust their ferryman. In the same way, to be protected from death, rebirth, and afflictions, we must follow a qualified teacher.

In this degenerate age, it may be challenging to find a teacher whose wisdom, compassion, and power are equivalent to those of Buddha Shakyamuni. However, as long as the teacher possesses a certain level of compassion, wisdom, and power, and can help directly or indirectly tame and transform our minds, they are a qualified teacher for us.

Some busy lay practitioners, even if they have successfully identified a qualified

teacher, may be too occupied to attend that teacher's teachings in person. In this case, if one acquires the teachings of this teacher through various means, such as watching their lectures on video or reading their books, and practices accordingly, this can also be a valid way of following the teacher.

Therefore, following the teacher does not imply that the Dharma student must physically accompany the teacher everywhere. It does not mean the student has to stay with the teacher at all times—whether the teacher is walking, sitting down, or having dinner.

The true manner of following teachers is to merge the teacher's wisdom and compassion into one's mindstream and gradually assimilate the three higher trainings of discipline, meditation, and wisdom that the teachers have attained.

Some people believe that following a teacher means being with them all the time. They think that if the teacher doesn't take them along while traveling, it means that the teacher no longer considers them disciples. However, this approach of "following the teacher" is of little meaning. Even if the teacher brings you along constantly, it does not guarantee your attainment of liberation.

In the current era, "following the teacher" refers to a disciple utilizing various means to learn the teacher's instructions, such as understanding the difficulties of finding the freedoms and advantages, recognizing the impermanence of life, and learning how to practice both in the morning and at night, as well as how to integrate Dharma into everyday life.

Even during the Buddha's time, he did not have all his disciples with him at all times. Most often, only a few primary disciples, such as Ananda, Mahakasyapa, and Maudgalyayana, stayed close to him. At most, he had 1,250 disciples around him, making it impossible for every disciple to be physically near the Buddha.

Some individuals think that being close to a teacher means they must sit, live, and even sleep nearby. This is not the case. If a disciple wishes to be "close" to a teacher, it is essential for them to assimilate the Dharma that the teacher understands and to comprehend the teacher's wisdom mind.

On the path to liberation, if your faith is strong, you may choose to follow more than one teacher. Some Dharma masters advise their students, "You should only follow one teacher and practice one kind of teaching; otherwise, the more teachers you follow and the more teachings you hear and contemplate, the more

mental afflictions will arise, and the less wisdom you will attain. In the end, you may not achieve enlightenment.”

Conversely, other masters counter this argument with scriptural evidence, such as the text in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* regarding Sudhana’s visits to fifty-three teachers, along with other verses in the same sutra, such as, “Sudhana follows as many teachers as there are grains of fine dust in the cosmos of a billion worlds and does not disobey their teachings.”

Which perspective is correct? In my opinion, it depends. Requiring everyone to follow only one teacher or to follow many teachers represents an extreme viewpoint. Buddhist practitioners have varying faculties and predispositions. For someone deeply immersed in their own afflictions and conceptual thoughts, the effort of a single teacher may not suffice, so additional teachers may be beneficial. On the other hand, another practitioner may feel confused and overwhelmed by following multiple teachers, making it more suitable for them to follow just one.

I once encountered a Dharma student who, after following many teachers, was constantly anxious about whether he would upset this teacher or that one. Inevitably, he became very exhausted. One day he exclaimed, “I don’t want to follow any teacher anymore. I would be better off staying independent and alone like a pratyekabuddha.” Alas!

So, how many teachers should we follow? The answer varies according to our individual faculties and predispositions. Nevertheless, as long as our goal is to attain liberation from samsara, we must follow a teacher. Otherwise, it is unlikely that we will achieve realization.

Here are the characteristics that a disciple should possess:

- 1) The disciple should be courageous, armored with the resolve to never displease their teacher, even if it means risking their life.
- 2) The disciple should possess a steadfast and unwavering mind so that no immediate circumstances, no matter how challenging, can disturb their inner stability. Such circumstances may include when the teacher is upset or when there is a conflict with a fellow practitioner. In these scenarios, the disciple will not think that the guru-disciple relationship has ended and that they must pack their belongings and leave immediately.

When we follow a teacher, it is not the same as dealing with a corporate

manager. In the latter case, we may respect and listen to the manager when everything goes well, but we may leave or even criticize the manager when we do not get along. This should not be the case when following a Dharma teacher. If you disobey the teacher's instructions and abandon them, then regardless of how many teachers you follow in the future, it is unlikely that you will attain realization.

Some people believe this only applies to Vajrayana and not to Sutrayana, but I do not agree. A review of what the *Flower Ornament Sutra* says about how to respect and serve a qualified teacher, not to mention other sutras, will reveal that perceiving the teacher as the Buddha is not exclusive to Vajrayana. This view of seeing the teacher as the Buddha is also emphasized repeatedly in those Mahayana sutras that reveal the truth of the ultimate meaning.

We should understand that no one can attain liberation without having followed a qualified teacher. This is not a casual statement made by an ordinary person, but a statement made by the Buddha himself. Its validity cannot be refuted unless one discards all of the Buddha's teachings entirely.

3) The disciple serves their teacher with unwavering courage, prepared to endure any difficulty or peril without hesitation. They are even willing to sacrifice their own life to support the teacher's Dharma endeavors. Thus, through the power of *Dharmata*, or the true nature of reality, the disciple will naturally receive the blessings of the teacher's wisdom mind. Conversely, if a disciple abandons the teacher at the first sign of fatigue or minor adverse circumstances, they will not be able to unite their mindstream with that of the teacher. In fact, everyone encounters temporary unfavorable circumstances when serving the teacher, but if a disciple can overcome all obstacles and serve the teacher for an extended period, their faith, state of realization, and Dharma activities will progress continuously.

However, some individuals believe it is not necessarily important to follow the teacher, thinking they will surpass the teacher in Dharma activities by pursuing their own Buddhist endeavors. With such a mindset, they can hardly fulfill their wishes, and worse yet, they are more likely to get stuck in difficulties that will threaten their own livelihood and physical survival.

As you know, the Dharma activities of a genuinely qualified teacher must be extraordinary. Therefore, when the disciple shares the teacher's aspirations and

strives to serve the teacher to the best of their abilities, it presents the greatest opportunity for the disciple to benefit all living beings.

For example, I have been reflecting on the following: “Had I relied solely on my own capacity, it might have been very challenging for me to help a few individuals, let alone all living beings. But thanks to my affinity with the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, I am linked to my guru’s vast Dharma activities, so I have managed to accomplish something meaningful.” Thus, a disciple must properly follow the teacher.

The *Flower Ornament Sutra* outlines ten attitudes essential for following the teacher:

- i. Intention to serve: The disciple should consistently uphold their intention to serve the teacher.
- ii. Being joyful: The disciple should be joyful, rather than miserable or sad, when serving the teacher.
- iii. No intention to disobey: Whatever the teacher wishes, thinks, or requests, the disciple must do their utmost to comply.
- iv. Conformity: The disciple must conform to the teacher and should not oppose or attempt to negotiate with them. Some individuals intentionally create difficulties. For instance, when the teacher assigns a task, the disciple may initially refuse with various excuses until the teacher becomes disappointed, at which point the disciple finally agrees. It is unnecessary to treat the teacher in this manner.
- v. Absence of personal agenda: The disciple should serve the teacher without any personal motives, intentions, or purposes.
- vi. Wholeheartedness: The disciple should follow the teacher wholeheartedly, without being distracted by other thoughts.
- vii. Shared meritorious intention: In whatever Dharma activities the teacher engages, the disciple should strive to participate fully. As Patrul Rinpoche states in the text, “Even just your offering of joy at the slightest thing he does will bring you as much merit as springs from his own unsurpassable intention.”

viii. Shared aspiration: Whatever the teacher is doing, the disciple should cultivate the same aspiration as the teacher.

ix. The perception of a tathagata: The disciple should see the teacher as a true tathagata.

x. The same perfection: The disciple should have the intention and action of perfecting vast Dharma activities alongside the teacher.

A disciple must embody these ten attitudes.

4) The disciple obeys the teacher's every instruction without imposing personal preferences or concerns and should not mix in personal demands or issues.

A disciple with the aforementioned qualities will surely attain liberation simply through their devotion to the teacher.

The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Those who are armored with diligence and unwavering
determination,
Serve a teacher without regard for their own health or life,
And faithfully follow the teacher's instructions without self-
concern
Will attain liberation through devotion and trust alone.

A disciple who truly follows a qualified teacher will rarely think of themselves. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often told us, "Södön, the senior overseer at Larung Gar, listens to whatever the guru says and acts on it immediately; he rarely thinks about himself. Some other Dharma masters, however, always ponder: 'Will I be disliked by others?' 'Will I lose something?' When serving the guru, they constantly reflect on their own concerns."

We were usually cautious when meeting with Södön. Why? Because whenever we had a meeting or a private discussion, he would relay our exact words to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche when asked. So, we were quite nervous.

Before every meeting, Södön would remind us, "Be careful what you say! Otherwise, if the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche asks me, I will report everything

frankly and directly.” After his reminder, no one dared to speak, as he would forward all our words to Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche (*the audience laughs*).

While we were following the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, in retrospect, many of our actions were not impeccable and warrant repentance. But generally speaking, back then, conditions at Larung Gar were much more challenging than they are now, and we followed our guru through ascetic practices and extensive Dharma studies. Looking back, we feel gratified and happy.

In fact, if a disciple can set aside their own concerns and wholeheartedly support the guru’s Dharma activities, they will undoubtedly attain liberation effortlessly through their devotion and faith. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted the verse from the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

Following his instructions without sparing themselves, they will
be freed by the strength of devotion alone.

He told us disciples that while following a teacher, we must strive to adhere to the teacher’s every instruction without reservation. Moreover, this obedience is not just for a day or two, but for as long as possible.

However, during this degenerate age, many people follow a teacher for only a short time—they become bored after studying with the teacher for a while—then they seek another teacher. Of course, it is acceptable to find another teacher, but many great masters followed their gurus for extended periods, which brought them great benefit.

As you should know, of all the practices, the one that brings the greatest merit is to follow the guru’s instructions.

Once, Gampopa went to see his guru Milarepa around dusk, wishing to receive profound instruction. Gampopa asked, “What is the supreme way to accumulate merit?”

Milarepa answered, “As stated in tantric teachings such as the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, making offerings to all buddhas of the three times cannot compare to making offerings to a single pore of the guru. Therefore, the best and most meritorious way to accumulate merit is to make offerings to the guru.”

Gampopa added, “Is there a better way to accumulate merit than this?”

“There is one,” Milarepa replied. “The better way to accumulate merit is to

follow the guru's instructions. It is more meritorious if a disciple can follow the guru's instructions and put them into practice."

If you contemplate those vajra words, you'll discover the profound meaning embedded in them. But can we truly obey the guru's instructions while following him? I feel ashamed of my performance in this regard.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was teaching us the *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*, or *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I paid particular attention to my attitude toward the guru while learning the section on following the teacher. I would remind myself, "Oh! I must see my guru as the Buddha. I should avoid harboring fabricated thoughts about my guru, and I must impeccably obey his instructions." However, one month later, I might have forgotten most of these teachings.

Ordinary people often struggle to maintain a specific practice for the rest of their lives. For example, when they first receive teachings on the impermanence of life, they meditate on the idea of "When will I die?" and wonder "Will I die today?" upon waking in the morning. However, one month later, they no longer contemplate this. Why is this? It is because they lack sustained practice.

To summarize, we need to "recharge" ourselves through hearing the Dharma; otherwise, we'll quickly regress to our starting point, which will hinder our development of genuine conviction. Meanwhile, we must practice with great diligence. Only in this way will our conviction in teachings, such as seeing the guru as the Buddha and obeying the guru's instructions, remain steadfast and never regress. Please devote yourself to Dharma practice.

To follow the teacher, a good disciple should also possess the following characteristics:

- 1) The disciple should have so much faith in the teacher that they perceive the teacher as a true buddha.

It can be challenging to hold such fervent confidence, but it can also be easy. When I first followed my root guru, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, there were occasions when it felt difficult for me to see my guru as the Buddha. However, I reminded myself, "Based on my guru's Dharma activities, wisdom, and compassion, he is undoubtedly a true buddha. No ordinary person could achieve the same accomplishments."

For example, every year during the Pure Land Dharma Assembly and the Vajrasattva Dharma Assembly, tens of thousands of people gather at Larung Gar to recite the Buddha's name and mantras. As a Buddhist, I believe that reciting the Buddha's name so many times generates great merit. My guru organized a Dharma assembly to attract many living beings to engage in virtuous deeds together. From the scale of his Dharma activities, we can infer that he is indeed a real Buddha; otherwise, how could an ordinary person achieve this?

Take me as an example. Sometimes I genuinely want to help others, so I encourage them to listen to the teachings and take refuge. However, it is very challenging for them to do so. Guiding living beings onto the path to liberation is not an easy task.

In contrast, a single action by my guru can quickly create a ripple effect throughout the world. Especially for Westerners, who are quite different from Easterners, it is rare for them to develop faith in spiritual teachers upon first encountering them. However, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche traveled abroad, many people, touched by his incredible blessings, saw him and experienced great joy. They took refuge immediately and vowed to practice true Dharma. From all his extraordinary Dharma activities, it is easy for me to recognize him as a true buddha.

2) The disciple should possess the discernment and understanding of the teachings to recognize the wisdom behind the teacher's skillful actions.

To tame and liberate a diverse array of living beings, the guru embeds various kinds of wisdom in their speech and actions. If they were teaching only you, they would only have to tailor their words and actions specifically for you. For example, if you are drawn to a monk's appearance, the guru would present themselves as a well-mannered monk; if you enjoy meditation, they will sit on a cushion and meditate daily. By doing so, they foster your faith in them, making it easy for you to see them as the Buddha.

However, the guru doesn't just tame and liberate one or two individuals, or even a few hundred, but countless living beings, along with invisible non-humans. Something the guru says may not necessarily resonate with you, but it will undoubtedly bring great benefits to others and may even help them attain realization immediately. Therefore, we should accept all of the guru's speech and actions without reservation.

3) The disciple should embrace and internalize whatever the teacher imparts.

Some individuals may attend the guru's teachings but spend most of their leisure time reading novels afterward. Even worse, some may read novels during Dharma class. Others might attend the Dharma classes but never engage with the texts afterward.

A true disciple would read the text at least once or twice after receiving the teaching. When I was a Dharma student, no matter how busy I was, I would always read the text at least once after class. I reviewed what I had studied in class, how the logical reasoning was examined, how the teacher presented the material, and what my understanding was. I have always maintained this study habit.

However, as the world progresses into the 21st century, the characteristics of many Dharma students have also "progressed" in very different directions.

4) The disciple should cultivate profound love and compassion for all beings who are suffering, lacking protection, and without a place to seek refuge.

5) The disciple should respect and uphold the vows and samayas that the teacher has instructed them to observe.

6) The disciple should be peaceful, calm, and gentle in body, speech, and mind. As disciples, when we speak, act, or interact with Dharma fellows, we shouldn't be stubborn, harsh, aggressive, or rude.

7) The disciple should cultivate a mindset so broad that they can wholeheartedly accept and embrace all actions of their teacher and fellow spiritual practitioners. Some individuals are narrow-minded, and when someone accidentally touches them, they yell, "What are you doing? Why are you looking at me? I am not a ghost! Dare you look at me again!"

8) The disciple should cultivate such generosity that they are willing to offer everything they own to the teacher.

9) The disciple should view everything with pure perception, avoiding constant criticism and negativity. They should not fixate on finding faults in the teacher or their fellow Dharma practitioners.

It's actually quite easy to find fault in someone. For example, a Dharma

practitioner may spend ten years spreading the Dharma and benefiting others while upholding pure precepts. However, people may overlook this and may not necessarily regard him highly. If this teacher happens to smoke once for just a minute, people are likely to criticize him and disregard all his previous good deeds.

Many people excel at finding faults rather than recognizing the good qualities in others. They feel indifferent toward others' extensive Dharma activities while tending to exaggerate even the most insignificant faults. We disciples should avoid such thoughts about our guru and Dharma friends. If we do have such thoughts, we should recognize that they stem from our impure perception.

10) The disciple should avoid any harmful or negative actions for fear of displeasing the teacher. This is related to one's sense of shame and remorse, which is really important.

According to the *Ekottara Agama*, two precious teachings can help maintain social order in this world—decency and remorse. Without them, the world would descend into chaos: the distinctions in responsibilities between wives and husbands or parents and children would cease to exist, and humans would live lives no different from cattle and sheep.

When it comes to following the teacher, if a disciple feels shame and remorse, they will discipline themselves. Otherwise, they will act as they please and may even believe that they and the guru are completely equal. Many people today advocate for absolute democracy and claim equal treatment among teachers and students, gurus and disciples, fathers and children, and so on. This disrupts social ethics and can lead to significant problems. Here, Patrul Rinpoche emphasizes the importance of feeling shame and remorse.

We must follow the guru in the manners outlined above. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Have faith, discernment, knowledge, and great compassion.
Respect the vows and samayas. Control the three doors of body,
speech, and mind.
Have broad-mindedness, generosity, pure perception, and self-
discipline.

The characteristics that a disciple should possess are further illustrated with the following similes.

According to the *Flower Ornament Sutra* and other texts, we should do the following when following a teacher:

i. The disciple should be like the perfect horse, always aligning their actions with the teacher's instructions in every circumstance, skillfully avoiding anything that might upset the teacher, and remaining free from anger or resentment, even when faced with harsh reprimands.

The perfect horse is unlike other animals such as cats and dogs, which may become resentful toward their owners if beaten and might even bite them in retaliation. A well-tamed perfect horse endures any hardship like a great practitioner, even when whipped daily by its owner. A disciple should embody this quality as well. When scolded by the teacher, the disciple should not respond with anger or bear resentment.

ii. The disciple should be like a boat, always willing to go back and forth tirelessly, whether to deliver messages or perform various tasks for the teacher.

iii. The disciple should be like a bridge, able to endure anything, whether the tasks assigned by the teacher are pleasant or unpleasant. Everybody, good or bad, can walk on a bridge, and it won't collapse. It is the same with following the guru. A disciple shouldn't be picky about the tasks assigned by the guru. The disciple shouldn't just work on the tasks they like and refuse those they dislike.

iv. The disciple should be like a smith's anvil, enduring heat, cold, and all other difficulties.

v. The disciple should be like a servant, obeying the teacher's every command.

vi. The disciple should be like a sweeper, never proud and always taking the lowest position.

vii. The disciple should be like a bull with broken horns, letting go of arrogance and respecting everyone. Some disciples complain that the guru is always unfair to them or dissatisfied with them. This is actually a blessing from the guru, so the disciple should accept the guru's blessing with humility, just like a bull with broken horns.

These are the guidelines for following the teacher as listed in the *Flower*

Ornament Sutra and other sutras. The sutra also introduces twenty-one attitudes for following the teacher, which are further summarized into nine attitudes in Shantideva's *Compendium of Training*.⁵⁷ These attitudes include being like the earth, a diamond, the Iron Mountains, a worldly servant, a sweeper, a vehicle, a dog, a ferry, and a dutiful child. If we uphold these attitudes, remain respectful and joyful, and refrain from arrogance when following the teacher, we will undoubtedly attain realization.

The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* summarizes the above analogy regarding how to follow the teacher:

Skillfully serve the teacher with the utmost care,
 And endure harsh rebukes without resentment, like a perfect
 horse.
 Never tire of coming and going, like a boat.
 Bear all things, whether good or bad, like a bridge.
 Endure heat and cold, like an anvil.
 Follow instructions faithfully, like a loyal servant.
 Cut off pride and ego, like a humble sweeper.
 Abandon arrogance and pride, like a bull with broken horns.
 These are the ways to follow the teacher, as taught in the
 scriptures.

There are three ways to please the teacher. The best way is known as the offering of practice, which involves applying their teachings into practice, regardless of the challenges encountered. The middling way is known as service through body and speech, which entails serving the teacher physically, verbally, or mentally. The lowest way is referred to as material offerings, which involves pleasing the teacher by providing material goods, food, money, and so forth.

However, at present, some teachers prefer the lowest offering over the best and middling ways. They seem very fond of material offerings, and some disciples think,

⁵⁷ The *Shikshasamucchaya* (Skt. Śikṣāsamuccaya) or *Compendium of Training* or *Compendium of Precepts* (Tib. བསྐྱེད་པ་ཀུན་བུས་, labpa kün tü; Wyl. bslab pa kun btus) by Shantideva presents clearly and in detail the conduct that bodhisattvas should embrace at all times. It is the longest of the three texts written by Shantideva, the *Sutrasamucchaya* being the shorter one and the *Bodhicharyavatara* the middle-length text. (Nagarjuna's text called *Shikshasamucchaya*, mentioned by Shantideva in the *Bodhicharyavatara*, is no longer available.) (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

“I’ve made this or that material offering to my teacher, so I am a major patron. I am my teacher’s favorite disciple!” This is a mistaken thought. In fact, the best offering to the teacher is the offering of practice.

Of course, the offering of practice doesn’t necessarily refer to meditating on a cushion every day. Some volunteer staff at Larung Gar think, “I feel so ashamed when taking the final exam. I have been volunteering every day this year, but I hardly practice the Dharma, so there is nothing I can offer my guru. Dear guru, I hope you won’t be upset with me.”

Actually, this is not the case. As mentioned in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, when you help and benefit others, this is the best form of offering. The sutra states:

Of all offerings, the offering of the Dharma is the greatest. This includes the offering of practice, the offering of benefiting sentient beings, the offering of accepting and caring for sentient beings, the offering of taking upon oneself the suffering of others, the offering of diligently cultivating the root of merit, the offering of not giving up the bodhisattva’s actions, and the offering of not departing from bodhicitta.

If your volunteer work is for living beings, then it already encompasses offerings such as not departing from bodhicitta, benefiting sentient beings, accepting and caring for sentient beings, and taking upon oneself the suffering of others. Therefore, volunteer work is the highest offering, which is what the buddhas, the bodhisattvas, and the teacher value most. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

To offer your wealth to the teacher,
And serve them respectfully with body and speech—
None of these efforts will ever be in vain.
Yet, among the three ways to please the teacher,
Practice is the most supreme.”

Here is a story from the *Dirghagama*:

When the Buddha was about to enter parinirvana, he went to the town of Kushinagara and prepared for his parinirvana under the twin Sâl trees. The Buddha asked Ananda to prepare a place for lying down, with his head facing north and his face west, signifying that the Dharma would spread to the north and flourish

there. The Sāl trees suddenly bloomed with flowers, even though it was not yet their season, and the flowers fell upon the Buddha.

The Buddha explained to Ananda why this extraordinary scene was unfolding, saying, “This is an offering from Rakshas and celestial beings who inhabit the twin Sāl trees and have faith in the Buddha. However, the offering of off-season flowers is not the true offering.”

“What is the true offering?” Ananda asked.

“The true offering to the Buddha is to receive my teachings and put them into practice,” the Buddha replied.

We often think, “The Buddha’s kindness is so vast. How can I make offerings to him?” In fact, following the Buddha’s teachings and putting them into practice is the greatest offering to the Buddha, as well as to the guru. Some often lament, “Ah! My merit is so small. Others can make offerings to the guru, whereas I don’t even have a penny to offer.”

In fact, material offerings to the guru are not that important. When you study and practice the Dharma diligently, even if the guru is unaware or the Buddha does not provide direct feedback, you are making the offering they value most. Therefore, we must strive to study and practice the Dharma well. The *Dhammapada* states:

If a wise person encounters a qualified teacher,
They should make offerings, even at the cost of their life.

The *Dirghagama* also says:

Those who receive the Dharma,
And practice the Dharma,
are the ones who make offerings to the Buddha.

“Receiving the Dharma” differs from “practicing the Dharma.” The former refers to listening to teachings or reading Buddhist scriptures to understand the Dharma, while the latter means putting the teachings into real practice after understanding the Dharma.

However, some Buddhists should feel embarrassed because they don’t even engage with the Dharma, let alone practice it. There are so many profound teachings in the Tripitaka; yet these Buddhists never read the texts. They simply

place their copies on the shelf as token collections. A few days ago, I heard that some Dharma teachers and practitioners have started to read the Tripitaka, which made me very happy. If you receive the Dharma in this way and strive to put the teachings into practice, this itself is a way of repaying the Buddha's kindness and is the best offering to both the Buddha and the guru.

Some individuals waste their time collecting alms and insist on making monetary offerings to the guru. However, such offerings may not necessarily benefit the guru and could negatively impact their reputation and Dharma activities. The best offering a disciple can make to the guru is to properly hear, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma. On this basis, when opportunities arise and conditions permit, you may then make service offerings or material offerings. In short, it is crucial to recognize what holds greater or lesser significance among the three types of offerings.



Lesson 76

“However incomprehensibly the teacher may behave, ...
Thus, the wise will not fall under the power of Mara.” [page
145–148]

Today we continue our study of the section on “How to Follow a Teacher.”

The teacher’s behaviors are unpredictable and unfathomable because, in order to tame and benefit beings of varying dispositions, they cannot simply adopt a single type of action, attitude, or demeanor. If the teacher only appears peaceful and controlled like a shravaka, they may only tame and benefit those with shravaka dispositions; sentient beings with other dispositions cannot be led in that way. Thus, after we examine the teacher and decide to follow them, we must maintain pure perception.

No matter how challenging it may be to understand the teacher’s actions, we should always maintain a pure perception, recognizing their behavior as skillful means to guide and benefit us. We must understand that the teacher’s wisdom and profound intent are inseparable from that of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, meaning the teacher has no faults. Since what we perceive are projections of our own minds, if we notice faults in the teacher, we should recognize that it stems from our own mental impurities and promptly confess this from the perspective of training our minds.

By maintaining a pure perception of the teacher, we will attain the great qualities of all true Dharmas. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* states:

Those who wholeheartedly follow the teacher without any addition or omission [regarding the teacher's qualities] will attain all the supreme dharmas from the teacher.

If a disciple can follow a teacher in this manner, they will eventually achieve the teacher's wisdom and acquire great qualities such as profound intent, wisdom, compassion, and skillful means to benefit others. Therefore, regardless of how the qualified teacher behaves, a disciple should not perceive faults in their actions.

Here is a story:

The great pandita Naropa had already achieved profound knowledge and spiritual mastery in the Dharma. However, his deity revealed that his teacher from past lives was the renowned Tilopa and instructed him to travel to eastern India to find him. Without delay, Naropa set out for the east. Upon arriving, he was unsure where to find Tilopa and inquired among the locals, but no one seemed to know of him.

"Is there really no one here named Tilopa?" Naropa asked.

The people responded, "There is someone known as Tilopa the Outcaste, or Tilopa the Beggar."

Naropa thought to himself, "The ways of enlightened beings are beyond ordinary understanding. This could indeed be him." He then asked where Tilopa the Beggar could be found.⁵⁸

"Near that broken wall over there, where you see the smoke rising," they replied.⁵⁹

When Naropa arrived at the location he had been directed to, he saw Tilopa sitting by a wooden tub filled with fish—some still alive, others dead. Tilopa grabbed a fish, roasted it over the fire, ate it, and then snapped his fingers.⁶⁰

Naropa humbly bowed before Tilopa and pleaded to be taken as his student.

Tilopa, however, brushed it off, saying, "What are you saying? I'm merely a beggar!"

⁵⁸ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche commented, "Some people are unlike Naropa. They prefer a high-caste and tall teacher who is said to have reincarnated for many lives. They probably won't approach a teacher who is said to be a beggar."

⁵⁹ According to other historical accounts, Tilopa lived near a river.

⁶⁰ The snapping of fingers is part of a practice for transferring the consciousness of another being to a pure realm.

Yet Naropa persisted with unwavering determination, and eventually, Tilopa agreed to accept him as his disciple.

Tilopa told Naropa that all external appearances are just the creativity of awareness and that attachment to appearances is the cause of all sufferings in *samsara*. Then Tilopa had Naropa undergo many ascetic acts, and eventually, Naropa was liberated from the state of attachment.

In fact, Tilopa was not killing those fish merely out of hunger or a lack of other food. Fish, being unaware of right and wrong, are beings burdened with negative karma, and Tilopa possessed the ability to liberate them. By consuming their flesh, he established a connection with their consciousness, enabling him to transfer them to a pure Buddha-field.

Generally speaking, it is very difficult to transfer the consciousness of a being with whom a master has no affinity. According to Tibetan tradition, even if you have only one *khata* or a single needle, you should offer it to the guru to establish a connection. However, an animal has no means to connect with the guru except by offering its flesh. This is transference through tantric subjugating activity.

This story is well known in the Tibetan region and India. Upon first hearing it, some beginning Buddhists of *Sutrayana* may find it frightening, and they may struggle to understand Tilopa's supreme state of realization. However, if you do not have sufficient evidence to negate the story, you should remain open-minded and not denigrate all meat-eaters simply because you are vegetarian. After all, the state of those sublime beings is inconceivable. Therefore, we should not dismiss all seemingly negative actions, as some of them can actually benefit beings.

Of course, those who haven't attained certain states of realization must not carelessly imitate such actions. Some tantric practitioners mimic Tilopa's fish-eating behavior. They also place both live and dead fish into a basin and snap their fingers after eating a fish. Indeed, they can snap their fingers, but can they actually transfer the consciousness of those fish to a pure realm?

If you can indeed liberate living beings, you may do so whenever possible. But if you cannot, it's best not to pretend in front of others. Although the state of realization is invisible to the naked eye, allowing charlatans to get away with nonsense, over time, people can gradually infer from the teachers' words and actions whether those teachers have the capacity to liberate living beings.

There are many stories similar to Tilopa's in the Han areas of China. Master Tiguang, a disciple of Master Xuyun, once recounted a story:

Emperor Xianfeng's mother died, and one night she appeared in her son's dream, saying, "I am now a hungry ghost. There is a monk in charge of feeding pigs at the animal shelter of Xiyu Temple. He is a sublime monk who has attained enlightenment. You must invite him to free me from the lower realm!"

Then, the emperor sent an imperial official to Xiyu Temple for the sublime monk. In the pigsty, he found a monk in filthy, ragged clothes who ate and slept together with the pigs. Seeing no one else around, the imperial official knew it must be this monk.

The monastic receptionist scolded the monk, saying, "Get up! The imperial official is here!" But the monk didn't budge at all. The imperial official prostrated himself before the monk, and eventually, the monk got up and went to the palace.

During the *Yankou* ritual⁶¹ for the hungry ghosts, the emperor had the monk take the main seat while the other monks sat on either side. The monk did nothing and eventually fell asleep, snoring loudly. The other monks had to wake him.

That night, the emperor's mother appeared in her son's dream, saying, "The sublime monk came to save me. While I was holding onto his robe and was just about to be freed, someone pulled him away from behind, and I couldn't get out."

The following evening, no one dared to disturb the monk while he slept. When the ritual was almost over, he sat up. The other monks brought him slices of steamed bread, asking, "Venerable master, can you offer food to the beings of the lower realms?"

The monk threw the slices to the ground without chanting any prayer, saying, "I have lived for over eighty years, and I've never done this. Fine, big ghosts go to the pure realm, and small ghosts eat the steamed bread!" Soon after, tens of thousands of hungry ghosts were liberated.

For this reason, the emperor appointed him Master of the Empire and awarded him a purple ceramic bowl and an imperial carriage. Master Tiguang said he saw these objects when he took ordination, but not since then, perhaps because they were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

⁶¹ The *Yankou* ritual is a Buddhist ceremony traditionally performed to offer food to hungry ghosts (preta) in the afterlife, believed to suffer from insatiable hunger due to past misdeeds.

In this story, the sublime monk lived in a pigsty and appeared filthy and deranged, so people didn't believe he could liberate beings. In fact, some great siddhas conceal their state of realization instead of displaying it for everyone to see clearly.

On the surface, great siddhas are humans, just like those burdened with heavy karmic debts. In some cases, the latter may appear more like sublime beings through their deception. Many people cannot distinguish great siddhas from charlatans, even though the inner realizations of these beings differ vastly. Thus, we shouldn't judge others' levels of realization solely based on their appearances, thinking that, aside from ourselves, everyone else is bad, foolish, and ordinary.

Among the great siddhas, in addition to the story just mentioned, there are tales of Saraha, who was an arrowsmith, and Savaripa, who was a hunter. Many enlightened masters, both past and present, often come from outcast backgrounds and adopt very lowly lifestyles.

For example, although the eighty-four Mahasiddhas of India attained incredible states of realization, they appeared as hunters, prostitutes, and other outcasts, and their conduct seemed highly inappropriate. We must approach topics related to enlightened masters with great caution. Careless remarks can lead to serious consequences, especially when they involve defaming sacred beings.

According to historical accounts, the great siddha Saraha was the teacher of Nagarjuna. Once, Saraha drank the liquor of a female vendor who was a manifestation of Vajrayogini, and at that moment, all of Saraha's conceptual thoughts disappeared, and he attained a supreme meditative state.

Knowing Saraha had consumed alcohol, which was forbidden by the Brahmin Law, some people scolded him, claiming he had tarnished his brahmin caste. In the presence of the king and others, Saraha threw a large stone into the sea, saying, "If I have drunk alcohol, may this stone sink. If you have drunk alcohol while I haven't, may this stone float." The stone floated and never sank. The crowd was amazed.

Later, he took ordination as a Buddhist monk and became a highly esteemed master admired by many. During a visit to the south, he encountered an arrowsmith girl whose daily task was to transform a stick, no matter how curved, into a perfectly straight arrow. Saraha received this arrowsmith girl's pointing-out instruction and immediately recognized the nature of phenomena.

[Our mind, which is primordially straight, is curved by ignorance. It can be straightened through the guru's pith instructions, revealing its primordial nature.]

Saraha traveled with the arrowsmith girl as his consort and also became an arrowsmith himself. Having once been a great monk who upheld pure precepts and taught many members of the sangha, people struggled to accept his new behavior and began to slander him. In response to their sarcastic remarks, he chanted while crafting arrows:

Shaving my head and appearing as a monk,
Or being together with liquor and women—
There is no difference between greed and non-greed,
And there is no difference between purity and impurity,
Which is incomprehensible to others.
Alas, worldly people are just like venomous snakes...

When the king and others heard his vajra song, their hair stood on end, and they uncovered ultimate wisdom and attained realization.

Saraha took the arrowsmith girl as his consort before becoming Nagarjuna's teacher. He had a vajra song that says:

Before yesterday, I was not a true bhikkhu;
After today, I am finally a true bhikkhu.

An ultimate bhikkhu is one who has realized that the nature of all phenomena is devoid of inherent existence, which is why Saraha referred to himself as a "true bhikkhu."

Shavaripa also had extraordinary life stories. Initially, he and his two siblings were dancers. Once, after they made a song-and-dance offering to Nagarjuna, he showed them the painting of Bodhisattva Jewel Wisdom. Shavaripa found the bodhisattva very familiar, developed great faith, and decided to follow Nagarjuna. Through practicing Mahamudra, Shavaripa attained enlightenment, had a direct vision of Bodhisattva Jewel Wisdom, and reached full realization of Mahamudra.

Later, he went to South India, took two consorts, and benefited beings as a hunter. His two consorts later became dakinis, who propagated Mahamudra and vajra songs, respectively.

Of course, it is difficult for shravakas to accept these seemingly off-limits

behaviors, but realized Mahayanists have no problem accepting such actions. Some practitioners of Chinese Buddhism cannot accept certain teachings in Tibetan Buddhism, particularly consort practice.

We cannot simply label consort practice as wrong. If a person lacks realization but uses tantric practice as an excuse for engaging in sexual activities driven by lust, this is forbidden in all the sutras and tantras. However, when a realized person has transcended lust, even if they appear to take a consort, it may sometimes be permitted.

The *Sutra on the Ocean-like Samadhi of the Contemplation of the Buddha*, translated into Chinese during the Eastern Jin dynasty, contains a story worth sharing here:

Once a girl noticed the Buddha, Ananda, and Nanda begging for alms, and she fell deeply in love with Ananda and Nanda, eagerly anticipating their next visit.

In response, the Buddha manifested as an elegant young man, with whom the girl became infatuated and engaged in sexual intercourse. The young man had intercourse with her every day and never seemed to tire. Initially overjoyed, the girl later felt tormented.

The young man explained that once he had intercourse with a woman, he had to continue for twelve consecutive days before taking a break. Overcome with remorse, the girl began to complain restlessly. Unable to endure the insult, the young man committed suicide over her body.

His corpse remained entwined with her body until it slowly decomposed into a skeleton. By this time, the girl had lost all desire. All she could do was pray to the Buddha to save her. The Buddha appeared before her, radiating light, and made the skeleton vanish with his miraculous power. Then the Buddha imparted his teachings, and eventually, the girl attained the realization of a stream-enterer.

As you can see, consort practice is discussed in a relatively obscure manner in the sutras. Nowadays, many people hear about tantric practices such as consort practice and subjugation, and they wonder whether consort practice is well-grounded in Vajrayana.

In fact, according to the precepts of individual liberation, lust is simply lust, making consort practice unacceptable. However, in the Mahayana sutras of definitive meaning, lust can be transformed, and consort practice is mentioned and accepted in a subtle manner. If lust can never be transformed on the path, then

how can we explain the stories in the Mahayana sutras? Therefore, please do not dismiss Tibetan Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism outright due to your limited understanding of certain aspects. The wisdom of Buddhism is both profound and encompassing; it is our narrow-mindedness that prevents us from seeing its entirety.

Thus, we shouldn't go to extremes by believing that a Buddhist can act without concern for being right or wrong. It is essential for us to examine a teacher. Some teachers are charlatans who do not possess any qualities of a qualified teacher, so we must not follow them.

It is like shopping; we may encounter genuine products or counterfeit ones. Sometimes, an item whose true value is only two dollars is rebranded and priced at thirty dollars, fooling many ignorant shoppers. Some medicines lack any medical value and can even be harmful, yet many people are misled by commercials and end up adopting products that ultimately harm them.

Therefore, we must examine a teacher carefully. If we truly don't know what to do or what not to do, at the very least, we should seek the opinions of others. It is similar to selecting a product; it is necessary to consult an experienced person for their insights on its quality and origin.

This issue becomes even more serious when choosing a qualified teacher. If we purchase the wrong product, we may simply waste our money or temporarily harm our health. However, following an unqualified teacher can waste not only our lives, money, and efforts but also jeopardize the virtuous roots of many future lives. Therefore, we must seek out a qualified teacher and follow them.

After carefully examining the teacher and choosing to follow them, it is important not to misinterpret any of the teacher's actions. We must maintain a pure perception of a qualified teacher. It says in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

Do not misinterpret their actions.
In sacred lands, many realized beings
Appear in the guise of lowly or wicked figures,
Even the most degraded among the degraded.

Some qualified teachers adopt very low lifestyles and may appear mischievous. Many stories of such teachers can be found in Taranatha's historical work on the lives of various Indian Mahasiddhas. A qualified disciple will not develop any

wrong views toward the teacher's apparent "misbehaviors" and will instead accept them without doubt.

It is also stated in Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Ten Bodhisattva Grounds*:

Internally, he possesses qualities and wisdom;
Externally, he seems to lack proper demeanor.
The ignorant walkers (who belittle him)
Are like sitting on a fire covered by ashes.

This verse illustrates that if an ignorant person disdains and slanders such a qualified teacher, they will be like someone sitting on a fire concealed by ashes. Soon, they will catch fire, which is quite dangerous.

Many people today often criticize teachers who offer them the Dharma, and some even post their remarks online, which is terrible. In fact, what they do is self-destructive. The actions of many siddhas are incomprehensible, and we may never fully understand the hidden meaning behind them. You might even consistently view such a great teacher as a bad person until the day you die, but in reality, the teacher is a true manifestation of all buddhas and bodhisattvas. Therefore, we must maintain a pure perception of our teacher and refrain from speaking negatively about them.

Especially after spending a long time with a teacher, one might begin to see them as an ordinary friend and perceive their actions as flawed. This is what is meant by the saying, "If one were to live with the Buddha long enough, one would find faults in him."

In the three-thousand-fold universe, Buddha Shakyamuni is the only one with perfect qualities who is devoid of any faults. However, those who lack faith and hold wrong views may still disdain the Buddha, even if they lived alongside him. Sunaksatra was one such person.

According to some sutras and shastras, Sunaksatra was the Buddha's half brother, but Master Kuiji's *Commentary on the Lotus Sutra* states that Sunaksatra was the Buddha's son. The corresponding verse is:

The Buddha has three sons,
Sunaksatra, Upamāya, and Rāhula.

It also says in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*:

Sunaksatra is the Buddha's son when he was a bodhisattva.

Regardless of his relationship to the Buddha, Sunaksatra did exist in history and was indeed a relative of the Buddha. However, he developed no faith in the Buddha and often slandered the Buddha without reason.

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* recounts many of his deeds in the 33rd volume, some of which are quite laughable. Here is one story:

One evening, the Buddha taught the Dharma to Indra. As a personal attendant, Sunaksatra had to make preparations for the Buddha to retire before he could finally rest. During the teaching, Sunaksatra grew impatient with the long discourse.

At that time, there was a custom in the city of Rajgir: whenever a child cried relentlessly, their parent would scare them by saying, "The scary ghost is coming for you!" Sunaksatra thought of this and told the Buddha, "World Honored One, please go back to your room and rest; otherwise, the scary ghost will come for you."

The Buddha replied, "You fool! Don't you know the Buddha is free from the four maras,⁶² so nothing can scare me?"

Indra witnessed the conversation and was surprised by Sunaksatra's foolish act.

Here is another story:

Once the Buddha went to the city for his alms round, accompanied by Sunaksatra. Many pious individuals wished to pay homage to the Buddha and even to his footprints. However, Sunaksatra, who walked behind the Buddha, deliberately tried to erase the Buddha's footprints. He failed in his attempt, and people were appalled by his actions.

When they arrived in the city, they encountered a drunken thirtika near a

⁶² The four maras are the four types of obstructive, 'demonic' forces (sometimes also translated as 'demons') that create obstacles for practitioners on the spiritual path. It is important to understand that they have no inherent existence and are only created by the mind. According to Sūtrayāna, the four maras are:

- 1) the mara of the aggregates (Skt. skandhamāra), which symbolizes our clinging to forms, perceptions, and mental states as 'real';
- 2) the mara of destructive emotions (Skt. kleśamāra), which symbolizes our addiction to habitual patterns of negative emotion;
- 3) the mara of the Lord of Death (Skt. mṛtyumāra), which symbolizes both death itself, which cuts short our precious human life, and also our fear of change, impermanence, and death; and
- 4) the mara of the sons of the gods (Skt. devaputramāra), which symbolizes our craving for pleasure, convenience, and 'peace'.

liquor house who spoke nonsense. Sunaksatra was impressed by the drunken man's words and said happily to the Buddha, "World Honored One, if there are arhats in this world, this person must be the arhat of all arhats! Why is that? Because he said, 'The principle of cause and effect doesn't exist at all.'"

The Buddha shook his head and replied, "Didn't you listen to my teachings? An arhat does not drink alcohol, nor does he slander the Dharma or deny the principle of cause and effect. This man commits every kind of wrongdoing! How could he possibly be an arhat?"

Sunaksatra remained unconvinced by the Buddha's words.

Here is another story:

A thirtika named Ascetic Gain didn't believe in the principle of cause and effect, and he often told others, "Affliction arises without a cause, so does liberation." Sunaksatra was convinced, so he immediately went to the Buddha, saying, "If there are arhats in this world, Ascetic Gain is the most supreme arhat!"

The Buddha answered, "Ascetic Gain is not an arhat. He doesn't even know what an arhat is."

Sunaksatra said, "Aren't you an arhat? How is it that an arhat is jealous of another arhat?"

The Buddha said, "I have no jealousy. It is only you who have such a wrong view. Ascetic Gain is not an arhat at all. Seven days from now he will die of abdominal pain and be reborn as a vomit-eating ghost. His corpse will be carried to a cemetery by his fellows. This will show he is definitely not an arhat."

Hearing what the Buddha had said, Sunaksatra rushed to see Ascetic Gain and informed him of the Buddha's words. Sunaksatra further added, "You must be careful and make sure this does not happen so that the Buddha will commit the transgression of lying."

For the next six days Ascetic Gain didn't eat and drink. On the seventh day he couldn't help but take some dark honey and drink cold water. As a result, he died of abdominal pain.

Hearing the news, Sunaksatra rushed to the cemetery and indeed found a vomit-eating ghost near the corpse of Ascetic Gain. "Dear master, are you dead?" Sunaksatra asked nervously.

"Yes."

“How did it happen?”

“Due to abdominal pain.”

“Who brought the corpse here?”

“My fellows.”

“What are you now?”

“A vomit-eating ghost.”

The ghost continued, “Sunaksatra, don’t hold wrong views about the Buddha. The Buddha is one who speaks of things as they are, speaks what is true, and speaks in accord with reality. The Buddha does not speak falsely; everything he says is the truth. Why don’t you believe this? Those who do not believe the Buddha’s words will end up like me.”

Despite this, Sunaksatra still clung to his erroneous views about the Buddha.

Sunaksatra, who was the Buddha’s half brother, had attended to him for twenty-four years and memorized all twelve categories of teachings in the scriptures. However, he perceived the Buddha’s actions as deceptive and eventually formed the mistaken belief that, aside from a six-foot aura, there was no distinction between himself and the Buddha. He told the Buddha:

For twenty-four years, I served as your attendant,
 Yet, apart from the aura surrounding your body,
 I have not seen even a sesame seed’s worth of special qualities
 in you.
 When it comes to the Dharma, I know just as much as you do—
 And from now on, I will no longer be your attendant.

After saying this, Sunaksatra left the Buddha. Subsequently, Ananda assumed the role of the Buddha’s personal attendant. He inquired of the Buddha about the future rebirth of Sunaksatra.

The Buddha replied, “In seven days, Sunaksatra’s life will end, and he will be reborn as a preta in a flower garden.”

Ananda conveyed this message to Sunaksatra, who thought, “Sometimes the Buddha’s predictions do come true, so I’d better be cautious for the next week. After that, I’ll prove him wrong.” He decided to fast for the entire period. On the

final evening, overcome by thirst, he drank water but couldn't digest it, leading to his death. True to the Buddha's words, Sunaksatra was reborn as a preta in a flower garden, bearing all nine signs of ugliness.

There are many disciples like Sunaksatra nowadays. They develop erroneous views toward their teacher after following them for an extended period. I have witnessed several such cases myself. Initially, these disciples had strong faith, which, however, waned after they heard someone slander their teacher. They then told the teacher, "I've been with you for many years, but now I quit." These students also believe they have surpassed their teacher and even begin to slander them to others.

In fact, a wise Dharma student won't blindly follow a fool. Gendün Chöphel said in one of his poems:

Though fools may not follow you,
Never follow fools.
That is the first vow of the wise.
Keep it though it costs you your life.⁶³

This is the great master's advice, which carries profound meaning. While the wise won't follow fools, will fools follow the wise? This seems unlikely. Even fools may temporarily follow the wise, but as time passes, they will eventually leave. It is clear that the wise and fools take different paths, as portrayed in Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*.⁶⁴

However difficult the situation is,
The wise will never resort to the path of fools.
Just like however thirsty a swallow is,
It will never drink water that has fallen on the ground.

Therefore, wise people should never follow the example of the fool by abandoning or slandering their teacher. Whenever we perceive faults in the actions of our qualified teacher, we should feel a deep sense of embarrassment and shame, recognizing that the impurity lies in our own perception. By understanding that

⁶³ This verse is translated by Donald S. Lopez Jr., in *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom: 104 Poems by Gendün Chöphel*, published by The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2009.

⁶⁴ *Treasury of Good Advice* was written by Sakya Pandita in the 13th century. The poetry emphasizes moral and ethical values.

the teacher's actions are entirely flawless and perfect, we can enhance our pure perception of the teacher and deepen our faith.

It is easy to make mistakes when measuring a teacher's inner state of realization by their outer behaviors. In the *Sutra on the Questions by Jnanottara Bodhisattva on the Means for Great Good*, the Buddha describes various ways in which a bodhisattva practices skillful means. For example, there was once a king who had attained enlightenment. To liberate a woman, the king engaged in sexual activity with her, which helped her generate the bodhicitta mind. Therefore, we should refrain from judging others' states of realization based on their external actions.

Nagarjuna's *Discourse on the Ten Stages* also states:

If one judges someone's inner qualities by their outer demeanor,
And gives rise to a mind of disdain,
It will harm one's body and the roots of virtue,
And upon death, one will fall into a lower realm.

In Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, he mentions individuals who resemble four types of mango fruits: unripe but seemingly ripe; ripe but seemingly unripe; unripe appearing unripe; and ripe appearing ripe. Some Mahasiddhas are like the second type: they have attained liberation from samsara but appear to engage in morally inappropriate conduct for the purpose of benefiting certain beings.

That said, a disciple should heed the advice from the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

Without having tamed and mastered your own perceptions,
Seeking faults in others is a grave wrongdoing.
Though Sunaksatra mastered the twelve categories of teachings,
He viewed the Buddha's actions as deceitful.
Reflect carefully on this and correct your own mistakes.

If, before your mind is tamed, you view the teacher with deluded and wrong views, this creates infinite faults. It's just like Sunaksatra: even though he was well-versed in all twelve categories of teachings in the scriptures, he saw faults in the Buddha and eventually fell into a lower realm. Therefore, we must contemplate the great qualities of the qualified teacher, and whenever we develop wrong views about the teacher, we need to recognize those deluded thoughts and repent immediately.

When the teacher appears to be furious with us, we should avoid responding with anger. Instead, we should remind ourselves that the teacher must have identified some fault in us and deemed this the right moment to address it through such a strong response. Once the teacher's anger has subsided, we should approach them, acknowledge our faults, and commit to never repeating them in the future.

[Many Buddhists develop faith in non-Buddhist religions and often see faults in their teachers. Alas! This is the karmic effect of their actions in past lives.]

While following a teacher, the aforementioned advice is very important. I was fortunate to have learned the right attitude and methods before I began following my teachers. Therefore, throughout my life, I have always followed whichever qualified teacher I encountered with maximum respect and an untainted perception. While following my teachers, I may have made unintentional mistakes here and there. Nevertheless, I have always tried my best to follow them and have never regarded them as ordinary persons.

At work, when dealing with superiors, employees may cooperate when pleased, but when displeased, they feel it's acceptable to confront or slander them. Employees may not see anything wrong with this behavior. However, Dharma students must not act this way toward their teachers.

One day, you may lose your congenial feelings for the teacher. Nevertheless, you should always cultivate gratitude toward the teacher for the Dharma teachings you have received. Therefore, we should always respect all the qualified teachers we follow. This is very important!

Especially when the teacher seems to be angry with you, do not develop wrong views. It says in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

If the teacher appears furious,
Recognize it as pointing out our faults to correct them.
When the time is right, we should confess and repent.
In this way, the wise will not be ensnared by Mara.

When the teacher appears angry with us, we should understand it is because we are so stubborn that a peaceful method cannot tame us; therefore, the teacher is employing a wrathful method. This indicates that the opportunity for the teacher to tame us has ripened, which is worth celebrating.

Otherwise, if we focus only on the faults in the teacher's rebuke and begin to

slander them relentlessly, we have fallen under the influence of Mara. We should always regard the qualified teacher as the Buddha and never see faults in them. *The Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra* states:

One must venerate the qualified teacher,
And never see faults in them.

Even if a Buddhist cannot perceive the teacher as a buddha or a bodhisattva, they should always remember the teacher's kindness in imparting the authentic Dharma and show respect to the teacher. We respect and appreciate our parents because they gave us life and raised us. Similarly, we should respect and appreciate, even more so, the teachers who have taught us even a single verse of the Dharma that enriches our wisdom.

For those who show no respect for a teacher, no matter how many teachers they follow, the Buddha's teachings will not inherently benefit them. Thus, their enlightenment will remain far out of reach. In contrast, if a Dharma student respects and appreciates their qualified teacher, feels genuine joy toward the teacher, and sees them with pure perception, then naturally, the Dharma will nourish them.

As a result, their minds will resonate with the Dharma, and many precious qualities of the state of realization will gradually emerge. That's why the Buddha emphasized the importance of following a teacher.

The teacher-disciple relationship is unlike a worldly relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate. As long as there are no serious conflicts in the latter relationship, the subordinate can still function well at work.

In contrast, a qualified teacher and their disciple are connected by special interdependent conditions, which are closely tied to the disciple's liberation and realization. You should definitely respect your qualified teacher, even if not for the sake of supporting your teacher and Buddhism. At the very least, you should do so for your own success and achievements in your Dharma practice.



Lesson 77

“In the presence of your teacher, stand up at once ...
Through such devotion you will experience all his qualities.”
[page 148–149]

We are currently studying the section on “How to Follow a Teacher.” After this chapter, we will move on to the uncommon preliminaries. Before that, I would like to remind you of two important points.

First, you must practice the common preliminaries to establish a solid foundation for your Dharma practice. Otherwise, the state of uncommon preliminaries will not easily arise within you, making it difficult for the states of the generation stage, perfection stage, and the Great Perfection to arise.

Therefore, although my teachings on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* have taken quite a long time, I believe they are entirely worthwhile. Based on my own experience and the life stories of other masters, it is evident that those who practice the preliminaries diligently will not easily regress later. Conversely, those who do not practice the preliminaries properly may have some experiences or reach certain states temporarily, but soon all that experience and those states will fade away. For this reason, I have been repeatedly urging you to practice the common preliminaries. I hope you will take this to heart.

Second, practice diligently. You have recently begun prostrations, one of the uncommon preliminaries. If you can perform a certain number of prostrations each day, it will accumulate over time. Some individuals find it very tiring to complete an entire round of preliminaries, and prostrations can be particularly challenging. However, this is easily manageable for a dedicated practitioner. As I mentioned

before, a lama in Qinghai Province completed the preliminaries sixteen times in his lifetime.

Recently, a Dharma master who returned from abroad shared the prostration practice of a renowned Tibetan master. Since leaving the Tibetan plateau in the 1950s, this master has been doing one hundred prostrations daily for almost fifty years without missing a single day. Even when visiting other countries or attending international conferences, he ensures to catch up on his prostration practice at night. He has completed more than 4.2 million prostrations.

Hearing their stories, I feel that people are truly very different from one another. On the surface, everyone can eat, walk, and talk, but their determination to practice the Dharma varies greatly. Some individuals plan to complete only one round of preliminaries, yet they constantly complain, saying it is as difficult as climbing to the sky. In contrast, others find the preliminaries easy to perform, regardless of how many rounds they've completed.

When practicing preliminaries, you should emulate the great diligence of those masters. I've noticed that some Buddhists living in cities are quite diligent at first but gradually lose motivation to engage in the preliminaries.

This is why I always emphasize the importance of group practice. It can be very challenging to complete the preliminaries alone. Take me, for example: If I practice prostrations with the sangha, I will do so without hesitation; but if I practice alone, I may easily find distractions that pull me away from my practice.

It is crucial for every practitioner to lay a solid foundation by practicing the preliminaries; otherwise, I wouldn't have devoted so much time to delivering these teachings to you. Personally, I have dedicated many years to the Dharma, so teaching you some simple practices, sadhanas, sutras, or shastras is not too challenging for me.

However, after careful contemplation, I believe what truly matters to you is the teaching on preliminaries, so I plan to provide extensive teachings in the coming years. By doing so, I hope you can internalize the teachings, ensuring that your practice does not easily regress.

Some of you may resemble those individuals who are highly motivated when they first encounter the Dharma but, over time, become bored and demotivated. Patrul Rinpoche says in *The Lotus Garden's Play*:

Their listening and contemplation resemble a tadpole, with a large head and a slender tail.

Some people's Dharma practice is similar. Initially, they are very motivated and practice day and night with little rest. But over time, they relax and eventually stop all their practice. It is definitely not ideal to start strongly but end weakly.

Recently, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche called on Buddhists worldwide to practice preliminaries, stating he will guide and engage in the practice. Participants must commit to practicing for ten years and meditating for at least two hours each day. More than three hundred Buddhists signed up; only a few participants are from China, with the majority from Western countries and Southeast Asia.

I believe those participants truly possess great merit. Some practitioners I know are committed to practicing the preliminaries for five or six years, yet many forget to engage in their practice if no one reminds them. Some Buddhists resemble elementary school students who don't behave properly without supervision from their teachers. These Buddhists, despite being advanced in age, like the sun that is about to set, remain uninterested in practicing the Dharma. They still believe that other aspects of life are more important and find it difficult to let go.

As for me, I firmly believe that preliminary practices are far more important than anything else, which may not align with your perspective. I hope you'll take the time to contemplate this issue carefully.

Today we'll continue studying the chapter on "How to Follow a Spiritual Friend."

In everyday life, when we are around the teacher, we must remain respectful and act according to the Dharma.

♦ Standing up

When our teacher stands up, we should immediately stand up as well, rather than remaining seated or lying down. Of course, if permitted by the teacher, we may remain seated. Otherwise, acts of deliberate disrespect toward the teacher will bring various karmic consequences in this life and in many lives to come.

♦ Sitting down

When the teacher sits down, we should inquire about their health, mood,

appetite, and the like. When we sense that the teacher might need something, we should, at the appropriate time, offer whatever would bring them joy.

It is important to identify the right moment for making offerings. You may annoy the teacher if you insist on offering something when they are not in a good mood. Only at the right moment can such an offering bring supreme merit. When offering something to the teacher, you should also consider their preferences. If the teacher doesn't like or need the item being offered, it is of little significance to offer it at that time. However, if the teacher appreciates it, you should do your best to make the offering.

A disciple must venerate their teacher. Lama Kangyur from the Gelug lineage once said, "Don't go against anything the guru says. Even if the guru says the sun rises from the west, you must accept and believe it without any doubt."

In the past, disciples with pure perception listened to everything the guru said and believed the guru's words were no different from the Buddha's. However, nowadays, many people do not behave the same way.

In today's society, some individuals overly emphasize democracy and equality, believing they should be on equal footing with their guru. They argue there is no need to distinguish high and low status because everything is empty and equal. Such misconceptions make little sense.

Although ultimately everything is equal, at the relative level, it is also true that we must venerate and follow the teacher to eventually attain their supreme qualities, such as wisdom, compassion, and realization. Therefore, when following the teacher, we must do whatever will please them, and we must always remember them.

Geshe Chengawa said that great qualities arose in his mind because he always remembered and revered his guru. As you may recall, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often broke down in tears whenever he mentioned his root lama, Thubga Rinpoche, which instilled great confidence in many regarding the merit of following a qualified teacher.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught, everyone was overjoyed, and significant changes occurred in their minds. For example, during teachings on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, sangha members resonated deeply with the content and immediately put the teachings into practice. When the topic was the impermanence of life, no one dared to waste time. When the

focus shifted to the merit of following the teacher, everyone felt it was essential to respect the teacher.

I often think that although the sangha at Larung Gar has been growing in number and some Dharma teachers provide profound teachings, it is difficult to determine whether the listeners will undergo significant mental transformation. Therefore, when a great master leaves this world, many beings who have a direct or indirect connection with them lose the opportunity to continue their mental transformation by personally listening to the Dharma in their presence.

On the other hand, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's qualities, Dharma activities, and blessings have always been present. Whether you've met him in person or not, now that you have the opportunity to study and practice the Dharma, I believe this activity is an integral part of his Dharma activities. If the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had never established our Buddhist Institute at Larung Gar and cultivated so many great masters, people would not have the opportunity to study the Dharma so comprehensively.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once said:

Even if a sangha member at Larung Gar generates a virtuous thought that lasts for just a split second, it is all due to the blessings of the omniscient Mipham Rinpoche.

In the same way, even if we sangha members at Larung Gar have the thought that all phenomena are impermanent and all compounded things are suffering for just a split second, it is also due to the blessings of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

If we recognize this and have genuine faith in our guru, we can eventually experience profound transformation in our practice, and the power of the Dharma can truly manifest within us during this degenerate age. Otherwise, if we merely follow a teacher superficially and practice the Dharma, it becomes just a formality that offers little benefit.

Therefore, we should read the life stories of those great masters and pay attention to how they followed their gurus and always prayed to the lineage masters. Due to their faith in their gurus, these masters always remained in a state of practice. In contrast, we may only study and practice the Dharma when we are free and in a good mood. We might quickly abandon the Dharma or even develop

wrong views when we are in a bad mood or face adversity. This illustrates that the Dharma hasn't penetrated our minds.

In fact, no matter which practice you engage in, you should view it as the blessings of the guru and the unobstructed power of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Non-Buddhists or novice Buddhists may be skeptical of such blessings or power, and they may struggle to believe in them.

Buddhism never rejects such doubts. In fact, when a person develops reasonable doubts about the true Dharma, this in itself can uproot the cause of samsara. The *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* states:

Those with little merit
Do not even doubt this doctrine.
Entertaining just a doubt
Tears to tatters worldly existence.⁶⁵

♦ Walking

When walking with the teacher as their attendant, we should not walk in front of them, as this turns our back to them, which is disrespectful. Do not walk behind them either, as this may involve stepping on their footprints or shadow. The *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* states:

If you step on your guru's shadow,
The consequence is the same as destroying a stupa.

We should also avoid walking to their right, as this implies taking a position of honor.

In Buddhism, the right side is considered the place of honor, which may not align with worldly norms. From what I've heard, social norms in the United States and China differ. When heads of state gather, some may believe that sitting to the left is the place of honor, while others may consider sitting to the right as the place of honor. In any case, the right side is the place of honor in Buddhism. For instance, it is not appropriate for a disciple to stand on the right side of their teacher when a photo of them together is being taken.

⁶⁵ Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

So where should a disciple walk in the presence of their teacher?

We should remain respectfully to their left and slightly behind. However, if the road becomes dangerous or an attack occurs, it is then appropriate to seek their permission to move ahead. This has been addressed in my commentary on *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. *The Tantra of the Ornament of the Vajra Essence* also states:

In the evening, on occasions when crossing a river,
And when in a dangerous place,
If permitted by the teacher,
It is not wrong to walk ahead of him.

♦ Seat and means of transportation

Regarding the teacher's seat and means of transportation, unless we, as disciples, have been explicitly granted permission by the teacher, we must never step on their cushion, ride their horse, or use their vehicle, among other similar actions, as outlined in Longchenpa's *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*.

According to the *Commentary on the Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*, one must not even cross over the teacher's shoes and cushion, let alone step on them. If we have no choice but to cross, Gunaprabha advises in the *Vinayasutra*.⁶⁶

When cleaning, sweeping, and painting the representations
of the Three Jewels, one may recite a verse while crossing over the
Dharma hall, the Buddha statue, the stupa, and the shadow of a
center column.

Similarly, there should be no fault if we recite a verse⁶⁷ while crossing over the teacher's shadow, possessions, clothes, conveyance, and the like.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited Singapore, many devout laypeople insisted on making massage offerings, which led them to step on Rinpoche's robe. Lama Södön was unhappy about this and asked them not to step

⁶⁶ The *Vinayasutra* by Gunaprabha consists of a root text on Vinaya and its auto-commentary. The *Vinayasutra* is included among the so-called "thirteen great texts," which form the core of the curriculum in most shedras and on which Khenpo Shenga provided commentaries.

⁶⁷ An example verse can be this one from the Diamond Sutra: "All conditioned phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like dew or a flash of lightning; thus, should one view them."

on the guru's robe. However, his Chinese was not proficient enough to convey a clear message.

I noticed that Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche seemed pleased, so I did not intervene with the massagers. However, some laypeople went too far and attempted to massage the guru's back with their feet, prompting me to stop them immediately.

Some individuals carelessly cross over or step on the teacher's clothes and belongings, not realizing that it is very wrong. If we must cross, we should simultaneously purify this fault by reciting the Vajrasattva mantra, the hundred-syllable mantra, or the sutra verse: "All conditioned phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like dew or a flash of lightning; thus should one view them."

♦ Doors

We should not knock on the teacher's door too hard or open and close it violently. Instead, we should handle the door gently.

Once, one of Atisha's disciples knocked loudly on his door, calling out his name, "Jowo Jé, Jowo Jé! Give me a pith instruction!"

It seemed that Atisha didn't hear the knock, so the door remained closed.

The disciple called out again, but still, no one answered.

On the third attempt, Atisha opened the door, seemingly displeased.

"Lax disciple, show me your veneration," he said. "It's not through loud knocks at my door that you will receive the pith instruction! I won't give it to you!"

Indeed, many disciples today fail to show basic respect to their teacher. They knock loudly on the door and yell, "Hey, hey, hey! Is anyone inside? Teacher, open the door!" This is entirely inappropriate.

♦ Conduct

In the presence of the teacher, we should refrain from displaying pride or dissatisfaction. Additionally, we must avoid lying, speaking thoughtlessly or insincerely, indulging in laughter or jokes, acting foolishly, and engaging in idle or irrelevant talk.

As one becomes more acquainted with their teacher, they may become presumptuous and careless in the teacher's presence, which should be avoided. Of course, teachers have different dispositions and personalities. If a teacher is tolerant,

it may be acceptable for a disciple to act casually. Nevertheless, it is inappropriate, for example, for a disciple to appear very miserable and preoccupied while everyone else is happily chatting with the teacher.

There are many instructions on how to follow a teacher in the *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* and *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection* that we must be aware of. Otherwise, we may unintentionally make many mistakes.

We disciples should always treat the teacher with respect and reverence, avoiding indifference. Our speech and behavior should be calm, gentle, and controlled, never drifting into casualness. In today's society, many people are unashamed of committing wrongdoings, are not fearful of the karmic consequences of their actions, and have no respect for parents, teachers, and elders. This is troubling. When following a spiritual teacher, although we may excel in certain aspects—we may be taller, stronger, or more attractive; we may have higher degrees and more diplomas—we likely do not surpass the teacher in their vast wisdom, great compassion, skillful means, and altruistic activities.

When I was young and had just begun my Dharma study and practice, I felt I was as good as, if not better than, some Dharma masters who taught us novices. However, as I grew older and gained more life experience, I gradually realized that those masters possessed extraordinary qualities beyond my reach.

Yesterday, during a panel discussion on “Buddhism and Science,” a Dharma student who is also a postdoctoral researcher mentioned that her supervisor was a great professor in whom she had never found any fault. I rejoiced in her pure perception. Some Dharma students can barely maintain a pure perception of a qualified spiritual teacher who imparts profound Dharma, let alone that of a worldly teacher. Some of these Dharma students even believe their teacher is inferior to them. Consequently, it becomes impossible for them to attain the states of realization and precious qualities their teacher possesses.

One day, Atisha was asked by his chief disciple, Dromtönpa, “In Tibet, many people try to meditate, but it seems they do not achieve the transcendental inner qualities. Why is that?”

To this, Atisha replied, “All the virtuous qualities of the Mahayana, whether great or small, arise from reliance on the guru. These Tibetans have only an ordinary attitude toward the teacher, lacking the perfected attitude that is necessary. Therefore, how could they achieve special virtuous qualities?”

Thus, we should view our teacher as someone with great transcendental qualities. Only in this way can our reverence and awe arise naturally, allowing our body, speech, and mind to be tamed and controlled. Sometimes, when Dharma students have followed their teacher for extended periods, they become less capable of taming and controlling their minds. We should strive to avoid this.

There are a few Chinese Dharma teachers at Larung Gar whom the Tibetan lamas and nuns sincerely respect. The Tibetans say that although they may not understand the Chinese teachers' language, these teachers exhibit great qualities that can be inferred from their demeanor. External demeanor reflects one's internal state. If a person's mind is not peaceful and controlled, anything they do, including walking or talking, can easily lead others to develop wrong views.

Overall, when a disciple follows the teacher, they should act according to the following verses in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

When the teacher stands up, do not remain seated;
 When they sit, greet them respectfully and offer what they need;
 When they walk, do not walk in front, behind, or to the right;
 Stepping on their seat or riding their mount will spoil your merit;
 Do not knock forcefully on the teacher's door;
 Avoid posturing, laughing, or displaying anger;
 Refrain from idle chatter, jokes, and irrelevant talk.
 Serve them with body, speech, and mind in a calm manner.

If there are those who criticize or harbor hatred toward your teacher, do not consider them your friends. If you can change the mindset of anyone who lacks faith in your teacher or speaks against them, make the effort to do so. However, if this proves impossible, avoid being overly open or engaging in close conversations with such individuals. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Do not befriend those who criticize
 Or harbor hatred toward your teacher. Make every effort to stop them.
 Speaking freely with such individuals will increase your wrongdoing
 And destroy all your vows and samayas.

If you often associate with individuals who greatly venerate their guru, it will benefit you significantly. You should refrain from talking, living, or dining with those who not only show no respect for the guru but also find faults in him, slander him, and create obstacles for him.

Once a sangha member at Larung Gar invited a person in need to spend the night in his cabin. However, that person criticized the teacher throughout the evening. Eventually, the sangha member realized there was no way to stop the person from slandering the teacher, so he said, “Could you please leave my cabin? I cannot stay with you.” He then asked the person to leave in the middle of the night.

Many people have great faith in the guru, yet they get along well with those who slander the guru or have broken their samaya vows. According to *Ascertaining the Three Vows*, befriending individuals who have broken their samaya vows will also indirectly or directly taint you, much like becoming infected while living with someone who has a contagious disease.

Therefore, some tantric prayers of confession often mention that one must purify one’s own faults for breaking samaya vows, as well as the faults resulting from others breaking their samaya vows. Specifically, the latter corresponds to what we are discussing here.

Once a person breaks the samaya vows related to their guru, such a fault can hardly be purified, as stated in Vajrayana teachings. There is scriptural evidence in *The Illuminating Lamp*, a commentary on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, which can be paraphrased as follows:

Even if a person has committed the five heinous acts, slandered the Dharma, or abandoned it—any of which could lead them to immediately fall into a lower realm after death—they can still attain Buddhahood by receiving and practicing the profound teachings on the completion stage, thanks to the kindness of their guru.

In contrast, some individuals begin by following their guru with reverence, but after hearing the teachings and understanding their profound meanings, they end up disparaging and insulting the guru. Even those who associate with someone who slanders the guru cannot achieve any realizations, let alone the slanderer themselves.

This is also clearly explained in Longchenpa’s *Treasury of Word and Meaning*.

Some individuals who haven't actually broken samaya are incorrectly labeled as "samaya breakers" simply due to their unpleasant words or disagreement with a teacher. This judgment is unjust. We must evaluate situations impartially, as labeling those who haven't broken samaya as "samaya breakers" can cause real harm. Conversely, forming friendships with true samaya breakers will undoubtedly taint you.

Therefore, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche established this rule:

Anyone at Larung Gar who committed one of the fourteen root downfalls, particularly those who had serious conflicts with their vajra guru or vajra peers, was prohibited from attending any empowerment or Dharma assembly.

In the presence of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, we disciples also vowed not to attend any empowerment or Dharma assembly with a samaya breaker.

However, if we are unaware of the presence of a samaya breaker, this is similar to the time of the Buddha, when a bhikkhu broke precepts without the sangha's knowledge; the sangha would have to continue staying with him.

I will uphold the vow mentioned above for as long as I live. Although there were empowerments I had not received, I refrained from attending due to the presence of samaya breakers. In fact, it would have been futile even if I had participated.

Just as a single drop of spoiled yogurt can taint a large pot of fresh milk, a samaya breaker can undermine the merit of one hundred vow holders.

These are the words of Buddha Vajradhara, not a fabricated thought of an ordinary person. I hope you will consider this matter seriously.

Some masters of Chinese Buddhism believe, "It's good to have such a rule in the Tibetan region, but it would be better not to apply the same rule in the Han area of China."

In fact, this doesn't make much sense. The faults of breaking samaya vows are not dependent on one's nationality, ethnicity, or location. Anyone who takes samaya and follows a vajra guru will face the same repercussions if they break the tantric vows.

Therefore, in my life, I have never received and will not receive any empowerment or teaching alongside a known samaya breaker, whether they are Tibetan or Chinese. This is the vow I made in the presence of my guru. As for you, the sangha members who are listening to my teaching, I do not have the right to impose anything on you.

Before each empowerment at Larung Gar, we will scrutinize the sangha members and expel samaya breakers, regardless of who they are. The empowerment will not take place until the samaya breakers have left. This was the practice in the past, and it remains the same now. The disciplinary overseers at Larung Gar will verify each attendee's eligibility before the empowerment, as mandated by the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. As long as the Buddhist Institute at Larung Gar exists, this rule will remain unchanged.

If you wish to attend empowerments or tantric teachings at Larung Gar, I hope you do not break any samaya vows. If you've already broken samaya, it is better not to participate. Otherwise, things could become complicated if you are asked to leave. By highlighting this issue in today's teaching, I do not mean to imply that anyone here has broken their samaya vows.

Regarding what I've mentioned in class, it seems that those who should be concerned are not, while those who shouldn't be concerned are. I am not saying that you have broken samaya; rather, I want to emphasize how serious it is if you do.

After receiving empowerment and tantric teachings, you should at least maintain a good relationship with your root lama and your vajra brothers and sisters. You must not have serious conflicts with any of them. Whenever a conflict arises and two people are not speaking to each other, according to the rules at Larung Gar, they must repent on the same day, and the conflict cannot remain unresolved overnight. This is the tradition passed down from our vajra guru, so please follow it closely.

In addition to respecting the teacher, a qualified disciple should also respect their vajra brothers and sisters, as well as the teacher's entourage. Here are some similes that illustrate how a disciple should approach the teacher's Dharma peers.

1) A belt

No matter how much time we spend with our teacher's entourage or our vajra brothers and sisters, we should never grow weary or annoyed with them. Instead, we should strive to be pleasant and easy to be with, like a comfortable belt.

A good Dharma student should be easy to be with, just like a belt. When wearing traditional Tibetan clothing or monastic attire, a belt is a must. I have been using the same belt every day for over a dozen years. I never use the belt one day and discard it the next.

Similarly, we should cultivate good relationships with our Dharma peers, especially our vajra brothers and sisters. The longer we know one another, the better our relationships become.

We should refrain from favoring new friends while neglecting old ones. Some people follow a teacher today, abandon the teacher several days or months later, and then seek a new teacher. They treat their Dharma peers in the same way. They may be on good terms with a Dharma friend today but discard that person rather quickly. They do not treat Dharma peers like they treat their belts; instead, they treat them like disposable items.

2) Salt

We should set aside our self-importance and actively participate in whatever needs to be done, mixing in easily like salt in food.

Regardless of the meal we prepare—be it veggie stir-fry, quiche, or ratatouille—a pinch of salt is always essential. Salt easily mixes with any food.

Similarly, some Dharma friends are comfortable with any assigned task. They possess a can-do attitude, allowing them to readily wire buildings, plow fields, operate computers, or drive vehicles. Whatever they do, they always get along with those around them. Many such remarkable monastic members at Larung Gar are praised by everyone. In contrast, some others may be quite intelligent, yet they lack pleasant characters.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche reminded us many times:

If one cannot be a good person, one can never become a Buddha.

As stated in his *Song of Victory*, one of the essential qualities of a good person is to “Always be in harmony with friends in attitude and deeds.”

3) A pillar

When others speak harshly to us, provoke conflicts, or when the responsi-

bilities we must bear feel overwhelming, we should remain steadfast and endure everything, like a pillar.

No matter how heavy a roof may be, strong pillars will always bear the weight and support the entire building. Similarly, when we are scolded or insulted by others for no reason, or when we must take on numerous responsibilities at work, we need to be patient like a pillar.

In short, we should maintain harmony and respect our Dharma fellows. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Getting along harmoniously with others, like a belt;
Blending easily with others, like salt;
Steadfastly enduring anything, like a pillar;
Serve your teacher's entourage and your vajra peers in this
manner.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often shared this verse with the sangha managers, saying, "Make sure to get along with all the Dharma fellows and staff volunteers. This is very important!" However, some Dharma fellows harbor negative feelings toward members of the teacher's entourage, viewing them as tigers or vicious dogs, and they voice their complaints harshly in front of the teacher. This indicates that they are not yet qualified to follow the teacher.

Imagine if there were no one around the teacher, forcing him to handle everything alone. Who would then assist him with his Dharma activities? Therefore, disciples should not feel jealous of one another. Anyone with the competence, wisdom, and conviction to serve the teacher should be welcomed. The teacher's entourage should emulate the Buddha or the great masters of the past by being impartial and broad-minded.

I've known some Dharma masters in Taiwan with large entourages whose members do not compete with one another. Their sole focus is on benefiting living beings wholeheartedly, enabling them to help their teacher spread the Dharma effectively.

On the other hand, if those around a teacher create intrigue against one another, the teacher may gradually become weary, and their Dharma activities will face setbacks. It is important to recognize that each qualified teacher has their own

Dharma activities to pursue in this life. If disciples cannot get along, this tension will ultimately harm the teacher.

Some disciples volunteer to assist with their teacher's Dharma activities, but internally they are consumed by envy and anger, which prevents them from contributing anything genuinely beneficial. Therefore, to successfully uphold the teacher's Dharma activities, disciples should act in solidarity and harmony. When disciples are free from selfishness and their intention is solely to benefit sentient beings and support the teacher, any effort they undertake is bound to be successful.

In summary, when following teachers, a qualified disciple should also respect their peers and act like a belt, salt, and pillar. They should avoid being like chili peppers, which do not get along easily with others and often scare people away, or like spiky trees, which hurt others' feelings with cutting and intimidating remarks.

Disciples who work for the teacher should practice patience as well. It is really not good if disciples react with anger and abruptly quit their assigned tasks when confronted or criticized by their Dharma peers. Quitting out of anger is unacceptable behavior for a good Dharma practitioner. The key to handling all tasks is to exercise wisdom and to subdue anger.

2.1.6.2.3. Emulating the Teacher's Realization and Actions

In the previous section, we studied how to follow a qualified teacher after examining him. Now we will explore how to emulate his realizations and actions. A qualified disciple should not disobey the teacher, as stated in the *Sutra of Skillful Veneration*:

The teacher doesn't ask, so do not speak out;
Whichever instruction the teacher gives, do not disobey.

A disciple who fails to do so cannot attain the realization and wisdom of the teacher.

As illustrated in the life stories of past eminent masters, the ultimate state of realization arises from fervent devotion to the guru. I have witnessed strong faith and devotion to the teacher in many great masters. For example, when Lama Akhyuk Rinpoche⁶⁸ visited Larung Gar, I saw him shedding tears and placing his

⁶⁸ Lama Akhyuk Rinpoche (Tib. ཨ་ཁྱུག་; Wyl. a khyug), also known as Jamyang Lungtok Gyaltzen (འཇམ་དབྱངས་ལུང་རྟོག་ཐུག་མཆོད་, jam dbyangs lung rtog srgyal mtshan) or Drubwang

palms together whenever the name of his root Lama Tromgé Arik Rinpoche⁶⁹ was mentioned. For over thirty years, while following Arik Rinpoche, Akhyuk Rinpoche willingly did whatever his guru asked and endured whatever hardships he encountered.

In particular, when Arik Rinpoche was physically tortured in struggle sessions⁷⁰ during the Cultural Revolution, Akhyuk Rinpoche desperately used his own body to protect Arik Rinpoche from whips and sticks. Through his unwavering faith and devotion, Akhyuk Rinpoche gained all the great qualities of his guru's wisdom mind.

Therefore, a disciple must possess extraordinary faith in the guru while following him. With faith, guru devotion will arise; with guru devotion, the disciple can naturally obtain all the supreme qualities of the guru's wisdom mind.

When we have clearly understood the proper way to follow our teacher, we should be like a swan gliding gracefully across a pristine lake, enjoying its waters without making them muddy; or like a bee in a blossoming garden, gathering nectar without harming the flowers' beauty or scent.

When following the teacher, we should not disturb them or their entourage. When we have the opportunity to receive their teachings, we must listen wholeheartedly and respectfully. When our time with the teacher is over and we must leave, we can depart with a relaxed and happy mind.

If we can follow our teacher's instructions wholeheartedly, without feeling bored or tired, then through such faith and perseverance, all the teacher's qualities

Lungtok Gyaltzen (ལུང་རྟོག་ལྷ་མོ་འཕེལ་མཚན་, grub dbang lung rtog srgyal mtshan) (1927–2011), was one of Tibet's most renowned meditation masters of recent times. Together with the late Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche (1933–2004), he revitalized the study and practice of Buddhism in Eastern Tibet. He was regarded as an emanation of Longsal Nyingpo (1625–1692).

⁶⁹ Arik Rinpoche of Tromgé (Tib. ཁྲིམ་དངེལ་ཨ་རིག་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་, Wyl. khromdge a rig rinpoche), also known as Rigdzin Wangshu (c.1908–1988) was a disciple of Khenpo Ngawang Palzang and one of Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche's teachers. He was also the root guru of Akhyuk Rinpoche. When Arik Rinpoche passed away, rainbows manifested and five-colored relics appeared among his physical remains.

⁷⁰ A struggle session was a form of public humiliation and torture that was used by the Communist Party of China in the Mao era, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, to shape public opinion and humiliate, persecute, or execute political rivals and those deemed class enemies. In general, the victim of a struggle session was forced to admit various crimes before a crowd of people who would verbally and physically abuse the victim until he or she confessed. Struggle sessions were often held at the workplace of the accused, but they were sometimes conducted in sports stadiums where large crowds would gather if the target was well-known.

will naturally flow into our own being, just like pouring the contents of one vessel into another. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* says:

Like a swan gliding on a pristine lake,
Or a bee savoring nectar from flowers,
Always follow your teacher with exemplary conduct,
Without growing weary in doing whatever they say.
Through such devotion, you will obtain all their qualities.

However, it is very difficult for some practitioners to achieve this. Due to their wrong views and biases, they often perceive the teacher as an ordinary person. Not to mention absorbing all the teacher's great qualities, like contents being poured from one vessel into another, they cannot even receive 1 percent of these qualities. Therefore, it is essential to see the teacher as the Buddha. The *King of Great Teachings' Nondual, Impartial, Most Supreme Yoga Sutra*⁷¹ states:

The Buddha is the best acharya⁷²
Who is always protected by all supreme ones.
An archarya who understands this secret truth
Is no different from the Buddha.

Thus, the qualified teacher is inseparable from the Buddha. If you can follow the teacher with fervent faith and a joyful attitude, you will undoubtedly obtain the teacher's great qualities.

No one can follow a teacher for infinite years. While following the teacher, many disciples often feel that the teacher is merely a good friend, and some even believe they are superior to the teacher. It is often not until the teacher passes into parinirvana that disciples begin to recognize the teacher's precious qualities and see the teacher as the Buddha. By then, it may be too late. This is a common mistake among many Dharma practitioners.

⁷¹ Advayasamatāvijayakalparāja

⁷² Acharya (Skt. ācārya; Tib. ལོཔོན་, lopön, Wyl. slob dpon) means a teacher, master, or instructor.



Lesson 78

“Whenever your sublime teacher accumulates great ...
would be miraculous!” [page 149–151]

We are currently studying the section on “emulating the teacher’s realization and actions,” which means disciples should acquire all the transcendent qualities of the teacher, including their supreme wisdom and compassion.

To develop these qualities, it is crucial to study and, more importantly, practice the Dharma. Nowadays, many Buddhists consider themselves Mahayanists. However, whether you are truly following the bodhisattva path depends on whether you have generated bodhicitta. You may often listen to teachings on bodhicitta, including my own teachings on its merits and benefits, but have you actually generated bodhicitta? As the saying goes, only the person drinking water knows whether it is hot or cold. If you are merely a nominal Mahayana practitioner, there is no reason for arrogance. If you have not yet developed bodhicitta but claim to be a tantric yogi or a Dzogchen practitioner, then you are simply deceiving yourself.

Recently, some people asked me, “Can I skip preliminary practices?”

I replied, “It’s fine. Living beings have different karmas. If you have no interest in liberation and wish to accumulate negative karma, there is nothing I can do.

“During the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, King Virudhaka massacred the entire Sakya clan, and the Buddha was unable to prevent this from happening.

When the consequences of a person's actions have ripened, I, too, cannot effect any change."

I do not want to impose on any of you to practice preliminaries. However, I hope you can gradually enter into the Dharma in a sequential manner. By doing so, at least your virtuous roots will not be compromised.

Many past and present eminent masters have placed great importance on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, as reflected in their life stories. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche always emphasized the significance of studying this text. As a result, many sangha members at Larung Gar were able to memorize it in its entirety. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche always carried a copy of the text with him wherever he went. Every morning, after his routine practice, he would read a few pages of the text. He continued doing this until just a few days before his parinirvana.

If great lineage masters in Tibet and India paid such close attention to *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, why should we, as Dharma students of the later generation, not study and practice it diligently?

Therefore, I hope you will follow the example of these great masters and treat *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* as your life manual. If ten years from now you still place significant emphasis on the preliminaries as you do today, I believe your mindstream will remain aligned with the Dharma. Even if you do not demonstrate your progress by claiming enlightenment or stating that you practice the Great Middle Way, Mahamudra, or Dzogchen, you will at least have disciplined yourself in the principle of cause and effect. If a great master like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche carried a copy with him wherever he went, how can we underestimate the importance of the preliminaries?

Someone called me today, asking, "According to the legacy of so-and-so teacher, one can opt out of the preliminaries by donating some money. By doing so, one can directly receive the Dzogchen teaching. This is said to be in line with a great master's wisdom mind. May I choose to do this instead?"

I replied, "That's fine, you can do whatever you wish, as long as you can receive the teaching."

Yes, those are my words because I do not have the authority to forbid anyone from doing that. However, it is important to note that past eminent masters, such as Jigme Lingpa, Longchenpa, and Mipham Rinpoche, placed great importance on the preliminaries. They themselves completed more than one or two rounds

of ngöndro. So, can we truly replace the preliminary practice with money? You should have the answer.

At present, diplomas and certificates of higher education can be bought with money. I know a Belgian who, while pursuing a doctoral degree in medicine in China, managed to obtain his degree by paying the “tuition” and attending four exams over four years. For him, exams are not as important as money because he wouldn’t have received the degree without the financial investment. Once the “tuition” was paid, he could still obtain his degree even if he failed the exams. So, can we use money to bypass preliminary practices? I cannot bluntly say no, but I do have my doubts.

If money could replace preliminaries, I would certainly rejoice because as long as you have money, you could access the ultimate tantric teachings. However, there is nowhere in the biographies of eminent masters that indicates this has been the case. Perhaps it doesn’t matter whether such a precedent truly exists, as modern people believe that money can solve everything. Given the rapid development of technology, people today can accomplish many tasks as long as they can afford them. However, if you don’t take preliminaries seriously now, even if you have practiced the ultimate Dzogchen, your afflictions may still be rampant a few decades from now.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche has a disciple who is now very renowned in the West. In July 1999, this disciple taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in San Francisco, California, and he said, “The Buddhist teaching that I place the greatest importance on in my life is this text. I have received its transmissions and teachings over thirty times. In particular, I received it ten times from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, five of which I personally requested from Rinpoche, and for the rest, I happened to be present when Rinpoche was giving the teaching to someone else. I also received the teaching three times from Dudjom Rinpoche, as well as from other gurus. If I am still alive thirty years from now, I hope I will continue to place great importance on this teaching.”

When reading his remarks, I thought, “If a person can truly integrate their mind with the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, they will definitely progress in their practice. In contrast, if they set aside the instructions in the text and try to find higher teachings elsewhere, their practice may not advance well, even if they manage to obtain the most profound teachings. Different teachers may follow various lineage traditions, and these teachers, who are manifestations of

the buddhas and bodhisattvas, possess inconceivable merit. From them, one may receive higher teachings without practicing preliminaries; however, generally speaking, no matter how profound the teachings are, preliminary practices are always an indispensable foundation for practitioners.”

Therefore, I hope you have faith in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Wherever you go, you should at least take a copy of the text with you if you cannot bring copies of my teaching transcripts. Many people have no problem carrying a large backpack when traveling. If you can bring many nonessential items with you, then it shouldn't be an issue to bring a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, which is not too heavy.

Of course, to do this, you need to have faith; without faith, you won't truly benefit from the Dharma. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says:

Having no faith is like having no hand;
A person without hands goes to the treasure mountain,
But cannot get anything from it.
It is the same with having no faith;
A person without faith goes to the treasure mountain of
Dharma,
But cannot obtain anything from it.

The mind is very powerful. To study the Dharma well from beginning to end, you must strive to generate confidence in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Then, no matter how difficult it is, your practice can surely succeed.

I wonder if any of you could make a vow to read a few pages of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* daily. I taught this text once in 1999, and at that time, a few Chinese Dharma masters and laypeople vowed to carry a copy with them and read a few pages every day. They have been doing this ever since.

Of course, this commitment requires faith and patience over the long term. Anyone can easily uphold such a vow for just two or three days. For example, when I mention this in class today, 80 percent of you listeners would raise your hands, promising to read the text if I asked you to make the vow. However, in three or four months, when there is a break, many of you might have forgotten the vow. It is easy to make the vow, yet hard to keep it. This is a common challenge for many.

Nevertheless, I still hope you will place great importance on *The Words of My*

Perfect Teacher throughout your life. If you can do so, it will be very easy for you to engage in any practice on the foundation of the preliminaries. The text contains many profound pith instructions. During my teaching, I sometimes worry that you may become distracted, making it challenging for you to understand and integrate the meaning. How unfortunate would that be! In fact, if you can contemplate and meditate on the teachings regularly and check yourself accordingly, you will realize that the text is full of priceless wish-fulfilling jewels and that no single word or sentence can be overlooked.

The teaching on how to follow a spiritual teacher seems quite simple, yet it actually encompasses the quintessential key to liberation, which is why all our lineage masters have emphasized its importance. Without a teacher's guidance, it is difficult for us to grasp even the basic teachings of Buddhism on our own. As stated in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

Just like a jewel in the dark
 Cannot be seen if there is no lamp,
 With no one to explain Buddha's teaching
 Even the intelligent cannot comprehend it.⁷³

Thus, even though the Dharma is supreme, without the guidance of a qualified teacher, a Dharma student may not fully grasp its profundity, regardless of their intelligence. Therefore, we must follow the teacher properly, understand the principle of cause and effect, and put what we have learned into practice. This is essential for a practitioner.

Now let's continue to study the text. Patrul Rinpoche says:

When our qualified teacher engages in bodhisattva activities, they amass immense merit and wisdom.⁷⁴ If we participate in these activities, even in small ways—such as making a modest monetary donation, volunteering our time and effort, or simply rejoicing in the activities without jealousy—we too will accumulate the same merit that the teacher accumulates through engaging in Dharma activities with bodhicitta.

⁷³ The verse is quoted from *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala, revised ed., 1993.

⁷⁴ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche added: "For instance, teaching the Dharma and printing scriptures foster the accumulation of wisdom, while building temples for the Three Jewels, freeing captive animals, and helping those in need contribute to the accumulation of merit."

I borrowed this statement for my public letter titled “On Rebuilding the Nun’s Dharma Hall at Larung Gar.” Last year, as we worked on rebuilding the Dharma hall, several patrons asked me for a bank account to deposit their contributions and for a brief description of the construction. While I had no issues financing the project, I welcomed their suggestion because the merit from supporting the construction of a Dharma hall is immense. Every day, many sangha members teach, listen, contemplate, and meditate in this Dharma hall, so anyone who contributes to its construction can accumulate significant merit. This inspired me to write the open letter.

The construction of such a grand Dharma hall required more than just the efforts of one or two individuals. Thanks to the contributions of many, the project has been completed smoothly and without obstacles. How joyful it is!

We should not only rejoice in the construction of this Dharma hall but also in any bodhisattva activity that a teacher engages in. Whenever the teacher acts virtuously, whether through collaborative work or individual efforts, as long as the Dharma activity benefits living beings’ temporary well-being or ultimate liberation, we should strive to contribute or simply rejoice, without feeling jealous, arrogant, or self-centered.

When the great Jigme Phunstok Rinpoche taught us about the merit of building a Dharma hall or a stupa, he often encouraged us to get involved in whatever way we could. If we are unable to contribute, we can always rejoice, even if just for a moment. The merit gained from doing this will not be exhausted before the teacher’s merit is depleted.

Here is a story from Patrul Rinpoche’s text that illustrates the importance of contributing to the teacher’s Dharma activities.

Once, two men were traveling to central Tibet. One of them carried only a small amount of brown tsampa made from beans, while the other had an abundant supply of white barley tsampa. The man with the bean tsampa shared his portion, mixing it with his companion’s barley tsampa. After several days, the second traveler said to the first one, “Your bean tsampa must be gone by now.”

“Let’s check,” the first traveler replied. To their surprise, they found that some of the bean tsampa remained. No matter how many times they checked, the bean tsampa never ran out. In the end, they had to share all the tsampa equally between them.

In the same way, by offering even a modest material contribution to another person's positive action, or by supporting them through actions or words, we can accumulate the same amount of merit as they do. What a great opportunity! For example, if a teacher invests a significant amount of money in a virtuous act and we contribute just a quarter without being stingy, the merit from our small contribution will not be exhausted before our teacher's merit is depleted. It's like when a drop of water falls into the ocean; it won't dry up before the ocean's water is gone. Therefore, when a qualified teacher engages in a Dharma activity, we should also participate, regardless of how small our monetary or physical contribution may be, and then dedicate the merit properly.

In fact, dedication is very important. Those who have studied the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*, *The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, and *The Sutra on One Hundred Tales* understand that whenever a person performs a good deed—such as offering, prostrating, or circumambulating—they should immediately make an aspiration and dedicate the merit upon completing the deed.

Making an aspiration is not the same as dedicating merit. Dedication involves the act of dedicating merit to all living beings after completing a good deed, whereas aspiration does not require the deed's completion. Aspiration can occur when we think in advance, "I aspire to do this or that," and we can also make an aspiration while dedicating.

Specifically, attending to the teacher's daily needs, delivering messages on their behalf, or even simply cleaning their living space are infallible ways to accumulate merit. Therefore, we should strive to engage in such acts of service as much as possible. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Those who are determined to practice virtuous deeds,
When a sublime teacher is amassing the two accumulations,
Can form connections through even the smallest acts—
By serving as an attendant, delivering messages, or performing
humble tasks like cleaning.
Such efforts yield immense fruit—this is the best path of
accumulation.

Geshe Jayulwa (1075–1138) of the Kadampa lineage was a disciple of Geshe Chengawa (1102–1176). He attended to all the affairs of his guru and thus had

no time for meditation. Geshe Jayulwa always did what his guru asked without delay. If he was writing the final stroke of a Tibetan word and his guru called him, he would not wait to finish. Instead, he would immediately put down his pen and rush to see his guru. If he was practicing mandala offerings when his guru called, he would set the mandala aside and go to see his guru right away. Geshe Jayulwa devoted himself entirely to serving his guru in this manner.

One day, while cleaning Geshe Chengawa's room, Geshe Jayulwa wrapped the trash in his robe and planned to take it outside. As he descended the stairs and reached the third step, he suddenly entered a meditative state and had a vision of many buddhas and bodhisattvas in his pure vision. Later, he became a great accomplished master.

When Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182–1251) cared for his sick root guru Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsen (1147–1216), he completely ignored his own needs for food and rest. Due to his respect for and service to the guru, he purified his heavy negative karmas and had a direct vision of Manjushri. He was regarded as one of the three renowned emanations of Manjushri in the Tibetan region.

In his *Pancakrama*, or *The Five Stages*, Nagarjuna explains how one can attain accomplishment by following the teacher in the first stage of self-blessing. In his commentary on *Offering to the Lama*, Yongdzin Yeshe Gyeltsen of the Gelug lineage cited many scriptural references to explain why all our accomplishments stem from the guru's blessings. Therefore, we must honor and serve the guru with deep veneration.

Offering service to a guru should take the guru's feelings into account. Many gurus have numerous disciples, and when a guru visits a large city, many of these disciples compete to host them. This competition can become quite intense.

For instance, I heard about an elderly lama who had just disembarked from a plane. His two groups of disciples began to fight over him, each group trying to pull him away in hopes of securing his favor. The scene was so chaotic that it seemed the lama might faint from the commotion. Eventually, the more powerful group successfully took him, forcing him into a car and driving away. Additionally, some disciples would visit the lama's room daily, vying for the opportunity to sweep the floor. There were even disciples who insisted on offering their food to the lama, prohibiting others from making their own offerings.

It is not necessary to behave like them. If you truly want to serve the guru, it

doesn't mean you need to do so in their presence. Some disciples sweep the floor or fetch water when the guru is around but fall asleep when the guru is not present. This may not necessarily please the guru. In fact, the best service and offering to the guru is to propagate the Dharma directly or indirectly, benefit living beings, and engage in your own study and practice of the Dharma.

A guru who has genuine bodhicitta may not lack any necessities in their life, so you don't necessarily need to make material offerings. What the guru values most is that you practice the Dharma diligently, do something beneficial for all beings and the Dharma, and particularly, offer help to those sentient beings in need. By doing so, all the qualified teachers of the ten directions will be pleased.

Among all the supreme sources of refuge and opportunities for accumulating merit, none surpasses the teacher. Especially when the teacher bestows empowerment or imparts teachings, the compassion and blessings of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions pour into this sublime being. In these moments, the teacher becomes inseparably united with all the buddhas, embodying their essence and wisdom.

The Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion states:

In the presence of the vajra gurus, from whom we receive
supreme empowerments,
All the buddhas of the ten directions pay homage to them three
times each day with great reverence.

It says in Chagme Rinpoche's *Mountain Dharma*:

When the guru gives an empowerment or teaching, the blessings of all the buddhas of the ten directions pour into them, even if they are just an ordinary person, let alone if they are an accomplished master. The guru becomes indivisibly one with all the buddhas. It is not until the teaching or empowerment concludes that all the buddhas and bodhisattvas return to their respective pure realms.

Thus, at such times, slandering the guru or harboring wrong views about them incurs grave faults, whereas offering even a mouthful of food with genuine joy and reverence is more powerful than making thousands of offerings at other times.

Of course, while teaching, the teacher may not necessarily need all the food

offerings if the quantity is excessive. As mentioned, what truly pleases the teacher is the offering of benefiting living beings, vowing not to abandon the bodhicitta mind, practicing according to the teacher's instructions, and contributing to their Dharma activities. If the teacher is surrounded by many intelligent, experienced, and steady-minded disciples who are willing to devote themselves to helping, the teacher's Dharma activities will naturally thrive.

The only reason for a qualified teacher to remain in this world is to propagate the Dharma and benefit living beings. Aside from this, the teacher does not live for themselves. For example, they do not lead a life like that of a worldly person whose goals include buying a house, owning a car, having a family, renovating their home, working a steady job, and traveling both domestically and abroad. A truly qualified teacher does not care about these worldly pursuits at all. What matters most to them is liberating sentient beings from the ocean of samsaric suffering. Even if they can only liberate one being from samsara, they believe their life in this world is meaningful.

Knowing this, we should do our utmost to assist in the teacher's Dharma activities and regard this as an offering of Dharma. Even if the teacher doesn't notice our efforts or cannot encourage us every day, as long as we contribute to their Dharma activities with our best effort, we are making an offering to the teacher. Here, Patrul Rinpoche states that offering food brings great merit, but I believe that food offerings may not be as significant; the key is to understand what the teacher truly needs.

In the deity practices of the generation stage, there are various specific deities to meditate upon. However, the nature of all these deities is nothing other than our own root guru. Recognizing this will allow the guru's blessings to come swiftly.

This reflects the approach of Gelugpa practitioners in the practice of the *Thirty-five Buddhas of Confession*. While reciting the prayer that invokes the thirty-five distinct buddhas, they visualize the nature of each buddha as inseparable from their root guru, much like how a single crystal can refract multiple rays of light. By doing so, the blessings of the guru can swiftly merge into the practitioners' minds. On the other hand, if one perceives the deities as separate from the guru, one may not receive the guru's blessings.

During the time when Marpa Lödro was practicing the generation stage, he visited his guru Naropa and saw that his guru was surrounded by the complete

mandala of Hevajra—the deity Marpa was visualizing in his practice at that time. Naropa asked Marpa, “Which one do you first prostrate to, me or the deity?”

Marpa thought, “The guru is with me every day, whereas I have only just managed to see the deity, so it’s more important to prostrate to the deity.” So Marpa told Naropa, “I’ll choose to prostrate to the deity first.”

Immediately, the mandala of Hevajra transformed into light and merged into the heart of Naropa. Naropa said, “Before seeing the guru, you had not even heard the name of the Buddha. All the buddhas in the thousands of kalpas attain perfect enlightenment by following a spiritual teacher.” Then, Marpa realized that his guru was indivisible from the deity.

Therefore, in your deity practices of the generation stage, whether it be Avalokiteshvara or Manjushri, you must regard the nature of the deity as nothing other than your own root guru.

Likewise, to develop wisdom in the perfection stage, it relies solely on our devotion to the guru. The perfection stage is generally divided into two types: the perfection stage with signs and that without signs. The former involves practices based on channels, energies, and essence, while the latter involves visualizing the wisdom in the guru’s mind fully merging into oneself, which is the ultimate deity practice. If we possess guru devotion, combined with the guru’s blessings, we will certainly attain the wisdom realized by the guru. Therefore, regardless of the practice we are engaging in, we must first understand that the guru is no different from the Buddha. The *Great King of Teachings Sutra* states:

The acharya is the source of ultimate bliss,
Is no different from all the buddhas.
By following the acharya,
One attains ultimate liberation.

A deep understanding of this will help us perfect our wisdom. Here is a story from Chinese Buddhism:

During the Tang dynasty, at Mount Zhongnan, there was a monk named Dushun.⁷⁵ He had a disciple who had been following him for over thirty years. One

⁷⁵ Dushun (557–640) was the First Patriarch in the Huayan School of Chinese Buddhism, which had the Indian Avatamsaka Sutra as its central scripture. This school originated in China and is known as Kegon in Japan. The Avatamsaka’s seminal chapter once circulated separately and is known as the *Gandavyuha Sutra*. Each designation is roughly equivalent to

day, the disciple insisted on going to Mount Wutai on pilgrimage to Bodhisattva Manjushri, and no one could dissuade him.

Dushun realized that he couldn't change the disciple's mind, so he told him before his departure:

A traveler embarks on a journey,
To pilgrimage to a dirt pile.
Manjushri is right here,
Where can you find Amitabha?

Later, the disciple arrived at Mount Wutai. While he was prostrating to the mountain with great veneration, an old man appeared and asked him, "Where are you from? What are you doing here?"

The disciple replied, "I came from Mount Zhongnan. I am here on pilgrimage to Bodhisattva Manjushri."

To his surprise, the old man said, "Manjushri is not here. Monk Dushun at Mount Zhongnan is the emanation of Manjushri."

The disciple exclaimed in astonishment, "I have been serving my teacher for over thirty years. Why did I not know this?"

The old man said, "You have eyes but do not see the reality! Hurry back. If you can return by tonight, you will still have the chance to see Manjushri; if you delay even one night, I fear you will miss your opportunity." Then he disappeared.

In great awe, the disciple rushed back but was still too late. His teacher had passed into parinirvana the night before.

Of course, Manjushri is actually everywhere. It is a skillful means for a specific person to say that Manjushri is not at Mount Wutai. For that disciple, if he could not even see his teacher as Manjushri, then even if there were many manifestations of Manjushri at Mount Wutai, he would not see them either.

According to an account in Lama Tsongkhapa's biography, once his disciple Khedrup Gelek Pelzang (1385–1438) truly missed his guru, so he presented offerings and prayed to him, and almost immediately had a vision of his guru. Khedrup Gelek Pelzang asked his guru where he was, and Lama Tsongkhapa

"Flower Garland." (Source: Buswell, Robert E., Lopez, Donald S. Jr., 2014, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, p. 275.)

replied that one of his emanations was at Mount Wutai and the other in Tushita Heaven. I do not remember this story very clearly now. I should have included it in the *Chronicles of Mount Wutai*, my work from over twenty years ago.

Therefore, the essence of what has to be realized at all stages of practice, including the generation stage and the perfection stage, is embodied in our own root guru. That is why all sutras and tantras state that the guru is inseparable from the Buddha. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Why is the guru the refuge and the field of merit?

Because the practice of guru yoga encompasses both outer and inner aspects.

Through the generation and perfection stages, the essence of the practice is embodied in the guru.

Thus, all sutras and tantras state that the guru is the true Buddha.

The wisdom mind of a sublime teacher is inseparable from that of all buddhas; however, they take on the form of an ordinary human being to skillfully guide us, their disciples, who are still bound by impurity and delusion.

The *Lotus Sutra* says:

Sublime teachers are the great favorable conditions,

Because their guidance and teachings allow us to see the Buddha,

And generate anuttara-samyak-sambodhi.⁷⁶

The *Immaculate Sky Sutra* says:

Ananda, although all the buddhas do not appear to all beings, they manifest as qualified teachers and impart the Dharma, thereby planting the seed of liberation in all beings. Therefore, qualified teachers surpass all the tathagatas. You must remember this.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was still with us, many people wanted to pay homage to him. This may be difficult for a non-Buddhist to understand. However, for those who understand the true Dharma, seeing a spiritual teacher who has genuine bodhicitta, remembering him, touching him, and hearing him can all serve as direct or indirect causes for their liberation. By

⁷⁶ It means unexcelled perfect enlightenment.

doing so, a person with sharp faculties can swiftly uproot the samsaric seeds and approach enlightenment, whereas a person with inferior faculties can have the seed of liberation planted in their mindstream and one day the person will attain liberation when their virtuous roots mature. The nature of the guru is nothing other than the Buddha.

So, while the teacher is still with us in this world, we must strive to follow their instructions and unite our minds with theirs through the three kinds of service. Some individuals, who failed to serve, respect, or follow their teacher while the teacher was alive, now claim to meditate on a picture of the teacher after their passing. Others, instead of earnestly praying to the teacher with devotion, seek high teachings elsewhere while claiming to meditate on the natural state. By doing so, they are unable to attain the qualities of freedom and realization of the teacher's wisdom mind. What they do is referred to as "practicing at odds with the practice."

Many people behave this way when following their guru. While the guru is still alive, they show little interest in actions that the teacher appreciates and have confidence in the very things the teacher disapproves of. Once the guru has departed from this world, they finally begin to reflect on the guru's kindness and display the guru's image, their works, and teachings.

Although this is acceptable, the most important thing is to serve, pray to, and please the guru while they are still with us. Otherwise, any actions taken after their parinirvana carry less significance. We may not have many opportunities to follow the teacher, so while they are still alive, we must make every effort to honor and serve them. On the day when the guru is no longer with us in person, we will still need to fulfill their wishes and continue to benefit all beings. This is referred to as "following the teacher."

In addition, praying to the guru is very important. The great practitioners of the Sakya, Kagyu, Gelug, and Nyingma lineages always pray to their gurus. As I have said repeatedly, although the guru is a wish-fulfilling jewel who can grant us anything we desire, without our prayers, they cannot bestow upon us siddhi or accomplishment. It's just like our computer: it functions only after we turn it on. Otherwise, no matter how powerful it is, it is of no use to us. Therefore, we disciples should always pray to our guru with great veneration, who embodies the union of ultimate wisdom and impartial compassion. Only in this way can we obtain the great qualities of the guru.

Along our path to Buddhahood, if we frequently pray to the guru, we'll gain an invisible power that can facilitate our Dharma practice and eliminate our afflictions. I once met a layperson who said her life was consumed by her afflictions. However, if she had prayed often to the guru, once the guru's blessings merged with her mind, her afflictions would have vanished immediately. It is truly unfortunate that she didn't know this pith instruction.

Meeting and receiving guidance from our teacher in the intermediate state is made possible only through a connection forged by our own limitless devotion and the teacher's compassion and prayers. It is not that the teacher appears physically; otherwise, a teacher with many disciples would have to remain in the intermediate state every day, as it is not uncommon for a disciple to die.

Thus, if a disciple lacks devotion, no matter how perfect the teacher is, they will not be present to guide the disciple in the intermediate state. The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* states:

Most fools meditate on the guru's painted image,
Yet fail to serve and honor them while they are alive.
The fools claim to meditate on the natural state but remain
ignorant of the guru's mind.
How pitiful to practice at odds with the practice!
Without devotion, it is nearly impossible to meet the guru in
the intermediate state.

One's faith in the guru can be observed throughout one's lifetime. In particular, when we encounter difficulties and obstacles in a dream, if we are able to pray to the guru, it should be easier for us to navigate the intermediate state.

In fact, our dreams reflect the state of our practice. When we see horrifying demons, hell beings, or hungry ghosts, it indicates that our mental and physical states may be in turmoil. Conversely, when we have a pure mind and various states of practice arise, we may dream of Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, lineage masters, or auspicious scenes like a beautiful garden. I often experience this; the state of my practice is frequently reflected in my physical experiences.

During the intermediate state, if a person can visualize and pray to the guru, everything in that state will immediately transform into pure appearances. As mentioned during my teaching on the hundred peaceful and wrathful deities, if

we recognize the nature of our minds, all the hundred peaceful and wrathful deities will become our own deities. However, if we cannot transform our minds onto the path, all the deities will turn into Yama's henchmen. Therefore, this is very important. We should all reflect on it carefully, as it holds profound meaning.

In summary, while we are still alive, we must always pray to the guru. Why must we practice guru yoga before any Dharma practice and recite the prayer of guru yoga once before going to bed? By doing so, all phenomena can be dissolved into the guru's body, speech, and mind, resulting in a state of purity for everything.



Lesson 79

“In the first place, you should take care to check ... qualities the teacher has.” [page 151–153]

As I mentioned last time, it would be great if you could always take a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* with you. In fact, it’s not too difficult to do so. I hope you will all make a vow to do this. If you always carry a copy, you can read a few pages even when you’re not particularly eager to read it. If you gradually place great importance on this text, your practice will surely advance.

Nothing in the text should be neglected or skipped. All the content is highly valuable and significant for our liberation. Studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is not like eating fish, where you take the fillet and discard the bones. A Dharma student has no reason to filter the text to retain what is useful and discard what is not. Every word, sentence, and paragraph is crucial to our practice and liberation, so there is no reason to stop studying it and practicing accordingly.

As you will learn in the later section, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is a guru who never gets angry. When you follow a human teacher and constantly pester them with various questions, the teacher may sometimes be unhappy, in a bad mood, very busy, unavailable, unresponsive, or reluctant to answer, among other things. In contrast, this text is always accessible whenever you wish to read it. It reminds you of key issues and guides you on how to practice properly. Therefore, we should always follow this “guru.”

Each practitioner has one or two Buddhist scriptures that have played an important role in their lives. An eminent Gelug master once said that he had extensively studied sutras, shastras, and tantras throughout his life, and eventually

he realized that all these Buddhist teachings were condensed into *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. A tulku from Ngawa⁷⁷ always kept this text with him during his exile in India, no matter how challenging the circumstances were. Similarly, we should carry a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* with us wherever we go, just as Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche did.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was a great enlightened master whom I met in New Delhi, India, and Thimphu, Bhutan. Recently, a tulku who lived in India told me that Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche could memorize all the sadhanas when bestowing empowerments, so it was perfectly acceptable for him if no written texts were provided.

In the fall of 1993, I watched a DVD of Rinpoche's teaching at the meditation center of Sogyal Rinpoche (1947–2019) in France, and I was astonished. During his teaching, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche spoke so fluently that all the scriptural sources flowed naturally from his lips.

If a great master like Rinpoche reads a few pages of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* every day and places great emphasis on the text, why do we ordinary beings, burdened by heavy karmic debts and deeply trapped in samsara, not read it carefully? Worse yet, some individuals believe they have been practicing so well that they only need higher teachings. Alas!

A Dharma practitioner should first identify their "task." Just as a farmer's task is to grow crops and a herdsman's task is to herd cattle, a monastic's task is to hear, contemplate, and meditate, and to benefit all beings while upholding pure precepts. The task of a Mahayana layperson is to study and practice the Dharma with great diligence and to benefit all beings as much as possible. These are the responsibilities of every Mahayanist.

We shouldn't spend our days in a constant state of confusion and aimlessness, engaging in nothing but eating and sleeping. We should frequently examine and evaluate ourselves using one or two Buddhist texts to analyze our strengths and weaknesses. This is very important.

In my home monastery⁷⁸ there is an elderly Khenpo named Legshed. During

⁷⁷ Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, also known as Aba, is an autonomous prefecture of northwestern Sichuan, bordering Gansu to the north and northeast and Qinghai to the northwest. Its seat is in Barkam, and it has an area of 83,201 km² (32,124 sq mi). The population was 919,987 in late 2013.

⁷⁸ Dhomang Monastery. According to Khenpo Sodargye's remarks, Dhomang Monastery

a conversation this summer, I asked him about his experiences following spiritual teachers. What impressed Khenpo Legshed the most was that he had the opportunity to follow Lama Yukhok for over ten days, during which the great lama mentioned he had read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* more than a hundred times in his lifetime.

Lama Yukhok Chatralwa was a renowned Tibetan master with a high level of realization. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often spoke of him, and he may have received several brief teachings from Lama Yukhok. If such a great master placed significant importance on preliminaries, then why do some of us not even bother to read the text, or feel satisfied after listening to the teachings just once or twice?

When I was in Xiamen⁷⁹ working on the translation of *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*, I lived a secluded life like a carefree hermit in a hospital and other places for more than 110 days. One day, I visited the Nanputuo Temple in Xiamen and was recognized by a layperson who invited me to dine at a vegetarian restaurant.

A professor from Xiamen University happened to be with us, and he told me, “I have read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* five or six times, which really helps me counter my afflictions. Patrul Rinpoche himself listened to these teachings twenty-five times in front of his root guru, let alone us. The more I read the text, the more inspired I feel, and the more blessed I become.”

Please don’t assume that *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* only covers preliminary practices that are particularly simple, and you have already heard many of the stories in it. In fact, each story, scriptural verse, and sentence in the text carries profound meaning. If you internalize the book’s content and remember it vividly, your practice will be greatly enriched. However, if you simply place the book on your shelf without applying its teachings, it will not hold much significance.

As you should know, hearing the Dharma teachings serves to counteract afflictions. According to Atisha, those that can counteract afflictions are called the Dharma, while those that cannot are not considered the Dharma. If you

was built in the 18th century during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty. Since its establishment, Dhomang Monastery has had 13 great practitioners who attained the rainbow body. The author of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche, also practiced at Dhomang Monastery.

⁷⁹ Xiamen is a port city on China’s southeast coast, across a strait from Taiwan. It encompasses two main islands and a region on the mainland.

have neither confidence nor interest in the Dharma, its benefits cannot arise for you. Therefore, when you pursue the Dharma, make sure you first understand its meaning well, followed by diligent practice. Neither of these two can be absent.

In summary, when choosing to follow a teacher, we must examine them with discernment. Before committing to them through receiving their empowerments or teachings, we should first examine whether they possess the qualities of a qualified teacher. If they are indeed a qualified teacher, we should follow them in accordance with the Dharma. Conversely, if they lack the necessary qualities, it is best not to follow them.

Once we decide to follow a teacher, we should avoid seeking faults in them. Regardless of their behavior, we should view it as virtuous and regard whatever they do as positive, cultivating faith and maintaining a pure perception. If, due to our impure minds, we lack faith in the teacher's profound actions and speech, as well as their various manifestations aimed at benefiting sentient beings, and instead give rise to negative thoughts and slander, the consequences can be dire and may lead to our endless suffering in the future.

In *The Just King*, Mipham Rinpoche says:

The Buddha says if a person disrespects
A teacher who teaches him even just one line,
He will continuously be reborn as a dog for a hundred lifetimes,
Then have countless rebirths as an outcast.

Not to mention teachers who have bestowed upon us empowerment, pith instructions, and valuable teachings; a teacher who has imparted even a single line deserves our wholehearted respect. If we carelessly slander the teacher, we will be reborn as a dog for one hundred consecutive lifetimes, and later we may be reborn as an outcast, such as a beggar or a prostitute.

Therefore, we should respect and appreciate all our Dharma teachers. As the saying goes:

Even if someone is your teacher for only a day,
You should regard him as your father for the rest of your life.

We should also always respect a worldly teacher, who may have taught us just one class in school. I have such a teacher who only gave me one lecture. I

remember it was a snowy winter day, and our teachers rode horses somewhere and couldn't reach the school due to the heavy snow. So, this teacher replaced our absent mathematics teacher and taught us infinite repeating decimals (ten divided by three equals 3.333...).

This teacher often told others she was my teacher, which I had to admit was true. Of all the teachers I had at school, some didn't leave many impressions on me, while others are still vivid in my memory, even if they taught me just one class twenty or thirty years ago.

Some individuals who become college professors may overlook their elementary school teachers, feeling embarrassed to acknowledge their connection. Such individuals often fail to appreciate and reciprocate the kindness they received.

Once, Khenpo Tsultrim Lödro and I were conducting a chanting service in a household where we met an elderly woman who was not in good health. Khenpo Tsultrim Lödro introduced her to me, saying, "This is my elementary school teacher."

The woman appeared a bit embarrassed and remarked in a self-mocking manner, "Yes, your teacher is indeed wise." In fact, regardless of who you become, it is essential to be respectful and grateful to your teachers. We should show this respect to our worldly teachers, let alone our spiritual teachers, who teach us the Dharma and whose kindness toward us is even greater.

Moreover, a spiritual teacher differs from a worldly teacher. Once you commit to a spiritual teacher, you must not slander them, even if some of their actions are unacceptable to you.

According to historical accounts, Kumarajiva⁸⁰ lived a tumultuous life. He was captured when Fu Jian, an emperor during the Northern and Southern Dynasties,⁸¹ initiated a war and dispatched General Lü Guang and his troops to the Kingdom

⁸⁰ Kumarajiva (344–413 CE) was a Buddhist monk, scholar, missionary, and translator from the Kingdom of Kucha (present-day Aksu Prefecture, Xinjiang, China). Kumarajiva is seen as one of the greatest translators of Chinese Buddhism. According to Lu Cheng, Kumarajiva's translations are "unparalleled either in terms of translation technique or degree of fidelity."

⁸¹ The Northern and Southern Dynasties was a period in the history of China that lasted from 420 to 589, following the tumultuous era of the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Wu Hu states. It is sometimes considered the latter part of a longer period known as the Six Dynasties (220 to 589).

of Kucha. There, the general acquired Kucha's "national treasure": Kumarajiva the translator.

Kumarajiva then went to China. During the reign of Emperor Fu Jian, his Dharma activities were not widespread.⁸² It was not until Emperor Yao Xing established a translation bureau for Kumarajiva that his Dharma activities began to flourish. At that time, nearly eight hundred people worked at the translation bureau, which was unparalleled in history.

Emperor Yao Xing regarded Kumarajiva as a man of great wisdom, so he felt it was a great pity that Kumarajiva had no children. Therefore, the emperor sent him ten beautiful women and pressured him to disrobe. Kumarajiva had no choice but to accept the arrangement. He moved out of the temple and lived elsewhere.

Noticing Kumarajiva's departure, many monks imitated him by breaking their celibacy vows. One day, Kumarajiva gathered the sangha together. He brought two bowls of water, each filled with many needles. Kumarajiva swallowed one of the bowls of needles and announced that anyone who could swallow the second bowl would also be allowed to marry and have children. The monks were astonished, realizing that Kumarajiva had attained an extraordinary state of realization.

Before each of his teachings, Kumarajiva would remind the audience, "As with a lotus growing out of the mud, one should just pick the lotus, not the mud." He implied that his body was like the mud, as he was disrobed and his status was inappropriate for teaching the Dharma to the monastic sangha, unlike other ordained teachers; however, the Dharma in his speech was like a lotus emerging from the mud. He urged everyone to accept the teachings in his speech, rather than imitate his behavior.

Due to the controversy surrounding his actions, Kumarajiva vowed to prove the accuracy of his translations in the presence of a large crowd before his parinirvana. He stated, "If my translations are errorless, when my body is cremated, my tongue won't be burned." When he died, his entire body was reduced to ashes, except for his tongue.

Regarding Kumarajiva's extraordinary yogic conduct, some scholars believe these actions were performed to manifest his achievements to others, while others feel it was to prove that his translations surpassed those of others. Nevertheless, a

⁸² Kumarajiva had never met Emperor Fu Jian in person.

disciple should always maintain a pure perception of a sublime master's actions, regardless of how unorthodox or improper those actions may appear.

Many individuals encounter problems when following a teacher. Initially, they don't examine the teacher carefully; whenever they meet a teacher, they rush to follow without understanding their background. Once they begin to follow the teacher, if they notice seemingly negative actions, these individuals struggle to maintain a pure perception and see the teacher as a buddha.

At this point, they find themselves in a dilemma. If they continue to follow the teacher, they no longer have faith since the teacher has revealed their flaws. Conversely, if they stop following and abandon the teacher, it will lead to serious consequences, as they have received empowerments and teachings from them.

Many Buddhists are puzzled by this issue and are unsure of what to do next. Occasionally, they seek my opinion, and I find it challenging to provide a conclusive suggestion. It's not advisable to encourage them to abandon the teacher; however, continuing to follow a problematic teacher is equally concerning. Thus, I also find myself in a dilemma regarding what they should do.

To address this issue early on, we must examine the teacher with great care before we begin to follow them. Examining the teacher in a general sense involves verifying whether the teacher possesses all the qualities described in the sutras and tantras, such as *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*, and *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*.

Of course, Sutrayana teachers and Vajrayana teachers have different characteristics and requirements. Evaluating a university professor involves more criteria than assessing an elementary school teacher. In the context of Mahayana Buddhism, it is absolutely essential for a teacher to have bodhicitta. Therefore, examining a teacher can be condensed into a single critical question: Does the teacher have bodhicitta?

If the teacher has bodhicitta, they will always strive to do what is most beneficial for their disciples, both in this life and in future lives. Following such a teacher can only lead to positive outcomes. The Dharma imparted by such a teacher is aligned with Mahayana teachings and will undoubtedly guide one along the true path to liberation. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* states:

The teacher with bodhicitta can be followed,

Because he is praised by the wise.

Such a teacher will naturally attract many disciples, as said in the *Water-Tree Treatises: Hundred Waves of Elegant Sayings & Hundred Branches of Elegant Sayings*:

Before a loving, kind, and altruistic person,
Many people naturally gather together.

Therefore, a disciple can trust the teacher and follow them without doubt.

On the other hand, a teacher lacking bodhicitta remains driven by selfish desires and is, therefore, unable to genuinely transform their disciples' minds. No matter how profound or extraordinary their teachings may appear, they will ultimately serve only the ordinary, worldly concerns of this life. Such a teacher cannot truly tame and benefit their disciples.

Even if the teacher bestows the highest empowerment or imparts the most profound teachings, they are merely skillfully promoting, branding, and boasting about themselves. Aside from this, not to mention assisting their disciples with significant matters of life and death, the teacher remains indifferent even when their disciples are in need. Such a teacher is like a venomous snake, bringing no real benefit to their disciples. Therefore, a wise person should distance themselves from such a teacher. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* states:

Don't approach a person lacking decency.
At the sight of a dishonest and indecent person,
You should stay away and avoid them
As if they were a venomous snake.

You must remember this teaching. In fact, a teacher with genuine bodhicitta is always warmly welcomed wherever they live and travel. In contrast, a teacher with selfish desires may initially attract and impress some people, but over time, others will uncover their lack of good qualities through their actions. As stated in the Chinese proverb:

Distance tests a horse's stamina,
Time reveals a man's heart.

Such a person is not even qualified to be a good disciple, let alone a teacher.

Many of you who are listening to my teaching will become great Dharma masters or accomplished yogis. At present, you may seem to be ordinary monastics or laypeople, but in the future, you will undoubtedly earn a great deal of respect from others when your Dharma activities flourish.

At that time, you must maintain a mind of benefiting others — this is the most crucial point! I have emphasized this point repeatedly, so please pay attention to it. If your actions are driven by altruism rather than selfish motives, others are less likely to question you. And even if they do, their doubts and disputes will eventually fade away.

Take the great Jigme Phuntsok, for example. When Rinpoche began his Dharma activities, many people misunderstood and even slandered him. However, over time, all the negative voices faded away, just as fog dissipates when the sun shines. Rinpoche's Dharma activities have reached many areas in the Tibetan and Han regions of China, as well as multiple countries, like sunshine. It is not only the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche but also many other eminent Tibetan and Han Chinese masters who have experienced this. In fact, even ordinary practitioners can bring great benefit to living beings, as long as they have bodhicitta.

Thus, all the qualities of a qualified teacher can be summed up as having bodhicitta. When a teacher has bodhicitta, we can follow them without question. Conversely, if a teacher lacks bodhicitta, even their most profound Sutrayana or Vajrayana teachings will only plant seeds of virtue in others. Without an altruistic mind, bodhicitta, and compassion, how can they foster these virtues in their disciples?

In fact, it is not easy to generate bodhicitta. As we all know, the foundation of bodhicitta is the Four Immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Giving rise to these Four Immeasurables is no simple task.

For example, generating compassion is not as easy as we might expect. Feeling sorry for a suffering being may be a form of compassion, yet it is not sufficient for immeasurable compassion. Why? If your parents or beloved friends are sick, you may earnestly wish for their swift recovery, while you may not generate the same intense wish for a sick stranger. If you don't feel the same compassion for strangers as you do for your family or friends, this lack of treating everyone equally indicates that your compassion is not yet boundless. Instead, it remains conditioned by "my" family, "my" friends, "our" human species, and the like.

If we haven't attained the Four Immeasurables—the very foundation of bodhicitta—it's impossible to generate genuine, uncontrived bodhicitta. Therefore, it's not easy to find a teacher who has genuine bodhicitta.

When a teacher generates genuine bodhicitta, all their actions are for the benefit of living beings. Thus, all the characteristics of a qualified teacher can be distilled into one essence: bodhicitta. A qualified teacher may be a layperson or a monastic; they may be dressed in rags or dressed like a wealthy heir; they may gulp an entire bottle of hard liquor while teaching, or just a glass of water, but what matters is that the teacher has bodhicitta.

Therefore, follow a teacher who has bodhicitta, regardless of their behavior. For example, Khyentse Yeshe Dorje shot guns aimlessly into the air in front of his disciples. This seemingly bizarre action enabled his fortunate disciples to realize emptiness in that moment. In contrast, a teacher without bodhicitta is not worth following, no matter how prestigious their Dharma throne appears or how abundant the khatas and alms they have received.

It is important to note that some individuals can disguise their true selves with pseudo-bodhicitta. When witnessing a being in suffering, a teacher may seem very compassionate and immediately recite, "May all beings attain Buddhahood." However, such a recitation does not necessarily indicate genuine bodhicitta. The ego can be very cunning, making it difficult to discern whether great compassion has genuinely arisen in such a teacher's mind.

Without genuine bodhicitta, even if a teacher appears to embody renunciation, meditates for long periods, displays a dignified demeanor, practices fasting after midday, and walks cautiously to avoid harming insects, they are still not a good teacher for Mahayana practitioners.

A disciple should not merely emulate the teacher's demeanor. Instead, the disciple's goal is to attain the teacher's inner realization and bodhicitta mind. Therefore, please refrain from examining a teacher solely based on outward appearances. You must examine their internal realization.

For ordinary people like us, no amount of careful examination can reveal the extraordinary qualities of those sublime beings who conceal their true nature. At the same time, charlatans posing as noble beings are abundant, and they are skilled in the art of deception. Here is a Tibetan story:

There was a Tibetan household that invited monastics every year to recite

The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines. One year, they invited a monk who was a charlatan and didn't know how to recite the text at all. However, this charlatan was unconcerned because the family members rarely listened to the recitation attentively. When he encountered characters that he didn't know, he simply mumbled through them.

In the family, there was an illiterate old woman. With her walking cane, she approached the charlatan and performed three prostrations. She then sat down and listened to the recitation. During lunch, she politely said to the charlatan, "Since I was an infant, this family has been very fortunate, and every year I am able to listen to the recitation of this text in this very room. However, I used to hear the monk recite "rapjor" very often, so why didn't I hear it this time?"

The charlatan replied, "Oh, dear grandma, there is nothing wrong with the recitation. In fact, after lunch, I will recite the part with 'rapjor.'" When the recitation resumed, the charlatan turned to the next page and repeated one "rapjor"⁸³ for every four lines. Very satisfied, the old woman got up and returned to her room for her own mantra recitations.

Nowadays, there are many such people who are so "smart" that they know how to tailor their speech and actions to others' preferences. For instance, when they hear someone express faith in a certain guru, they boast of their "good relationship" with that guru. There are many skilled charlatans nowadays, so please be cautious.

Someone may wonder, "Since we should refrain from judging a teacher solely based on their external appearances, how can we truly discern whether the teacher has genuine bodhicitta or not?" *The Buddha Speaks of the Ten Dharmas of Abiding in the Mahayana Path Sutra* suggests:

Just as one infers the presence of fire by seeing smoke,
Or the presence of water by seeing aquatic birds,
The presence of bodhicitta in a bodhisattva's mind
Can be recognized through certain signs.

One can approximately determine whether a teacher has bodhicitta based on their Dharma activities. However, a Dharma student is best off relying on trustworthy sources for guidance on who qualifies as a teacher.

⁸³ It refers to Subhuti (Skt. Subhūti; Tib. རམ་བཞུ་ཏི་ལྷ་མོ་, Wyl. rab 'byor), an important disciple of Buddha Shakyamuni. He is frequently mentioned in the Prajnaparamita sutras.

Some learned masters suggest the following step-by-step examination of a teacher. Before following a teacher, one should first inquire from afar with those who are close to them and who know them. Next, one should observe the teacher's actions in person. Finally, one should establish direct contact with the teacher to further examine them.

A challenge to following this procedure arises when a Dharma student has not completed their evaluation of a potential teacher, yet the teacher believes the student has a karmic connection and offers to bestow empowerment or teachings. This can place the Dharma student in a difficult position.

I heard of a Dharma student who was very reluctant to receive empowerment from a teacher he was still examining, so he intentionally ran to the bathroom and hid until the empowerment was over. This was not an easy situation for the student.

Because it is challenging to determine whether a teacher is qualified, what should we do? As Patrul Rinpoche suggests:

The greatest of all teachers is the one with whom we share a connection from past lives. With such a teacher, further examination is unnecessary. Merely encountering them, hearing their voice—or even just their name—can instantly transform everything and evoke such deep faith that every hair on our bodies stands on end. This indicates that the teacher has been our teacher across many lifetimes, rendering further examination pointless.

Rongton Lhaga informed Jetsun Milarepa, “Your lama from previous lifetimes is the supreme being, the renowned translator king, Marpa. He resides in a hermitage in Trowolung in the South. You should go and seek him out!”

Merely hearing Marpa's name ignited an extraordinary and profound faith within Milarepa. He thought, “Even if it costs me my life, I must meet this lama and become his disciple.”

Milarepa traveled to Trowolung and inquired about Marpa the Translator, but no one had heard of him. Later, he met a well-dressed and good-looking young boy who said, “Are you referring to my father? If so, he used all our wealth to purchase gold and took it to India. When he returned, he brought back many gem-studded volumes of scripture as gifts. Although he had never worked before, today he is plowing his field.”

Hearing this, Milarepa eagerly set forth to find Marpa. Along the way, he encountered a tall, robust farmer with large, piercing eyes. Although he did not realize this was Marpa the Translator, upon seeing him, Milarepa felt an indescribable sense of happiness. In that instant, all his discursive thoughts vanished without a trace, and he stood there, completely transfixed.

However, I have noticed many Dharma students blindly pursuing the feeling of recognizing a teacher. Even when they encounter a charlatan, they force reactions such as tears, hair standing on end, and body twitching. They quickly claim the charlatan as their imagined teacher in this life and in lives to follow.

It is possible for a Dharma student's mindstream to be instantly transformed by hearing the name of a teacher with whom they are linked in former lives, or by seeing or hearing that teacher. However, for most people, it is better to take the time to examine the teacher thoroughly.

Otherwise, upon first encountering the teacher, a Dharma student may be engulfed in ecstasy, but not long after, they may go to court and sue the teacher for fraud. This is truly unfortunate. When past accomplished masters relied on their teachers, they followed them with great faith from the beginning and maintained that faith even after achieving enlightenment. This is the act of a wise person.

In general, the type of teacher we encounter is determined by the purity or impurity of our perceptions and the power of our past karma. No matter what type of person the teacher may be, we should always regard them as a true Buddha, recognizing that it is through their compassion that we receive teachings and personal guidance.

[According to accounts in the sutras, Buddha Shakyamuni often appeared as an ordinary person. For example, he appeared as a monk to help Angulimala.⁸⁴ The Buddha also manifested as a universal monarch, while his disciple Maudgalyayana appeared as a minister, to tame a group of individuals with strong karmic ties who required special methods for liberation. Additionally, the Buddha manifested as a being radiating an exceptionally beautiful and captivating fragrance to liberate the king of Gandharva, who had a deep attachment to fragrances.]

⁸⁴ Angulimala (lit. 'finger necklace') is an important figure in Buddhism, particularly within the Theravada tradition. Depicted as a ruthless brigand who completely transforms after converting to Buddhism, he exemplifies the redemptive power of the Buddha's teachings and the Buddha's skill as a teacher. Angulimala is regarded by Buddhists as the "patron saint" of childbirth and is associated with fertility in South and Southeast Asia.

Without the favorable circumstances created by our past actions, we would never have been fortunate enough to encounter a truly exceptional teacher. Furthermore, if our perceptions were impure, even meeting the Buddha face-to-face would not enable us to recognize or appreciate his profound qualities.

Here is a story from the *Sutra on the Ocean-like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha*:

Five hundred Sakya⁸⁵ descendants see the Buddha's body as the color of charcoal; one thousand bhikkhus see the Buddha's body as the color of red clay; sixteen upāsakas⁸⁶ see the Buddha's body as the color of a black elephant's foot; and twenty-four upāsikās⁸⁷ see the Buddha's body as the color of ink. Thus, these four groups have different perceptions of the Buddha's body.

Why did they fail to see the true golden color of the Buddha's body? As explained in the sutra, it is because, in past lives, these Sakya descendants slandered the Buddha and the Dharma with ill intentions; the bhikkhus developed doubts and wrong views toward the teacher and the sangha; the upāsakas followed bad teachers and believed in the wrong views; and the upāsikās insulted well-behaved monks.

Therefore, encountering the teacher who has bestowed the Dharma upon us in past lives is of utmost importance. Due to our karmic connection with the teacher in past lives, it becomes easier for us to hold pure perceptions toward the teacher in this lifetime. Once we commit to following the teacher, we should obey them in all matters and disregard all hardships, including heat, cold, hunger, thirst, and so on. We should pray to them with faith and devotion. In fact, praying to the teacher is crucial. If we often pray to the teacher and visualize their great qualities dissolving into our minds, just as we do during our daily guru yoga practice, our minds will gradually become peaceful and tamed.

While following the teacher, we should seek their guidance in all our endeavors. Whatever the teacher instructs, we should wholeheartedly put it into

⁸⁵ The name of the clan or tribe into which the Buddha was born. Like other tribes resident in the foothills of the Himalayas and northern Bihar, which were tributary to the great kingdoms but exercised internal autonomy, the Śākya most likely practiced a republican form of government.

⁸⁶ Upāsaka (Pāli, 'one who sits close by') is a male Buddhist layperson who has taken refuge in the Three Jewels (triratna) and undertaken the five precepts.

⁸⁷ Upāsikā is a female Buddhist layperson who has taken refuge in the Three Jewels (triratna) and undertaken the five precepts.

practice, placing complete trust in their wisdom. With such faith, we can easily attain realization, even if the teacher teaches us only once in this lifetime.

Here is a story I'd like to share with you:

Once, when Katok Dampa Deshek⁸⁸ (1122–1192), a well-known Tibetan master of the 12th century, was bestowing a high-level empowerment, three beggar-like Dharma practitioners in shabby clothes arrived. The monastery was so crowded that even the rooftop was full of people. There was not even a niche left for a newcomer. Since they were late and couldn't squeeze into the monastery, the three had no choice but to climb onto the highest branch of a nearby tree, looking in the direction of the monastery, and there they received the empowerment and teachings from Dampa Deshek. All three of them had fervent faith and devotion toward the teacher. After the empowerment, these three practitioners attained realization, while it seemed none of the audience members sitting inside the monastery awakened.

As long as a Dharma student has faith and devotion, that person can receive great benefit from hearing the Dharma, even if the student sits far away on top of a tree. However, without faith and devotion, that student can barely receive the benefit of the Dharma, no matter how physically close they are to the teacher. Well, I am not referring to those who are currently sitting close to me. You don't need to lower your heads (*the audience laughs*).

After a careful examination of the teacher, we choose to follow them. We should strive to emulate the teacher's realizations and actions, which involves closely studying their behavior and mirroring it precisely. As the saying goes:

Every action is an imitation;
Those who imitate best, act best.

Practicing Dharma involves emulating the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past. As a disciple strives to become like their teacher, they should assimilate the teacher's realizations and conduct. The disciple should resemble a tsa-tsa formed

⁸⁸ Katok Dampa Deshek (Tib. ཀའཏོག་པ་དམ་པ་བདེ་གཤེགས་, Wyl. kaHthog pa dam pa bdegshes) (1122–1192) — founder of Katok Monastery. His eldest brother was Phagmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo, one of the main students of Gampopa. Dampa Deshek's teachers included Phagmodrupa, the Sakya patriarch Sönam Tsemo, Dzamtön Drowé Gönpö, a disciple of Zur Shakya Sengé, and the first Karmapa, Düsum Khyenpa. He founded Katok in the Earth Rabbit year, 1159. His extant writings include commentaries on the Sutra Gathering All Intentions (Tib. Düpa Do).

from the teacher's mold. Just as a tsa-tsa accurately reproduces every detail carved into the mold, the disciple should aim to develop qualities that are identical to, or at least closely aligned with, those of their teacher.

Otherwise, if the teacher demonstrates wisdom and compassion in the same way the Buddha did, yet the disciples exhibit none of those qualities or possess many unwholesome qualities, they cannot truly be considered the teacher's disciples.

In the practices of the highest teachings, such as the Great Perfection and Chan practice, great emphasis is placed on mind-to-mind transmission. For example, the Sixth Patriarch⁸⁹ of Chan Buddhism attained realization upon hearing his teacher, the Fifth Patriarch, teach one specific line of the *Diamond Sutra*. Deeply immersed in the blessings of his teacher, the Sixth Patriarch then exclaimed:

All things are not apart from our intrinsic nature.

Who would have expected that our intrinsic nature is inherently pure?

Who would have expected that our intrinsic nature is basically unborn and un-perishing?

Who would have expected that our intrinsic nature is fundamentally complete in itself?

Who would have expected that our intrinsic nature is basically immovable?

Who would have expected that our intrinsic nature can produce all things?"⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Dajian Huineng (638–713), also commonly known as the Sixth Patriarch or Sixth Ancestor of Chan, is a semi-legendary but central figure in the early history of Chinese Chan Buddhism. He was said to have been an uneducated layman who suddenly attained awakening upon hearing the Diamond Sutra. Despite his lack of formal training, he demonstrated his understanding to the Fifth Patriarch, Daman Hongren, who then supposedly chose Huineng as his true successor instead of his publicly known selection of Yuquan Shenxiu. Twentieth-century scholarship revealed that the story of Huineng's Buddhist career was likely invented by the monk Heze Shenhui, who claimed to be one of Huineng's disciples and was highly critical of Shenxiu's teaching. Huineng is regarded as the founder of the "Sudden Enlightenment" Southern Chan school of Buddhism, which focuses on an immediate and direct attainment of Buddhist enlightenment. The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, which is said to be a record of his teachings, is a highly influential text in the East Asian Buddhist tradition.

⁹⁰ The translation of the verses is from *The Story of Chinese Zen*, by Master Nan Huai-chin, translated by Thomas Cleary, published by Charles E. Tuttle (Tuttle Library of Enlightenment), 1995.

This story is a vivid example of a disciple who fully acquired qualities identical to those of the teacher.

There is a similar story about Damei Fachang, a practitioner of Chan Buddhism during the Tang dynasty. When they first met, Damei asked his teacher Mazu,⁹¹ “What is Buddha?” Mazu answered, “Mind is Buddha.” Upon hearing this, Damei experienced a profound realization. Years later, even after enduring many hardships and challenges, Damei’s mind remained inseparable from Mazu’s wisdom mind.

Therefore, at the end of each session of guru yoga, you should conclude by abiding in the state where your mind completely merges with the wisdom mind of the guru. If it is too challenging for you to abide in such a state, you may simply think, “Whatever I think and perceive is my guru’s very essence.” In summary, whenever you think of the guru, this itself is the very essence of the guru’s wisdom mind.

There are still many topics worthy of elaboration and explanation; however, time is short, so in today’s class, I can only provide a brief teaching on guru yoga. Additionally, it may not be necessary to elaborate too much at this point. If you are interested, you may revisit the corresponding text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* repeatedly.

This time, I’m offering a very extensive teaching, so my transcripts may consist of several volumes, which you may not have time to read through one by one. However, I believe it would not be difficult for you to read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* once every year, two years, or even ten years.

⁹¹ Mazu Daoyi (709–788) was an influential abbot of Chan Buddhism during the Tang dynasty. The earliest recorded use of the term “Chan school” is from his *Extensive Records*. Master Ma’s teaching style of “strange words and extraordinary actions” became paradigmatic Zen lore.



Lesson 80

“Anyone who first examines his teacher skillfully...
Proclaims the Dharma with Inexhaustible Melodious Voice.”
[page 153–157]

Let’s continue to study the chapter on “How to Follow a Teacher.”

To summarize what has been covered, Patrul Rinpoche states:

In the process of following a teacher, a disciple should first examine the teacher skillfully, then follow the teacher skillfully, and finally emulate the teacher’s realizations and actions skillfully. Such a disciple will undoubtedly be on the right path, no matter what.

The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* says:

First, examine the teacher skillfully;

Then, follow the teacher skillfully;

Finally, emulate the teacher’s realizations and actions skillfully.

Such a disciple will surely be on the right path.

We must not grow weary when following a teacher. Understanding the importance of following a teacher and putting this into practice brings us to the Dharma and is also the cause of our enlightenment. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* states:

Following and honoring spiritual teachers

Is the initial cause of omniscience.
Therefore, do not grow weary of it.

We must neither grow weary nor develop negative views toward the teacher. Even when we struggle to understand the teacher's actions and their hidden meanings, we should quietly repent and recognize that all the teacher's behaviors are supreme Dharma activities aimed at benefiting sentient beings. By doing this, our minds will find peace and stability, allowing many positive qualities to naturally emerge from within.

Once we have encountered a supreme qualified teacher with all the necessary qualities, we should follow them without any concern for life or limb—just as the Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita followed Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, the great pandita Naropa followed the supreme Tilopa, and Jetsun Mila followed Marpa of Lhodrak.

Please contemplate this point carefully. If you have the opportunity, you must find a teacher, follow them without concern for your life, and ultimately obtain the teacher's wisdom mind. A devoted disciple can achieve all the teacher's realizations in a short period, even if they haven't followed the teacher for long.

However, if you do not have the opportunity to follow a teacher in person, you can still receive their teachings through videos and books, which can also bring you genuine benefits.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche never met Mipham Rinpoche in person but developed profound faith in him from a young age. By reading Mipham Rinpoche's works and earnestly praying to him, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche eventually received all his blessings. Afterward, he always paid homage to Mipham Rinpoche at the beginning of his own compositions.

Similarly, Jigme Lingpa generated great faith in Longchenpa after reading his writings and began to see him as a Buddha, despite their nearly five hundred years of separation and having never met. Through earnest prayer to Longchenpa and diligent practice of his teachings, Jigme Lingpa received all the blessings of Longchenpa's wisdom mind and ultimately recognized the nature of mind.

From the stories of these accomplished masters, we can see that practitioners can indeed attain extraordinary realization through unwavering faith in a teacher, even if they have never met in person.

Many people studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and *The Words of My Perfect*

Teacher have never met me in person, yet they have still benefited from the Dharma through reading my transcripts and watching my videos. Of course, I do not claim that I can bring you enlightenment or bestow blessings upon you, but all the Dharma teachings I offer consist of the vajra words of eminent masters, so it is reasonable to assume you have gained some benefits.

Therefore, I do not believe it is essential for you to meet the teacher and speak with him. What is most important? To attain benefit from the Dharma taught by the teacher.

A disciple should follow the teacher and seek his teachings without concern for life. Patrul Rinpoche recounts three classical stories in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, that are easy to understand and quite straightforward. Thus, I will simply go over the literal meaning without quoting scriptural evidence or employing logical reasoning.

1) Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita became the disciple of Dharmodgata

This story can be found in the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajnaparamita Sutra*. The Chinese translation is presented in classical prose, which can be difficult to comprehend. Therefore, I will tell this story in plain language.

The Sanskrit name Sadāprarudita means “Ever Weeping,” and Dharmodgata means “Sublime Dharma.” How did the Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita become the disciple of Dharmodgata?

From a young age, Sadāprarudita had always preferred to stay in secluded places.

One day, while meditating in a secluded place, he heard a voice from the sky saying, “O fortunate one, go eastward, and there you will encounter the teachings of the Prajnaparamita—the transcendent wisdom. Proceed without concern for physical exhaustion, sleep, laziness, heat, or cold, whether by day or night. Look neither to the right nor to the left. Soon, you will receive the teachings of the Prajnaparamita, either through sacred texts or from a monk who embodies and imparts the Dharma. When that time comes, fortunate son, devote yourself to the one who teaches you Prajnaparamita, honor them as your teacher, and revere their

teachings. Even if you witness them indulging in sensory pleasures, understand that bodhisattvas are masters of skillful means, and never let your faith waver.”

Upon hearing these words, Sadāprarudita began his journey eastward. However, he had not traveled far when he realized that he had neglected to ask the voice how far he needed to go—leaving him clueless about how to find his Prajnaparamita teacher. Overwhelmed with sorrow, he wept and vowed to endure exhaustion, hunger, thirst, and sleeplessness, day and night, until he had received the teachings. His grief was akin to that of a mother who has lost her only child. Consumed by a single thought, he kept asking himself: When would he finally hear the Prajnaparamita? He was so sad that he wept for seven days and seven nights.

At that moment, a tathagata appeared before him, praising him for his pursuit of the Dharma. The tathagata said, “Very well, very well! Fortunate son, when countless tathagatas were bodhisattvas, they underwent great trials to hear the Prajnaparamita, just as you are doing now.”

“Five hundred leagues from this place,” the tathagata continued, “lies a city known as the City of Fragrant Breezes. Constructed from the seven precious materials, it is surrounded by five hundred parks and endowed with every perfection. At the heart of the city, where four grand avenues intersect, stands the abode of Bodhisattva Dharmodgata. This abode, also made of the seven precious substances, spans a league in circumference. Within its gardens and other enchanting spaces, the great being Dharmodgata resides with his retinue. Accompanied by 68,000 women, he revels in the pleasures of the five senses, which he commands with complete mastery, joyfully engaging in whatever brings him delight.”

Throughout all time—past, present, and future—he imparts the teachings of the Prajnaparamita to those who reside there. Go to him, and you will have the opportunity to listen to his teachings on the Prajnaparamita!”

Sadāprarudita became completely absorbed in what he had just heard. Right where he stood, he could hear Bodhisattva Dharmodgata expounding the Prajnaparamita. He experienced various states of mental concentration. In his vision, he perceived the diverse realms in the ten directions of the universe and saw countless buddhas teaching the Prajnaparamita. These buddhas praised Dharmodgata before vanishing from sight.

Overflowing with joy, faith, and devotion for Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, Sadāprarudita wondered how he could meet him.

“I am poor,” he reflected. “I possess nothing to offer him—no garments, no jewels, no perfumes, no garlands, nor any other tokens of respect for a qualified teacher. Therefore, I should sell the flesh of my own body and use the proceeds to honor Bodhisattva Dharmodgata. Throughout countless cycles of samsara, I have sold my flesh innumerable times, and I have been torn apart and annihilated in the hells to which my own desires led me—yet never for the sake of receiving such profound teachings or honoring such a sublime teacher!” So, Sadāprarudita was determined to sell his body.

When passing through a wealthy and beautiful city, he walked to the center of the marketplace and began shouting, “Who needs a man? Who will buy a man?” However, envious of Sadāprarudita’s dedication to the Dharma despite his hardships, Mara made everyone deaf to his cries.

Mara thought, “When Sadāprarudita hears the Prajnaparamita, he will undoubtedly benefit all sentient beings and help them attain enlightenment. As a result, the population of evil spirits will diminish. There’s no way I’ll allow him to do this.”

Therefore, nobody was able to hear Sadāprarudita’s words, except for a merchant’s daughter. Due to her vast merit accumulated from previous lives, she was immune to the manipulations of the evil spirits.

Unable to find anyone to buy him, Sadāprarudita retreated to a corner, where he sat crying, tears streaming down his face. He thought, “What wrongdoings have I committed that I can’t even sell my body for money?”

Indra, King of the gods, decided to test Sadāprarudita’s determination. Disguised as a young brahmin, he approached Sadāprarudita and said, “I don’t need an entire person. I only need some human flesh, fat, and bone marrow for an offering. If you can provide these, I will pay you for them.”

Filled with joy, Sadāprarudita took a sharp knife and sliced into his right arm, causing blood to gush out. He then cut the flesh from his right thigh and was about to break the bones against a wall when the daughter of a wealthy merchant, observing from the upper floor of her house, hurried down to him.

“Noble one, why are you causing yourself such suffering?” she inquired.

[If Sadāprarudita’s story were made into a film, it would be very inspiring to watch. During the summer break of 1998, we referenced *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni* and adapted the story of Prince Siddhar-

tha into a play. We also created a theatrical piece about the twelve deeds of Buddha Shakyamuni. We invited a professional director and rehearsed for a month.

The director wanted to add some romantic subplots, but I stopped him and said, “The audience mainly consists of monastics. It may not be appropriate to include romantic themes.”

The director said, “No way! We must add those plots; otherwise, the story will be quite dull.”

Nevertheless, I insisted and didn’t allow the director to revise the stories told in the sutras. However, she had her reasons for making such a suggestion. To meet market demand, many films with Buddhist themes included scenes that were not always appropriate.

Many Buddhists have tried to present Buddhist stories on stage in their own ways. Recently, I watched a video with a captivating tagline on its CD cover. Intrigued, I started to watch it. The video featured two or three actors who continuously sang on stage, and that was it. What a simple way to tell the story! If this were considered a play, I could direct it as well.

During our Vajra Entertainment Dharma Assembly, I used to direct theater pieces on the *Life Stories of Ksitigarbha*, *Journey to the West*, *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*, and others. Some Dharma fellows still visit the place of the performances and proudly tell others, “I used to act in this role or that role right here.”

In fact, it would be wonderful if one day those stories were filmed, as they could bring us joy and faith in the Buddha and the great bodhisattvas. In the West, there are a few well-known Buddhist films that combine worldly plots with transcendental meanings. Through this skillful approach, many people can grasp the greatness of the Buddha and the Dharma, and they are more likely to develop compassion toward sentient beings. How wonderful!]

He expressed his desire to sell his flesh as an offering to Bodhisattva Dharmodgata. When the merchant’s daughter asked about the benefits he hoped to gain from this act, Sadāprarudita replied, “He will teach me the skillful methods of the bodhisattvas and the Prajnaparamita. By mastering these teachings, I will attain omniscience, embody the many qualities of a Buddha, and be able to share the invaluable Dharma with all beings.”

[What Sadāprarudita listed is very important to us. Why do we pursue the

Dharma? Some people have no clue at all. In the long run, it's about two things: attaining omniscience like the Buddha did and sharing the precious Dharma with all beings. Of course, it is fine if you want to be happy and healthy, but that is not the ultimate goal.]

The merchant's daughter, due to her roots of merit from previous lifetimes, felt her hair stand on end and was filled with overwhelming joy upon hearing the benefits of pursuing the Prajnaparamita. "Certainly," the girl said, "it is undeniable that each of those qualities deserves an offering as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges. However, I beg you not to harm yourself in this way! I will provide you with everything necessary to pay homage to Bodhisattva Dharmodgata and will personally accompany you to meet him. By doing this, I will also plant the seeds of merit, allowing me to attain the same qualities in the future."

[The merchant's daughter was a great support to Sadāprarudita during the journey. Similarly, when traveling to Larung Gar, some Dharma friends met a person who said, "It's all OK. Go take ordination and focus on your practice. I will support your expenses, but you have to take me with you. I will follow you."]

After she finished speaking, Indra returned to his true form and addressed Sadāprarudita, saying, "I am Indra, King of the gods. I came to test your determination. Whatever you desire, I will grant it—simply ask."

"Grant me the supreme qualities of the buddhas!" Sadāprarudita responded.

"That is beyond my power," Indra replied.

"Bestow upon me the Prajnaparamita!" Sadāprarudita requested.

"It doesn't fall within my domain either. How about I make your body whole again?" said Indra.

"In that case, you need not concern yourself with restoring my body," said Sadāprarudita. "I shall invoke the power of the truth. By the blessings of the Buddha's prophecy that I will never return to samsara, by the truth of my unwavering and supreme determination, and by the truth of my words, may my body be restored to its original state!"

As soon as he spoke these words, his body was completely healed, returning to its former condition. Then, Indra vanished.

Sadāprarudita accompanied the merchant's daughter to her parents' home, where he shared his story with them. They generously supplied him with all the

materials required for his offering. Afterward, he, along with the merchant's daughter, her parents, five hundred female attendants, and their entire entourage, traveled eastward in carriages until they reached the City of Fragrant Breezes.

[What a good family! Some Chinese Dharma friends at Larung Gar, on the other hand, find it impossible to gain their parents' permission and support. Particularly, some nuns weep as much as Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita during their pursuit of the Dharma. At first, they weep because their families won't allow them to pursue the Dharma; in the middle, they weep because they cannot find a teacher; then they weep because they can find nowhere to live after following a teacher; and finally, they weep because winter is so freezing cold after they find a cabin to live in.

In comparison, Dharma friends who live in cities don't weep as much as those at Larung Gar. Of course, you may still weep because your family is against your pursuit of the Dharma, your work is overwhelming, your life is stressful, and for other sufferings.

Nevertheless, the hardships you undergo when pursuing the Dharma differ from the trials you experience in worldly life. They are extremely worthy and meaningful. Sometimes I felt so exhausted, both physically and mentally, when traveling to teach or receive the Dharma. But when I thought about passing the Dharma to others or receiving the teachings myself, my fatigue vanished instantly.

Therefore, our mind is very powerful. Yesterday, I traveled to a distant monastery to give a teaching. I left at 6 a.m., delivered the teaching, met many people, and returned at 2 a.m. the next morning. It was very tiring, but I kept reminding myself, "This is neither for my own livelihood nor for fame or status. I want to pass on this great Dharma bit by bit to living beings."

Whenever I reflect on this, I feel energized, and my fatigue dissipates. Therefore, in your process of seeking or propagating the Dharma, when you encounter challenges and difficulties, comfort yourself by contemplating how precious and extraordinary the Dharma is.]

Upon arriving, he saw Bodhisattva Dharmodgata teaching the Dharma to a vast assembly of thousands. The sight filled him with profound joy akin to the bliss a monk experiences in deep meditative absorption. The entire group descended from their carriages, adorned themselves in their finest attire, and approached Dharmodgata to pay their respects.

[Once, I noticed a laywoman adorn herself before meeting her guru. She first

put on gold and silver rings, followed by bracelets, and last layers of clothing. She is from an ethnic minority group, and she said, “According to our tradition, we must meet the guru wearing our most beautiful clothing and ornaments.” Thus, she dressed like a queen and met her guru wearing a five-sided crown. From Sadāprarudita’s story, we know that what she did was reasonable.]

At that time, Dharmodgata had constructed a temple dedicated to the Prajnaparamita. The temple was made from seven precious materials and adorned with red sandalwood, embellished with intricate pearl designs. In each of the four directions, wish-fulfilling gemstones served as lamps, while silver incense burners released the fragrant smoke of black aloe-wood incense as offerings. At the heart of the temple stood four jeweled coffer each containing volumes of the Prajnaparamita, written in lapis lazuli ink on golden pages.

Witnessing both gods and humans presenting their offerings, Sadāprarudita, along with the merchant’s daughter and five hundred attendants, made magnificent offerings as well.

Unaware of the contents of the coffer, Sadāprarudita asked Indra, who informed him, “These are the volumes of the Prajnaparamita, the Mother of all the buddhas, which brings the perfect enlightenment of all the tathagatas and the realization of all the bodhisattvas.”

Overjoyed, Sadāprarudita wished to open the coffer and examine the text, but Indra told him that Bodhisattva Dharmodgata had sealed the coffer with seven precious substances, preventing easy access. Sadāprarudita then, accompanied by others, divided the offerings into two parts: one part was offered to the Prajnaparamita, and the other to Bodhisattva Dharmodgata.

[Here it is said that the volumes of the Prajnaparamita were placed in the most luxurious and elegant temple. Therefore, if possible, we should also place the volumes in the finest jeweled coffer within the best shrine room. We must not simply leave the volumes lying around. Many novice Buddhists regard Buddhist scriptures as no different from newspapers or ordinary books, leading them to place the scriptures haphazardly, which is inappropriate. Only by venerating and respecting the scriptures can we truly attain their benefits and cultivate good qualities in our minds.]

They then went to Dharmodgata, who was teaching his disciples, and paid

homage to him by presenting all their offerings. The merchant's daughter and her attendants took the bodhisattva vows.

Magically, the offerings rose into the air and transformed into an elegant canopy that hovered over Dharmodgata. Seeing this, Sadāprarudita and the others were filled with great joy, and they all generated sublime bodhicitta. They vowed to hear the Prajnaparamita, attain perfect enlightenment, and benefit countless beings in the ten directions with the teachings of the Prajnaparamita, just as Dharmodgata had done.

Sadāprarudita asked Dharmodgata where the buddhas he had previously seen came from and where they would go. Dharmodgata responded with a chapter explaining that buddhas neither come nor go, stating that the Buddha cannot be seen through physical form, and that the true tathagata is the Dharmakaya, which neither comes nor goes.

Upon hearing this, Sadāprarudita's mind remained in a non-abiding state. He again made offerings to Dharmodgata for imparting such profound teachings.

At dusk, when the teaching was over, Dharmodgata rose from his seat and returned to his quarters, where he maintained a continuous state of meditative concentration for seven years.

During this entire time, Sadāprarudita, the merchant's daughter, and the five hundred servants gave up both sitting and lying down, remaining on their feet at all times. Whether standing still or moving about, their minds entirely dwelled on the moment when Dharmodgata would emerge from his meditative concentration and resume teaching the Dharma.

[This is the key! We must endure trials for the sake of the Dharma. Some people cannot endure seven months, seven days, seven hours, or even seven minutes, let alone seven years.]

As the seven-year period drew to a close, Sadāprarudita heard the announcement that Bodhisattva Dharmodgata would arise from his meditative state and resume teaching in just seven days. Alongside the five hundred serving maidens, he meticulously cleaned the area where Dharmodgata was to teach, sweeping the ground for a league in every direction. However, when Sadāprarudita began sprinkling water to keep the dust from rising, Mara intervened, causing all the water to vanish.

[In the process of pursuing the Dharma, the more profound teaching one

seeks, the more agitated Mara becomes, and the more obstacles one encounters. One person falls ill during retreat; another faces unfavorable conditions on the way to receiving teachings from his guru, forcing him to cancel the trip. Yet another has received the teaching but is constantly unwell, in a bad mood, disturbed by others, and so on. All these challenges are caused by Mara.

At such times, you must remain persistent and resolute so that Mara will feel ashamed. Therefore, each time you practice a high teaching, you will encounter many unpleasant situations, which is normal. You should have a better understanding of this now that you have completed your study of the *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*.]

Sadāprarudita couldn't find any water, and he thought, "Throughout beginningless samsara, I have lost my life countless times for indulging in the pleasures of the five senses, but I have never done so for receiving a teaching like this. Therefore, I must offer my blood today."

Sadāprarudita slit his veins and spilled his blood onto the ground, and the merchant's daughter, along with her five hundred attendants, did the same. Indra, King of the gods, then transformed their blood into the red sandalwood of the god realms.

Then Sadāprarudita and others set up the lion throne. The merchant's daughter and her five hundred attendants each removed a clean robe and covered the seat.

[Sadāprarudita and the others had been waiting for seven years since hearing the part of the chapter that explains that buddhas neither come nor go. In contrast, many people today tell their teachers, "Are you going to give me the teaching? If not, I am leaving soon, and I have already bought my ticket." Such individuals are certainly not like Sadāprarudita, who stood for seven years and never said, "I don't want to wait."]

Finally, Bodhisattva Dharmodgata arrived and took his seat upon the lion throne, which Sadāprarudita and the others had meticulously prepared. He began to teach the Prajnaparamita, and as he spoke, Sadāprarudita experienced six million distinct states of concentration and had the direct vision of an endless array of buddhas—a vision that remained with him forever, even in his dreams. It is said that Sadāprarudita now resides in the presence of the perfect Buddha, known as He Who Proclaims the Dharma with Inexhaustible Melodious Voice.

From this story, we should learn how to follow a teacher. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

In order to pursue all the Dharma,
Equally venerate and honor all spiritual teachers.

Whoever can do this will attain all states of realization, as stated in the *Discourse on Meeting of the Father and the Son*:

By following spiritual teachers,
One can attain the immaculate eye of insight.

Sadāprarudita's experience is not a fabricated tale; it truly happened. In another story, the Bodhisattva Asanga had been practicing in retreat for six years but still hadn't had a vision of Maitreya. He was so disappointed in himself that he wanted to give up his practice. So, Asanga left his hermitage. Later, he realized how far he was from Sadāprarudita's determination to undergo trials for the sake of the Dharma. Consequently, Asanga returned to Kukkuṭapada Mountain and resumed his practice.

If time permits, you'd benefit from reading the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāparamita*⁹² and the *Mahāprajñāparamita*.⁹³ After reading this story, many people may feel great joy in studying the Prajñāparamita and following a spiritual teacher. Of course, those who have no affinity with the Prajñāparamita in previous lives, or who have no right views, may feel suspicious or even develop a grave wrong view toward the story.

After all, living beings have different dispositions. As mentioned in the story, when listening to Dharmodgata's teaching on the Prajñāparamita, some listeners attained realization on the spot, while others merely followed the verbal meaning. Therefore, the benefits of hearing the Dharma vary from person to person, and the same story may bring different benefits to different listeners.

Nevertheless, I do hope you are inspired to some extent and develop faith in following the teacher and practicing the Dharma diligently.

⁹² The Chinese version was translated by Kumarajīva.

⁹³ The Chinese version was translated by Master Xuanzang.



Lesson 81

“While following Tilopa, the great pandita Naropa: ... meet his teacher face to face.” [page 157–161]

To each of us, following a spiritual teacher is extremely important in our lifelong pursuit of Dharma. Without the guidance of our teacher, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the nature of all phenomena by relying solely on our own wisdom and capacity. Therefore, devotion to the teacher is the most crucial factor that leads to realization. This is why we often emphasize the paramount importance of following the teacher in our pursuit of the Dharma.

Today, we’ll move to the second story:

2) Naropa became the disciple of Tilopa

Through this story, we learn that when following a teacher, we must obey his orders and never grow weary, regardless of the circumstances.

Naropa (1016–1100) was a historical figure who lived in this world. As we read these stories of great masters, we should recognize that they truly happened. By emulating them, we can also attain the same realization. Please don’t regard their stories as fabricated tales or folklore.

Naropa was an Indian prince who developed renunciation at a young age. Concerned that he would become a monk, his parents did everything they could to prevent him from pursuing a monastic life. Nevertheless, he managed to take ordination at the age of twenty-five and later became a great pandita at Nalanda University.

One day, while Naropa was reading a scripture, an old laywoman appeared and asked whether he could understand the words and grasp their meaning. When she heard Naropa say he could understand the words, the old woman was so delighted that she began to sing and dance. To further impress her, Naropa added that he could also grasp the meaning. The old woman then started to shed tears and cry loudly.

When Naropa asked why she was crying, the old woman replied, “You are honest in saying you understand the words, but you are lying when you claim to grasp the ultimate meaning.”

Naropa asked, “Who can truly grasp the ultimate meaning?”

“Go see my brother Tilopa,” the old lady said. “Request him to teach you the ultimate meaning.” Then she vanished.

So Naropa set out to find Tilopa. Many interesting events occurred along the way, which are detailed in the biographies of Naropa.

At one point, Naropa had to navigate a narrow path between a rushing river and a steep cliff. In the middle of the path lay a leprous woman who had neither hands nor feet. The woman said, “You may either take a detour or cross over me.” With no other option, Naropa stepped over her. In an instant, the woman rose into the air, and an aura surrounded her. She said, “If you are still bound by habitual tendencies and attached to external appearances, how can you find your guru?” The scene then quickly vanished, and Naropa fainted.

When he regained consciousness, he thought with great frustration, “I failed to recognize that person as the guru. From now on, I must venerate each and every person.” He got up and continued his journey, praying in his heart.

As he walked, he encountered a foul-smelling female dog, her body infested with parasites. The dog was in the middle of the road, so he held his breath and jumped over her. The dog rose into the air, and once again, an aura appeared around her. The dog said, “All beings have been your parents. Without a Mahayanist’s compassion, how can you find your guru? When you disparage other beings, how can your guru accept you?” Then the dog disappeared, and Naropa fainted again.

There were many such occurrences during the journey. They were all manifestations of the guru, but Naropa did not recognize any of them.

Finally, he found Tilopa. At that time, Tilopa was roasting live fish as a beggar,

and many yogis living nearby disapproved of his actions. Then Tilopa spat out the fish. With a snap of his fingers, all the fish came back to life and swam back into the lake.

Naropa stepped forward to pay homage to Tilopa, requesting that Tilopa accept him as a disciple. Initially, Tilopa did not accept Naropa. It was only after Naropa's persistent pleas that Tilopa finally agreed to take him under his guidance. Tilopa then brought Naropa along wherever he went but hardly taught him any Dharma.

Later, Naropa endured twelve major and twelve minor hardships. The major hardships occurred once a year when Tilopa would "torture" Naropa and then make him wait a year for teachings. Unable to receive the teachings, Naropa felt very anxious but dared not disturb his guru. In this way, he continued to wait year after year. Consequently, he had been following Tilopa for a long time.

When I first began my monastic life at Larung Gar, I bought *The Life and Teachings of Naropa* in a bookstore, a book that detailed the twelve hardships he endured. There is another version of his biography, but I don't recall the author's name. This version was first translated into English from an original published in Bhutan and then translated into Chinese from the English version. In this version, all the hardships that Naropa faced while following Tilopa are described in detail. Here are some of them:

One day, Tilopa brought Naropa to the top of a nine-story tower and asked, "Is there anyone willing to jump from this height to demonstrate obedience to their Master?"

Naropa thought, "Since no one else is here, he must be speaking to me." Without hesitation, he jumped from the tower, and his body struck the ground, leaving him in excruciating pain and agony.

Tilopa came down and asked, "Are you in pain?"

"It's more than just pain," Naropa moaned. "I feel like a corpse." Yet, after Tilopa bestowed his blessing, Naropa's body was fully restored.

Tilopa then continued their journey with Naropa.

On another occasion, Tilopa commanded, "Naropa, make a fire!"

Once the fire was roaring, Tilopa prepared several long bamboo splinters, coating them in oil and placing them in the flames to harden.

“If you are committed to following your teacher’s commands, you must be prepared to endure trials like this,” Tilopa said as he forced splinters beneath the nails of his disciple’s fingers and toes.

Naropa’s entire body stiffened, and he was overwhelmed with excruciating pain and suffering. Tilopa then walked away, leaving him alone. When he returned days later, he removed the splinters, causing blood and pus to stream from Naropa’s wounds. Tilopa blessed him once more and continued their journey together.

On another occasion, Tilopa said, “Naropa, I am hungry. Go and fetch some food for me.”

Naropa went to a place where a group of farm workers were eating. He begged for a skull-cup filled with soup and returned. Tilopa ate it with great satisfaction, appearing thoroughly pleased.

Naropa thought, “In all the time I’ve served him, I’ve never seen my teacher so happy. Maybe if I ask again, I can get more soup for him.”

He set out once more with the skull-cup in hand. By then, the farm workers had returned to their fields, leaving their leftover soup behind.

“The only option is to steal it,” Naropa decided, so he seized the soup and ran.

However, the workers spotted him. They chased him down, beat him severely, and left him nearly dead. Naropa was in such agony that he couldn’t move for days. Once again, Tilopa arrived, blessed him, and they resumed their journey as before.

There are different accounts of this story:

Tilopa instructed Naropa to fetch more soup and told him, “If they refuse to give, just pour water on their food; if they chase after you, simply draw a symbol of water in the sand; if they don’t back off, just wave your sword.”

In their country, there was a custom: anyone who asked for food a second time would not receive it. So, when the farm laborers saw Naropa returning, they said, “You’ve already taken it,” and refused to give him any more food. Naropa then poured water on their food. A man shouted, “This guy ruined our meal!” A few men heard and chased after Naropa.

As they nearly caught him, Naropa drew a symbol of water in the sand. A lake appeared at that spot, blocking their path. An old woman suggested that they drain the lake. Soon, they found a way to drain it and caught up with him.

Naropa waved his sword, and it instantly transformed into a metal cabin. He hid inside. The old woman told the angry farm laborers to bring coal and bellows and to make a fire around the cabin. After a while, Naropa could not stand the heat, so he rushed out. The farm laborers seized him and beat him almost to death with sticks and rocks.

Later, Tilopa blessed Naropa, and his body was completely healed.

From this story, we learn that we should follow the teacher without any concern for life and limb. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* also states:

Do not cling to your body and life;
Hold your mind firm like a vajra.
Seek the path from the teacher,
And never abandon true faith.

We should not cling to our bodies and lives; instead, we must hold our commitment to following the teacher as steadfast as a vajra and single-mindedly pursue the teacher's path to enlightenment. We must never abandon our true faith; otherwise, we will find it impossible to successfully follow the teacher.

Let's continue with the story of Tilopa and Naropa.

On another occasion, Tilopa said to Naropa, "I need a large sum of money. Go and steal some for me."

Naropa obeyed and attempted to steal from a wealthy man, but he was caught in the act. He was captured, severely beaten, and left for dead. After several days, Tilopa appeared and asked him, "Are you in pain?" When Naropa gave the same response as before, Tilopa blessed him, and they continued their journey together.

Once, Tilopa was sitting by a blazing sandalwood fire when Naropa approached, requesting a teaching. Tilopa said, "If I have a disciple, he will definitely jump into the fire!"

Without a second thought, Naropa jumped into the fire and was severely burned, causing him tremendous pain and suffering.

Tilopa asked, “How do you feel?”

Naropa answered, “This body, formed by the force of my karma, has been burned in the fire, and the pain is excruciating.”

Tilopa touched his body and blessed him.

Once, Tilopa sat down by a dark and deep pool full of leeches and said, “If I have a disciple, he will build a bridge over this pool.” Naropa immediately began to build the bridge.

When he submerged his lower body into the water, he accidentally slipped, and the leeches swarmed over him and bit his body. The loss of blood made him collapse, and his wounds filled with water, chilling him to the bone.

Tilopa asked, “What’s the matter with you, Naropa?”

Naropa answered, “The leeches’ bites have made me exhausted and cold. I cannot control myself. I’m in great pain!”

Tilopa blessed him and healed his body.

Once, Tilopa and Naropa were walking on a grassland when they saw a man carrying a bag. Tilopa told Naropa, “Go chase him!”

Naropa ran after the man. However, the man fled like a phantom, and Naropa couldn’t reach him. Exhausted, Naropa fell to the ground, unable to move.

Tilopa blessed him again.

Once, they encountered a minister who was taking his bride home while she rode on an elephant. Tilopa said, “If I have a disciple, he will pull the bride down and drag her away.”

Without hesitation, Naropa did as instructed. He was then beaten severely by the minister and his entourage, leaving him unable to move.

Tilopa blessed him again.

Once, they met a king with his queen and attendants. Tilopa said, “If I have a disciple, he will knock down the queen and drag her away.”

Naropa obeyed. He was then so brutally attacked by the king and his attendants that he nearly died.

Tilopa blessed him once more.

Once, they met a prince who had just bathed and was adorned with jewels. The prince was in a carriage, surrounded by many guards. Tilopa said, “If I have a disciple, he will drag out this prince and push him around!”

Naropa did as he was told. Then, he was so violently attacked by the guards with arrows, spears, swords, and stones that he nearly lost his life.

Then, Tilopa blessed him again.

Once, Tilopa asked Naropa to find a woman consort. As a monk, Naropa was reluctant to do so, but he still obeyed the guru’s order and found a woman. After a while, Tilopa asked Naropa to offer him the woman, which he did. However, the woman showed no interest in Tilopa and only smiled at Naropa. Tilopa beat her and said, “You don’t care about me! You only like Naropa!”

Naropa didn’t develop any negative views toward Tilopa’s actions. This can be considered a trial of the mind.

Once, Tilopa asked Naropa to make a mandala offering with his body. He asked Naropa to cut his vein and use his blood as the offering liquid, to cut off his head and put it in the middle of the mandala set, and to cut off his limbs and place them near the head as the mandala flowers. Naropa obeyed the order and fainted from loss of blood.

Tilopa blessed Naropa, and his body was completely healed.

Naropa underwent twelve major and twelve minor hardships like these—twenty-four hardships that he had to endure in one lifetime.

[The life stories about how Naropa followed his guru are truly inspiring. Many people today tend to focus solely on the faults of their teachers and nothing else. Of course, there are few gurus today whose realization is as extraordinary as that

of Tilopa, and there are also few disciples like Naropa. As a result, there are fewer and fewer individuals who have attained realization.]

Finally, Naropa had undergone all the hardships.

One day, Tilopa told Naropa, “Go and fetch some water. I’ll stay here and prepare the fire.”

When Naropa returned with the water, Tilopa suddenly stood up from the fire he had been tending, grabbed Naropa’s head with his left hand, and commanded, “Show me your forehead.”

With his right hand, Tilopa removed his sandal and struck Naropa’s forehead with it. The blow rendered Naropa unconscious. When he awoke, the profound wisdom and qualities of his teacher’s enlightened mind had fully awakened within him. In that moment, teacher and disciple became one in realization.

It was the same when Chan Master Huangbo was training Linji, the founder of the Linji school of Chan Buddhism.

Linji asked Master Huangbo, “What is the Dharma about, in general?” He asked three times and received three beatings. Master Huangbo struck him sixty times with a stick, which eventually awakened Linji as one of the great Chan masters in history.

Because of this, the saying goes, “Linji is like a general, while Caodong is like a farmer.”⁹⁴ This shows that the Chan schools also employed extraordinary methods to guide their disciples.

When Chan Master Liaoyi was following his teacher Chan Master Gaofeng, the latter asked Liaoyi to solve the kōan, or succinct paradoxical statement, of “being one with all things.”

Liaoyi saw snow falling on a pine tree, and feeling inspired, he wrote a verse and presented it to Master Gaofeng for verification of his realization. Without saying a

⁹⁴ In both China and across the globe, only the Linji and Caodong schools of Chan Buddhism maintain an unbroken lineage today. The saying, “Linji is like a general, while Caodong is like a farmer,” captures the essence of their distinct styles. Linji’s approach is bold and sweeping, like the sharp release of an arrow. Through sudden shouts and strikes, it severs attachments and disrupts mental habits with explosive force—thus earning the title of “General.” In contrast, Caodong’s method is more subtle and refined, like a farmer’s careful tending of the land. With gentle words and measured conversations, it nurtures wisdom in a way that resembles the nourishing effect of spring rain, hence the title of “Farmer.”

word, Gaofeng began to beat him severely with a stick, causing Liaoyi to fall from a steep cliff. Covered in bruises and wounds, Liaoyi endured tremendous pain for seven days and seven nights, after which he attained sudden realization. At that moment, Liaoyi blurted out:

The earth, mountains, and rivers are covered with snow,
Which disappears when the sun shines upon it.
From now on I have no doubt about the Buddhas,
And I make no distinction among south, north, west, and east.

What a great verse! When the sun shines, all the snow melts and vanishes. Likewise, when Liaoyi was blessed by his teacher with a stick, all worldly appearances of impurity disappeared, and the state of purity truly arose within him. At that point, he had no doubt about the vajra words of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and he was free of any conceptualization, including the directions of south, north, west, and east.

I mentioned this story in my book *Footprints on the Journey*, wishing that my guru could strike me with a stick so I could also attain sudden realization. Therefore, according to Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, and Pre-sectarian Buddhism, it is through the guru's extraordinary blessing, along with our devotion and faith, that we can finally recognize the nature of mind.

The twenty-four trials that Naropa experienced were actually Tilopa's profound instructions, serving as skillful means to purify his obscurations. On the surface, these trials seemed like meaningless hardships, far from what anyone would recognize as the Dharma. Tilopa had not spoken a single word of formal teaching, and Naropa had not engaged in any conventional practice—not even a single prostration. Yet, when Naropa encountered Tilopa—an enlightened teacher—he followed every instruction without hesitation, despite the immense challenges. Through this unwavering devotion, his obscurations were purified, and true realization dawned within him.

In fact, there are many similar stories throughout history. A qualified teacher, through extraordinary symbols or blessings, can forcefully eliminate a disciple's karmic obscurations. If the disciple has accumulated sufficient merit from previous lives and possesses enough faith in this life, he can recognize the nature of mind immediately.

That said, if a teacher does not have the same state of realization as Tilopa, he should train his disciples in a more conventional manner. He cannot beat the disciples with a stick every day or ask them to engage in absurd actions. Otherwise, if the teacher instructs a disciple to jump from a nine-story tower and the disciple crashes to death or becomes disabled, his family will undoubtedly sue the teacher.

Generally speaking, it is preferable for a teacher to train his disciples in gentle methods, such as through giving Dharma talks and teaching. Otherwise, if the teacher intentionally strikes a disciple's head with a stick and accidentally hits his temple, the disciple may "faint" forever and never regain consciousness. In such a case, it would be highly irresponsible of the teacher. A qualified teacher would never beat a disciple to death.

However, anything can happen during this degenerate age. Some so-called teachers have not attained even the slightest realization yet recklessly imitate the extraordinary actions of a Mahasiddha. Such teachers think that anyone can act this way simply because they are a teacher, which is misguided. Therefore, it is important to be especially cautious when following a teacher.

If the teacher we follow possesses the required qualities, then among all practices, there is none greater than faithfully obeying the teacher. The benefits of such devotion are immeasurable, as stated in Nagarjuna's *Discourse on the Ten Stages*:

When pursuing wisdom from others,
One should not hold concern for one's own body and life.

In fact, even to gain worldly knowledge, one may have to undergo certain trials, let alone attain the wisdom of supreme Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, when studying the Dharma, we should not be deterred by any obstacles. With the teacher's blessings, a persevering and determined practitioner will progress on the path to liberation.

If we follow the teacher in accordance with the Dharma, it will not be difficult for us to have a vision of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and to obtain all the great qualities. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

Follow a spiritual teacher,
Then you can swiftly have the vision of all buddhas.

Conversely, if a person does not follow the teacher properly and lacks faith, they often develop wrong views and negative thoughts. This taints the person's mindstream, making it difficult for the qualities born from the Dharma to arise.

It is important to understand that wisdom does not arise without cause. In ancient India, if a person wanted to receive supreme instruction from a teacher, they would exchange their material wealth or service for the teaching. Aside from this, there was no other way.

Today, it is easier to find opportunities to study the Dharma. However, without devotion, joy, and pure perception toward our guru, we cannot receive the blessings of the Dharma. Therefore, throughout the ages, there has not been a single accomplished master who did not respect their guru.

An outsider may struggle to understand how a qualified disciple follows their guru. However, by following the guru in this manner, the disciple will undoubtedly receive the guru's blessing. As a result, not only will the disciple attain realization, but it will also be easier for them to benefit beings, both directly and indirectly. These aspects are reflected in the actions of some practitioners.

On the other hand, disobeying the teacher, even in the slightest way, is an extremely serious fault. Once, Tilopa instructed Naropa not to accept the role of pandita—gatekeeper at Vikramasila. However, when Naropa later arrived in Magadha, one of the panditas holding that position had passed away. With no one else qualified to debate the tirthikas, they pleaded with Naropa to take on the role of protector of the northern gate. They persisted until he finally agreed. Yet, when a tirthika challenged him to a debate, Naropa argued for days without being able to defeat him. Desperate, he prayed to his teacher until Tilopa eventually appeared, looking at him with an intense gaze.

"You lack compassion. Why didn't you come sooner?" Naropa protested to Tilopa.

"Did I not explicitly forbid you from taking this gatekeeper position?" Tilopa replied. "Still, as you debate, visualize me above your head and make the threatening gesture at the tirthikas."

Naropa followed Tilopa's instructions, won the debate, and ended the arguments of the tirthikas once and for all.

Therefore, when we encounter unfavorable conditions, even if the teacher is

not physically present, we can always visualize them above the crown of our heads. This can eliminate all obstacles. Here is a story about Karma Chagme Rinpoche:

When Karma Chagme Rinpoche was young, a renowned yogi came to his area. This yogi was regarded as a great accomplished master, so one lama was eager to visit him. However, it was said that the visiting yogi was fierce and often scolded or beat people in front of a crowd. The lama felt nervous and asked Chagme Rinpoche for his advice.

Chagme Rinpoche suggested, “I have an idea. We can visualize his guru, Machik Labdron, above the crown of our heads. It is said that this yogi has great clairvoyance, so he would certainly hesitate to scold his guru.” Thus, when the yogi saw Chagme Rinpoche and his lama friend, he was very happy and warmly welcomed them.

What a clever idea! Some accomplished masters seem to enjoy scolding others, causing many people to hesitate or fear visiting them. For instance, Khenpo Chökhypa from Horshul village in Sertar County is a great spiritual teacher, and Khenpo Norpa and I were eager to visit him. However, we were warned that he would scold his visitors harshly, which made us a bit apprehensive.

Once, on our way back to Larung Gar, we decided to visit him. When we arrived, his sangha was on a break, and Khenpo Chökhypa was sitting on his Dharma seat, surrounded by many people. We hesitated to approach him, fearing that if we were scolded in front of so many, we might not be able to handle it. So, we prayed to him from a distance and lacked the courage to come closer. Therefore, teachers behave differently, and some indeed appear stricter.

3) Milarepa became the disciple of Marpa

In the area of Ngari Gunthang, there lived a wealthy man named Mila Sherab Gyaltsen. He had a son and a daughter, and it was the son, Mila Thopa-ga, meaning “Mila Joy to Hear,” who would later become known as Milarepa. While the two children were still young, their father passed away. Their uncle, Yungdrung Gyaltsen, seized all their wealth and property. Left without food or money, the children and their mother endured significant suffering and hardship.

[Many Dharma friends have read the life story of Milarepa, so I won’t elaborate on this introduction. I’ve interviewed many Buddhists with higher education, and

some mentioned that they chose to embrace Buddhism after reading Milarepa's biography. One of them wept for three days and three nights.]

Milarepa studied the skills of casting spells and creating hailstorms under the guidance of the sorcerers Yungton Throgyl of Tsang and Lharje Nupchung. Using these abilities, he caused the collapse of a house, resulting in the deaths of his uncle's son and daughter-in-law, along with thirty-three others. When the local people reacted with anger, Milarepa summoned a devastating hailstorm, leaving the ground covered in hail as deep as three layers of a clay brick wall.

The hailstorm killed many people and animals. Milarepa's mother was very happy to see this, so she sang many songs. Afterward, filled with remorse for his wrongdoings, Milarepa decided to practice the Dharma.

[Recently, some Tibetan lamas residing in India made a film based on the biography of Milarepa, which includes Chinese subtitles. I briefly watched the film. The actor portraying Milarepa was a Khampa man, which differed slightly from the image of Milarepa I had in mind]

Following Lama Yungton's advice, Milarepa sought out a master of the Great Perfection named Rongton Lhaga and requested teachings from him.

The Lama responded, "The Dharma I impart is the Great Perfection. Its root is the supreme beginning, its summit is the supreme attainment, and its fruition is the supreme realization. If one meditates on it during the day, one can attain Buddhahood by that same day; if one meditates on it at night, one can achieve Buddhahood by that very night. For fortunate individuals whose past actions have created suitable conditions, meditation is not even necessary—they can attain liberation simply by hearing its teaching. Since the teaching is for those with the highest spiritual capacity, I will teach it to you."

After receiving the empowerments and instructions, Milarepa thought, "It took me two weeks to achieve the signs of success in casting spells, and just seven days to master making hail. Now, here is a teaching even easier than spells and hail—meditate by day, and one becomes a buddha that day; meditate by night, and one becomes a Buddha that night. If one's past actions have created the right conditions, one might not even need to meditate at all! Given how easily I encountered this teaching, I must surely be one of those with favorable past karma."

With this thought, he chose to stay in bed without meditating, and in doing so, the practitioner and the teaching went their separate ways.

A few days later, the lama spoke to him, “What you told me is true. You are indeed a great sinner, and I may have spoken too highly of my teaching. Because of this, I cannot guide you. Instead, you should go to Trowolung hermitage in Lhodrak. There, you will find Marpa, a direct disciple of the Indian siddha Naropa. He is the greatest of teachers, known as the king of translators, and a master of the New Mantra Tradition. There is no one like him in all the three worlds. You and he share a connection from past lives, so go to him.”

Just hearing Marpa the Translator’s name filled Milarepa’s heart with indescribable joy. His entire body buzzed with bliss, and overwhelming devotion brought tears to his eyes. Eagerly, he set out on his journey, wondering when he would finally meet his teacher in person.

I’ve never been to the hermitage of Trowolung in Lhodrak, but a Dharma friend who visited there showed me some photos. Many places where Milarepa followed Marpa can still be identified, including the spot where Milarepa first met Marpa, who appeared as a farmer. To us, these are sacred places filled with blessings. If you have a chance to go on pilgrimage to Lhasa, you might consider taking a detour to visit those sites, though they seem a bit far from Lhasa.

Through studying the stories of Milarepa, many of you may recognize the importance of following a spiritual teacher. His biography has been translated into English, and many Western practitioners like it so much that the stories have inspired extraordinary faith in them. Of the many biographies in the world, why is Milarepa’s so popular? It undoubtedly carries an invisible blessing power. Therefore, we must not develop wrong views or doubts about his biography.

It is said that a few Dharma masters of Chinese Buddhism in Malaysia and Singapore have openly declared Milarepa’s biography to be invalid. The reason for their claims may be that these masters have not frequently encountered such stories in their Dharma studies. Additionally, they might be influenced by non-human beings, which could explain their seemingly irrational remarks.

Nevertheless, it is not our place to judge the stories of an accomplished being. In fact, Milarepa’s experiences truly occurred; they are not fabricated tales. When you read these stories, you should feel great joy. If possible, you should read Milarepa’s biography and the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*.



Lesson 82

“Now, Marpa and his wife had both had ...the teacher scolded him and gave him a thrashing, and he did not receive the empowerment.” [page 161–164]

We are currently studying the stories of Milarepa following Marpa. These events truly occurred in the past. You can find not only the historical accounts but also the structures at Lhodrak built by Milarepa. Thus, these are not fabricated tales but true stories.

Milarepa eventually attained enlightenment due to his perseverance and the blessings of his guru. Similarly, when we follow the guru in pursuit of the Dharma, we should emulate him without concern for our own life and limb. Regardless of what happens, we must not grow weary. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* states:

In pursuit of the Dharma,
Do not hold concerns about your body and life;
To accumulate sources of merit,
Do not let your mind grow weary.

For most of you, even if I do not cover the stories in class, you should be able to read them in just a few minutes and grasp the plot. While it is indeed important to gain an intellectual understanding of the stories, what matters most is that you feel inspired and reflect on your own life. In doing so, you will be able to suppress and eliminate your afflictions. Even if this cannot be achieved immediately, your sources of merit can gradually grow. If you never study and practice the Dharma, your mind will drift further away from it.

Therefore, whether you are a practitioner living in a city or residing in a secluded place, you need to constantly nourish your mind with the nectar of the Dharma. Otherwise, due to your deep-rooted habitual tendencies combined with the influences of society, worldly education, family, and friends in this life, you may gradually behave less impeccably and eventually stray from the Dharma altogether. In that case, your precious human life will be wasted.

In particular, it is a rare opportunity to encounter a qualified teacher. If you have the opportunity but do not follow them and receive their teachings, once the opportunity vanishes, you will surely regret it. *The Sutra on the Mahayana Practice of the Six Perfections* states:

A spiritual teacher is
Hard to find and rare to encounter;
If one doesn't follow them with faith,
How regretful will one feel for the lost chance?

Therefore, while you are following a spiritual teacher, whether directly or indirectly, you must appreciate the opportunity and ensure that you receive their teachings.

When I reminisce about my life, I feel quite content. Why? Because for a few short decades, I had the great experience of following great teachers. Although I was living a materially poor life, my spiritual life was incredibly rich. This experience is the most meaningful of my life and for many lives to come.

When following a teacher, make sure you never regard them as ordinary. You shouldn't think that merely having a modicum of respect and devotion for them, while not violating social norms and morals, is sufficient. It is wrong to believe you don't need the same level of guru devotion that Milarepa and Naropa had. In fact, Mahayana Buddhism is fundamentally different from worldly knowledge. You should contemplate this repeatedly.

I once read a thick book about the life stories of Milarepa. I was a middle school student at the time and was on sick leave due to a serious health condition. My doctor was a relative of mine, a monk. During my treatment for more than half a month, I asked him to read the book to me every night. The book left a strong impression on me, and I found the stories very inspiring and moving. Now, I have forgotten some plots and retained only a vague memory of certain stories.

Yesterday, we learned that Milarepa went to the hermitage of Trowolung in Lhodrak to find Marpa. Now, let's continue with this story:

Marpa and his wife had been experiencing many extraordinary dreams. From these, Marpa sensed that Milarepa was coming to them. What dreams did they have?

In his dream, Marpa saw his guru Naropa, who handed him a vajra made of lapis lazuli with a bit of dust on the tip and a golden vase full of nectar. Naropa asked Marpa to clean the dust off the vajra with the nectar in the vase and to place the vajra on top of a victory banner. Marpa complied, and the vajra suddenly burst into bright light, illuminating the entire cosmos of a billion worlds, which delighted all buddhas and bodhisattvas and benefited all beings in the six realms.

Marpa woke up in the morning overjoyed when his wife came to share her dream, saying, "In my dream, two young women arrived from Oddiyana, holding a jeweled stupa made of lapis lazuli with a bit of dust on the outside. The young women said, 'It is the will of Naropa that Marpa consecrate this stupa and place it on a mountaintop.' So, you cleaned the stupa and did as instructed. Then, the stupa suddenly radiated light as infinite as that of the sun and the moon. Innumerable stupas appeared within that light."

His wife asked Marpa, "I had such a wonderful dream last night. What does it mean?" Marpa was pleased to know that her dream mirrored his own, but he replied calmly, "Dreams are illusory, so there is nothing to cling to. I don't know what your dream signifies."

[Throughout the story, Marpa appeared ill-tempered and often did not get along with his wife, disciples, and those around him.]

Then Marpa said, "I will plow a field today. Go prepare things for me." His wife replied, "If a great lama like you is doing such a thing, people will gossip. You'd better not go."

Marpa didn't listen to her and said, "Bring me a jug of beer. I am serving it to my guest today." With the jug and a farm tool in hand, he headed down into the valley, pretending to plow a field while waiting for Milarepa to arrive.

Meanwhile, Milarepa inquired about Marpa, but nobody knew who he was. Later, he approached a group of herdsmen, and an old herdsman said he didn't know.

When he arrived at a place called Cholagang, meaning “Pass of Dharma,” he learned that Marpa’s residence was there, and Milarepa considered it a very auspicious omen. Soon after, Milarepa met Marpa’s son, Tarma Dode, who was tending the cattle. Tarma Dode was a charming and intelligent child, who said, “Are you speaking of my father? If so, my father used all our wealth to buy gold and took it to India. He returned carrying many gem-studded volumes of scripture as gifts. He has never worked in the past, but today he is plowing his field.”

Overjoyed, Milarepa continued his journey and eventually saw Marpa, who was plowing. In Milarepa’s eyes, he appeared as a heavyset farmer with a stocky frame, wide-set eyes, and a resplendent air.

The moment Milarepa saw the farmer, he felt an overwhelming, indescribable joy and bliss. For a brief moment, all his ordinary thoughts vanished. However, he didn’t recognize that this man was Marpa.

Milarepa asked, “I am a terrible sinner from the region of Latöin Tsang. I heard Marpa is a greatly renowned teacher, so I would like to request the Dharma from him. Do you know where I can find him?”

Marpa said, “I’ll introduce you to him myself. But first, plow this field for me.” He left Milarepa a jug of beer and walked away. Milarepa finished the beer to the last drop and then got to work. When he was done, Marpa’s son came to call him. “Hey! The lama says you should come home to meet him!”

Milarepa answered, “The farmer has arranged an introduction for me, so I must finish plowing his field.”

Milarepa then turned over the remaining ground in the field. Since the field provided the favorable circumstance for Milarepa to meet Marpa, it was later named Tünkyen, meaning Favorable Circumstance.

[I once saw a photo of Tünkyen taken in the summer. It seems there is no farmland left there; it’s now just a nice piece of land.]

After the field was plowed, Milarepa and Marpa’s son set off together. The farmer whom Milarepa had met earlier now sat upon a seat raised high with three cushions and a carved garuda. He seemed to have just washed his face, but his brows were still unclean. He sat there with a noticeable beer belly.

“This is the same man as before,” Milarepa thought. “Where is the lama seated?” So, he looked around.

Marpa smiled and said, “What are you looking for? I am Marpa. Prostrate yourself!”

Milarepa knelt before Marpa, placing the teacher’s feet on his head, and pleaded, “Master, I am a sinner from the west. I offer you my body, speech, and mind. Please feed and clothe me, teach me the Dharma, and show me how to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime.”

Marpa responded, “It has nothing to do with me that you are a sinner, as I didn’t tell you to commit wrongdoings! What exactly have you done?”

Milarepa then explained his past actions in full detail.

“All right,” Marpa agreed. “That you offer your body, speech, and mind is a good thing. But when it comes to food, clothing, and Dharma, you can’t have all three. You must choose either to have me provide you with food and clothing while you seek the Dharma elsewhere, or to have me teach you the Dharma while you find food and clothing on your own. Make up your mind. If you choose to receive Dharma teachings from me, whether you achieve Buddhahood or not in this life will depend entirely on your own effort and determination.”

[Many people like to offer their body, speech, and mind. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once said, “Upon first meeting me, many people say they offer me their body, speech, and mind, but a few days later they leave without letting me know. They’ve already offered their body to me, but then they take it away with them.”]

“If that’s how it is,” said Milarepa, “then I’ll find food and clothes elsewhere. After all, I came here for the Dharma.”

As Milarepa was carrying his volume of scripture into the shrine room, Marpa said, “Take your filthy book away. It would defile the sacred objects of my shrine.”

Milarepa was surprised and thought, “The lama responded this way because he must know that my text contains works of spell casting and black magic.”

Marpa provided a room for Milarepa, who stayed there for four or five days while he made a sack for carrying his belongings. Meanwhile, Marpa’s wife offered Milarepa delicious food and treated him kindly.

[This is truly a splendid story! When I first read the book, I felt Marpa was quite fierce and difficult to get along with, whereas his wife was full of compassion.

She had no power but a kind heart, and she always shed tears when she saw Milarepa suffer.

I wonder how the actors portrayed their roles in the film about Milarepa. I briefly checked the film the other day but didn't have time to finish it. A good film should capture each character's true personality, as everyone is unique. This is quite important.]

He spent a few days in Lhodrak, traveling through both the upper and lower regions to collect alms. Through this effort, he gathered twenty-one measures of barley. With fourteen measures, he purchased a sturdy copper pot with four handles. He used one measure to buy meat and beer for Marpa. He then placed the remaining six measures of barley in a sack and brought them back to Marpa as an offering, along with the pot.

Milarepa carried the barley into Marpa's room. Exhausted, he unloaded the barley with a loud thud. The load nearly filled the entire room, causing it to tremble.

Marpa stood up and said, "You're quite a strong monk, aren't you? Do you want to bring the whole house down with your bare hands and crush us all? Take that sack of barley outside!" He kicked the sack, and Milarepa had no choice but to carry it out.

Without thinking ill of Marpa, Milarepa said to himself, "It seems that the lama has a fierce temper. I must be mindful of my behavior and offer my service in his presence."

Later, he offered Marpa the empty pot. Marpa held the pot in his hands and stood there for a while, pondering with his eyes closed. At last, tears trickled down his face, and he said, "This is most auspicious! I offer it to the most venerable Naropa."

Marpa made a hand gesture and performed the offering. He then struck the pot with a stick, and it rang loudly. He carried the pot into his shrine room, where he filled it with melted butter, added a wick, and lit it.

At that moment, Milarepa felt an intense longing for the Dharma, so he begged Marpa to impart the Dharma and his oral instructions. Marpa told him, "People from Yamdrok Taklung and Lingpa are attacking many of my faithful disciples who travel from Ü and Tsang to see me. They're stealing their supplies and offerings. I want you to summon hailstorms to stop them. This act is also part of the Dharma, and I'll give you the teachings afterward."

Milarepa must have felt happy upon hearing this, as casting hailstorms was his “expertise,” making it an easy task. Thus, Milarepa summoned devastating hailstorms that struck the regions of Yamdrok Taklung and Lingpa, destroying crops and killing many humans and animals. Then, he went to ask Marpa for the teachings.

“You think I’ll just hand over the precious teachings I worked so hard to bring from India in exchange for a few hailstones? If you truly want the Dharma, prove it. The people of Lhodrak keep causing trouble—they attack my disciples from Nualoro and show me no respect. Use your power to stop them. Once I see that your spell has worked, I’ll share Naropa’s oral instructions with you—the ones that can lead to Buddhahood in this very life.”

[If it were someone else, they might have thought, “Why is this lama like this? He protects his disciples and patrons but harms and curses those who despise him. He is so attached to ‘I,’ ‘me,’ and ‘mine,’ and has no bodhicitta at all.” Many disciples know only a little bit of Dharma and begin to judge the guru’s actions.

When I read this part in the past, I truly admired Milarepa’s pure perception. Milarepa wholeheartedly followed Marpa’s instructions and never entertained a single thought of seeking the guru’s faults. If it were us, we likely wouldn’t have generated faith in Marpa’s actions. Perhaps in the eyes of most people back then, Marpa was merely someone who had received some scriptures from India, who even had a wife and a son. He was a man whose family was not wealthy and who appeared greedy for money and ill-tempered. Therefore, it might have been very difficult to follow him wholeheartedly and obey all his orders.

In fact, in the course of our practice, the guru is the most essential cause that brings us pith instructions, so we should be careful not to ruin this cause. It is definitely impossible to attain realization solely through our own efforts. It is through guru devotion, reverence, and joy that enlightened masters, both past and present, have received mind-to-mind blessings and had the guru’s wisdom merged into their minds.

Once you attain such a state of realization, your speech will align with the Dharma, and even a single sentence from you will bring incredible blessings to infinite living beings. Conversely, if you have no realization whatsoever and are merely an ordinary person, no matter how eloquently you speak, your words will not genuinely benefit living beings. Therefore, being guided by a teacher

and receiving his teachings is the most wonderful and important aspect of every Buddhist's experience on the path. Please take time to deeply reflect on this.]

Milarepa had no choice but to cast spells again. Soon enough, there was an uprising among the hill-folk of Lhodrak, and people fought among themselves. This led to many deaths, including among those who treated Marpa with disrespect. Observing this, Marpa said, "It's true you possess great magic, just as people have told me." From then on, Marpa referred to Milarepa as the "Great Magician."

Given that his evil spell worked, Milarepa asked Marpa for the Dharma teaching.

Marpa scolded him, "What? Are you trying to honor your evil actions by asking for these sacred teachings? I risked my life to find them—they're still warm with the breath of the dakinis. This is no joke! Anyone else would have killed you for this. Now, undo the damage you've done. Bring those villagers back to life and return the harvest to the people of Yamdrok. Only then will I even think about teaching you. If you can't do that, stay away from me!"

Crushed by Marpa's harsh words, Milarepa sat down and cried bitterly. Luckily, Marpa's wife had been comforting him, saying he would definitely receive the Dharma sometime later.

[While Milarepa was following his guru, there were several occasions when he wanted to commit suicide after Marpa refused to give him the Dharma and tormented him severely.]

The next morning, Marpa came to see Milarepa and said, "I was a bit harsh with you last night. Don't feel discouraged. I'll give you the instructions little by little, so just be patient. You're a good worker, so I'd like you to build a house for my son, Tarma Dode. Once it's done, I'll give you the teachings and also provide you with food and clothes."

Milarepa asked, "But what if I die before I receive the Dharma teachings?"

Marpa reassured him, "I will make sure that doesn't happen. My teachings are not just idle boasting. With your extraordinary perseverance, when you put my teachings into practice, it is possible for you to attain Buddhahood in this very lifetime."

After further encouragement in a similar manner, Marpa instructed Milarepa

to construct three houses one after another: a circular house at the foot of the eastern hill, a semicircular one in the west, and a triangular one in the north.

When Milarepa was about halfway through building the house at the foot of the eastern hill, Marpa came and said, "I didn't consider things earlier. Take down this tower to its foundations and return the earth and stones to the places you found them." And so, Milarepa did.

Then Marpa brought Milarepa to a western spur of the mountain and asked him to build a semicircular house. This project was quite challenging, as Milarepa had to carry all the construction materials for miles from below to the mountain-top, which was extremely painful.

Again, when Milarepa was about halfway finished, Marpa came and said, "This will not do either. Here too, carry the earth and stones back to the places you found them." And so, Milarepa complied.

Then Marpa took Milarepa to a northern spur of the mountain and said, "The other day I was drunk and didn't give you proper instructions. Now, build a fine tower right here."

Milarepa replied, "Please consider this carefully. Otherwise, if I build it and you later ask me to tear it down, it would be nothing but toil for me and a waste of your resources."

Marpa said, "No worries. I am not drunk today. I have thought this through. This house will be triangular, so construct it in that shape. You will not need to tear this one down."

Milarepa began building the triangular house. When he had completed about one-third of the construction, Marpa came and said, "Who asked you to build this tower?"

Milarepa was very nervous and answered impulsively, "It was you, my lama, who asked me to do this!"

Marpa denied it, saying, "I don't recall giving any such instructions. Building a tower here is detrimental to my lifespan. If what you said is true, I must be completely crazy! You claim I ordered you to do this, but do you have any witnesses?"

Milarepa had no choice but to tear down the tower and carry the earth and stones back to the places he found them.

While doing so, Milarepa developed an open sore on his back but hesitated to

show it to Marpa, fearing another scolding from his master. He also didn't want to trouble Marpa's wife by making a fuss. So, he didn't show it to anyone and instead wept alone.

Having built the house three times, Milarepa called on his Dharma friends to request teachings from Marpa. He also sought Marpa's wife's help in convincing Marpa to grant him the teachings. She conveyed Mila's request, and Marpa responded, "Feed him well and bring him to me."

Then, Marpa bestowed upon Milarepa the transmission and vows of refuge. "These," Marpa explained, "are the common teachings of the Dharma. But if you seek the uncommon teachings of Vajrayana, you must be prepared to endure great trials, much like Naropa did." He then briefly recounted Naropa's twelve major and twelve minor hardships, adding, "It might be difficult for you to do the same."

Mila was overcome with profound devotion upon hearing Naropa's stories, and tears streamed down his face. With unwavering determination, he vowed to do whatever his teacher demanded.

A few days later, Marpa set out for a walk, taking Milarepa as his attendant. They headed southeast and eventually arrived at a piece of land protected by Marpa's paternal relatives, who forbade any construction there. Marpa instructed Milarepa, "Build me a square gray tower here—nine stories high, with a pinnacle on top, making it ten. You won't need to dismantle this building, and once it's complete, I will give you the teachings. I'll also provide you with the necessary provisions for your retreat practice."

Milarepa considered the proposal and said, "Dear master, you asked me to build a house, and I constructed it three times, only to tear it down each time. The first time, you said it wasn't well planned; the second time, you said you were drunk and didn't plan it properly; the third time, you said you forgot giving me the order and asked who my witness was. May I invite your wife to be my witness this time?" Marpa agreed, so he asked his wife to act as the witness and promised that he wouldn't tear the tower down.

While Milarepa was working on the foundation, Marpa's three senior disciples passed by. For fun, they rolled a huge stone over to him, which Milarepa used in the foundation. After completing the first two stories, Marpa visited and noticed the stone. He inquired about its origin, and Milarepa explained how it had been brought by the other disciples.

Marpa became furious and shouted, “My disciples, who are the yogis practicing the generation and perfection stages, are not here to serve you! Remove that stone immediately and return it to where it came from!”

Milarepa said, “But you invited your wife to attest to this project, and you promised not to tear down the tower.”

Marpa answered, “I am not asking you to tear down the entire structure. You just need to remove the stone and return it to the place it came from.”

Milarepa took apart the entire tower, starting from the top. After removing the large foundation stone, he returned it to its original location. Marpa then instructed him, “Now, bring it back and place it where it was in the foundation.”

Milarepa was puzzled and asked, “But you said I shouldn’t use this rock.”

Marpa answered, “It’s not that I don’t want this rock. I want you to bring the rock to the construction site instead of taking advantage of others’ labor.”

So, Milarepa carried it back to the site and placed it exactly as it had been before.

While Milarepa was laying the foundation on the mountain spur, Marpa’s relatives convened and said, “Marpa is constructing fortifications on the oath-bound mountain; we must protect our land.” Some expressed their concerns: “Marpa has lost his senses. He has a strong young man erecting towers on every outcropping and mountain spur without any clear plan. When these structures are only half-finished, Marpa asks the young man to dismantle them and return the earth and stones to their original places. He will surely do the same with this one. If he doesn’t, we are justified in defending our land. Let us watch to see if he tears it down or not.”

This time, Marpa didn’t order Milarepa to tear down the tower. Milarepa continued his construction, completing up to the seventh floor, but by then, an open sore had developed on his hip.

Marpa’s relatives remarked, “It appears he is not going to tear it down. The first ones he demolished were merely a cover for the construction of this one. We will destroy it ourselves.” With that, they gathered their forces. In response, Marpa conjured miraculous emanations, filling the tower inside and out with a legion of armored soldiers. Terrified, the relatives refrained from attacking. Eventually, they

approached Marpa in private to pay their respects and seek his forgiveness. In time, they all became Marpa's patrons.

Then, Marpa instructed Milarepa to stop building the tower and instead construct a temple featuring a twelve-pillared hall and a raised sanctuary. Milarepa completed the temple, but the labor caused a painful sore to develop on his lower back.

At that time, Meton Tsonpo of Tsangrong requested the Samvara empowerment from Marpa, and Tsurton Wange of Dol asked for the Guhyasamaja empowerment. Hoping his hard work had earned him the right to receive empowerment, Milarepa joined the assembly on both occasions. However, instead of receiving the empowerments, he was met with harsh blows, scolding, and expulsion from Marpa on both occasions.

Seeing this, Marpa's wife felt very sorry for Milarepa, so she comforted him, saying, "The lama often declares that the Dharma teachings he brought back from India are meant for the benefit of all beings. Even if a dog were to come before him, he would teach it the Dharma and dedicate the merit of that action. I don't understand why he won't accept you, but please don't harbor any wrong thoughts about him."

Despite his back being one huge sore, oozing blood and pus from three places, Milarepa kept working, carrying the baskets of earth in front of him instead.

Later, when Ngokton Chodor of Shung requested the Hevajra empowerment from Marpa, out of compassion, Marpa's wife gave Milarepa a large piece of turquoise⁹⁵ from her personal inheritance. When Marpa's wife got married, her family had heard that Marpa was ill-tempered. Worried that she would encounter difficulties in life, her family secretly gave her the turquoise and asked her not to show it to anyone.

[This is similar to some householders who secretly deposit money in their bank accounts without their partners knowing about it.]

Milarepa used the turquoise as his offering for the empowerment and placed himself among the crowd of recipients. Marpa examined the turquoise and asked, "Where did you get this?"

"Your wife gave it to me," Milarepa replied.

⁹⁵ In another account, it was described as a ruby.

Marpa said, “Everything my wife has is mine, so this turquoise is mine! Why are you using my possessions to make an offering to me? What impudence!”

Once again, Marpa scolded him, beat him, and prohibited him from attending the empowerment.



Lesson 83

“This time he felt that there was no further doubt: ... That our minds may be tamed by the Dharma.” [page 164–166]

Let’s continue with Milarepa’s stories. Someone mentioned yesterday that I should finish the stories in one go; otherwise, it might be difficult for listeners to re-engage, but I don’t think that’s an issue. It’s like a TV series with many episodes, where each episode ends at a critical moment that encourages continuous viewing.

Yesterday, we learned that Milarepa wanted to participate in the Hevajra empowerment requested by Ngokton Chodor of Shung, but Marpa denied him permission and even scolded his wife for offering help to Milarepa. Consequently, Milarepa was turned away and did not receive the empowerment. At that moment, Milarepa thought, “Without a doubt, I will never receive any teachings.” Seeing this, Marpa’s wife felt deeply saddened and devised a plan to persuade Marpa to grant the teachings to Milarepa.

Here are the details of how Marpa’s wife specifically assisted Milarepa.

When she learned that Marpa was going to give the Hevajra empowerment, she devised a scheme, hoping it would help Milarepa obtain the Dharma from Marpa.

She instructed Milarepa to go to a place where Marpa would see him and then pretend to leave. Milarepa followed her instructions. He cried while packing his belongings and carrying a small sack of tsampa flour, while Marpa’s wife pretended to try to prevent him from leaving.

Witnessing this, Marpa stormed into the room, furious, and struck Milarepa. “You already offered me your body, speech, and mind when you first came to see me. Where do you think you’re going now? I am the master of your body, speech, and mind, and I could tear them into a hundred pieces. If you intend to leave despite this, explain why you are carrying the tsampa from my house,” he yelled.

Then Marpa grabbed the sack of tsampa flour. Milarepa was in great despair, but he dared not tell Marpa he was only pretending. He went to his room, weeping.

Next, Milarepa resolved to leave for good. This time he departed with only his clothes and books, without any tsampa flour. Along the way, Milarepa remembered the kindness of Marpa’s wife and the fact that he hadn’t said farewell to her, which filled him with sadness. Around noon, he begged for some tsampa flour and then borrowed a cooking pot to boil water.

As Milarepa returned the cooking pot, the owner said to him, “You seem like a young man capable of working. Instead of begging, consider reciting scriptures if you can read. If you cannot read, then work as a servant, and you will receive both food and clothing. Do you know how to read?”

“I do know how to read, though I don’t do it often,” Milarepa answered.

“That is excellent,” the man said. “In that case, recite scriptures in my home for five or six days, and I shall pay you.”

Milarepa was overjoyed.

Then, this family in Lhodrak Khok hired Milarepa to recite the *Transcendent Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses*. While reading, he came to the story of Sadāprarudita, which inspired him. He thought, “Sadāprarudita was as penniless as I am, but for the sake of the Dharma, he was able to renounce life and limb. He was certain to die if he gave up his heart, yet he was still resolved to sell it. Compared to him, I have hardly suffered at all for the Dharma.”

Milarepa realized that, for the sake of the Dharma, he must endure any hardship and please Marpa by fulfilling any orders given to him. He thought, “As long as I continue serving my teacher, it’s possible he will grant me the Dharma. If he does not, his wife has promised to help me find another teacher.” Finding the courage to return, Milarepa set off once again.

However, Marpa greeted him with nothing but harsh words and physical punishment again. Marpa instructed him to complete the remaining three stories

of the tower, stating that unless Milarepa finished the project, he wouldn't grant him the oral instructions.

Unable to respond, Milarepa went to see Marpa's wife, saying, "The Lama still refuses to grant me the Dharma. He told me he would only teach me after I completed the construction. He promised this before, but he has never truly granted me the Dharma. I am uncertain whether he will keep his promise this time. Please allow me to return to my village." With that, Milarepa gathered his belongings and prepared to leave.

Marpa's wife stopped him, saying, "In that case, I will find a way for you to obtain the Dharma from Ngokpa, a senior disciple of the lama who possesses the oral instructions. Stay a little longer and pretend to work." Grateful for her help, Milarepa agreed to stay and work.

Venerable Naropa had a custom of preparing an extensive tsok offering on the tenth day of the lunar month, which Marpa always observed. A few days later, on the tenth day, Marpa's wife prepared three large measures of beer from one khal load of barley. One measure of beer was strong, one moderate, and one weak.

During the tsok offering, Marpa's wife made Marpa drink plenty of the strong beer while the resident disciples consumed the moderate beer, and she and Milarepa drank the weak beer. Eventually, all the resident disciples became drunk, as did Marpa.

When Marpa was quite drunk and fell into a deep sleep, his wife took his seal, Naropa's six ornaments, and a ruby rosary from their home. She prepared a letter that mimicked Marpa's handwriting and affixed his seal to it. Next, she wrapped the items in a fine cloth, sealed the package with wax, and handed it to Milarepa, saying, "Act as if these were entrusted to you by the Lama. Present them to Lama Ngokpa and request the Dharma. Hurry and go!"

Milarepa prostrated before Marpa's wife and set off to see Lama Ngokpa. When he arrived, he noticed from a distance that Lama Ngokpa was teaching, so he performed prostrations. Lama Ngokpa saw him and told his disciples, "This is the manner of homage used by disciples in the lineage of Lama Marpa. His arrival is auspicious. He will become a master of all the Dharma."

Then Milarepa handed the letter and other items to Lama Ngokpa, who was very happy to receive those sacred objects. Before granting Milarepa the oral instructions, Lama Ngokpa said, "Many disciples from Kham, Dakpo, Kongpo,

and Yarlung have come to me, reporting that evil men from Yepo and Yemo in Dol are stealing their Dharma provisions. Bring a hailstorm upon those men, and I will grant you empowerment and oral instructions.”

Hearing this, Milarepa felt very sad, thinking, “How miserable is the life I am living! I cannot obtain the Dharma, and I am destined to perform evil deeds! I am fed up with casting hailstorms, which is such a heinous crime. But if I don’t cast hailstones, it will amount to breaking the lama’s command, and I will not receive the Dharma.” So, he had no choice but to obey the command and cast a hailstorm.

When the hailstones began to fall, an old woman was weeping, saying, “What shall I eat when my crops are destroyed by hail?” Feeling empathetic, Milarepa asked the old woman where her field was and then protected it with a special blessing. Her field remained intact. It was said that thereafter, her field was never hit by hailstorms, so she no longer had to pay lamas to perform anti-hailstorm rituals.

After the hailstorm ended, Milarepa gathered many corpses of birds and mice and carried them in his robe. He piled the corpses in a heap before Lama Ngokpa and said, “Precious lama, I came here for the genuine Dharma but have committed only evil deeds. Look upon me, a terrible sinner, with compassion.” Milarepa then wept.

Lama Ngokpa reassured him, “You need not worry. In the lineage of Naropa and Maitripa, we possess an oral instruction that can enable even the gravest sinners to swiftly attain Buddhahood. All the beings lost to the hailstorm will, in the future, be reborn as the first members of your retinue in your pure realm once you achieve Buddhahood. Until then, rest assured that, by my power, they will not take rebirth in a lower realm. If you doubt my words, watch this.”

After a brief moment of contemplation, he snapped his fingers, and instantly, all the corpses revived. Some soared into the sky, while others hurried across the ground, each returning to their homes.

Seeing this, Milarepa was in awe of the lama’s incredible blessings. Great joy and admiration welled up in him, and he wished he could have killed more so that more beings could have been liberated by the lama.

Lama Ngokpa then gave Milarepa the empowerment and oral instructions. However, when Milarepa tried to meditate, he achieved no results because he lacked his teacher Marpa’s permission.

Lama Ngokpa was surprised that Milarepa experienced no results from his

practice, so he began to question whether Milarepa had received Marpa's consent. Milarepa was scared but dared not tell the truth.

Later, a letter from Marpa arrived at Ngokpa's residence. Marpa ordered Milarepa to return with Lama Ngokpa. Lama Ngokpa brought all his household items with him except for an old goat with a broken leg and presented them as offerings to Marpa. Marpa told Lama Ngokpa that in order to receive the most important profound empowerment and oral instructions, he had to offer everything he owned, including the crippled old goat; otherwise, he wouldn't receive the Dharma. Lama Ngokpa had no choice but to return home and carry the old goat on his back. He then offered the goat to Marpa.

A few days later, during a tsok offering, Marpa sat with a long acacia-wood stick resting at his side. He stared directly at Lama Ngokpa and interrogated him, "Why did you grant empowerment and oral instructions to this evil Great Magician?" As he spoke, Marpa glanced at the stick and was about to reach for it.

Terrified, Lama Ngokpa prostrated himself, saying, "Precious Lama, you instructed me in your letter to confer empowerment upon the Great Magician and to teach him the oral instructions, along with the ornaments of Naropa and his ruby rosary. I have fulfilled your command and, as such, I feel neither shame nor regret and do not believe I deserve reprimand or blame. I hope you can understand this."

Marpa then pointed a menacing finger at Milarepa, asking, "Where did you get those objects?" Milarepa's heart ached as if it were being torn out, and he was too terrified to utter a word. With a trembling voice, he eventually answered, "Your wife gave them to me."

Marpa jumped up, grabbed the acacia-wood stick, and went to strike his wife. Anticipating this, she had already gotten up and moved some distance away, where she now sat. She then fled inside the shrine room and shut the door. Marpa yelled in anger and scratched the door several times with the stick before finally returning to his seat.

[It is truly important to maintain pure perception toward the guru. Otherwise, if we were present at the scene, we might have regarded Marpa as inferior to an ordinary householder, rather than recognizing his actions as those of a great, realized Mahamudra master.]

Milarepa reflected, "With my negative karma, not only do I endure suffering

due to my grave faults and obscurations, but I have also brought difficulties upon Lama Ngokpa and my teacher's wife. Since I'm merely accumulating more harmful deeds without receiving any teachings, it would be better to end my life." As he prepared to take his own life, Lama Ngokpa intervened to stop him.

Lama Ngokpa told him, "Don't do such a thing! You must understand that, according to the Vajrayana teachings, our aggregates, constituents, and sense fields are deities. Performing transference before it is time is equivalent to committing the offense of killing a deity. Taking one's own life is an even graver sin. Even in the Sutrayana teachings, there is no act more negative than suicide. Therefore, I urge you to heed these warnings and abandon all thoughts of suicide. There is still a chance that the lama will provide you with the Dharma. If he does not, you will certainly be able to obtain it from another lama."

When Marpa calmed down, he asked Milarepa and Lama Ngokpa to come over. Marpa said, "If we examine the situation closely, it becomes clear that none of us is at fault. From my perspective, I have only challenged the Great Magician to purify his negative deeds. If his work on the tower had been for my own benefit, I would have guided him more gently. Therefore, in this regard, I believe I was justified. As for my wife, Dakmema, she is a compassionate woman who could not bear to witness what the Great Magician had experienced, so she too was justified in her feelings. However, forging the letter and sending the gift of religious objects were serious offenses. Lama Ngokpa, you are correct in what you have said. However, please return the religious objects for now; I will give them back to you later. As for the Great Magician, he was driven by a deep desire for the Dharma, and in that pursuit, he acted rightly to obtain it by any means necessary. I see no reason to punish him."

"Had I the opportunity to punish the Great Magician nine times, he would have become a Buddha, free of physical remainder and without the need for another human birth. Since this did not occur, some slight residue of negativities and obscurations remains, a result of Dakmema's foolishness. However, your major negativities have been eradicated through eight great agonies and many minor adversities. Now, I will accept you as a disciple and provide you with oral instructions that are as precious as my heart. I will also supply you with everything you need for your retreat and set you to meditate. So, rejoice!"

Marpa then accepted Milarepa as a disciple, gave him many good instructions, and named him Mila Dorje Gyaltsen, meaning Mila Adamantine Victory Banner.

Marpa also conferred upon him the common vows of individual liberation and the bodhisattva vows.

The next morning, Marpa gave Milarepa the empowerment of Samvara. When he revealed the mandala for bestowing the empowerment, he pointed to the circle of colored powder, saying, “This is called the symbolic mandala. The actual mandala is there.” Pointing up to the sky, Marpa made the mandala of its sixty-two deities appear. Then, he gave Milarepa the secret name of Shepa Dorje, meaning Adamantine Laughter. Later, Marpa bestowed all the empowerments and instructions on him, just like pouring the contents of one pot into another.

Then Marpa told Milarepa, “I knew from the very beginning you were a worthy disciple. You drank all the beer I gave you and plowed the entire field, signs that you would be a worthy recipient of the oral instructions and that you would master them perfectly. The four handles on the copper pot you offered are signs of the arrival of one of my four famous disciples. Because you offered the pot empty, you will have only meager sustenance while you meditate. But to bring about great resources for you later in life and for your line of disciples, and to ensure that worthy disciples are satisfied by the elixir of the oral instructions, I filled it with melted butter from my offering lamps. To secure your great renown, I rang it as loudly as I could.”

From then on, Milarepa endured many hardships and practiced the true Dharma with great perseverance. As a result, he attained both ordinary and extraordinary accomplishments.⁹⁶

The biography of Milarepa is popular among practitioners not only in Tibet and China but also in Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Many practitioners are inspired by Milarepa’s life story. While there are numerous biographies in this world, this one stands out and influences thousands of people. It clearly carries blessings and extraordinary, auspicious significance.

In fact, all the past panditas, siddhas, and Vidyadharas—whether in India, the Tibetan region, or the Han areas of China—followed a qualified teacher. By faithfully adhering to their teacher’s instructions, they attained realizations

⁹⁶ Khenpo Sodargye expanded the stories based on Patrul Rinpoche’s text, and the translation of Khenpo’s transcript here is largely based on Tsangnyön Heruka’s *The Life of Milarepa*, translated by Andrew Quintman, Penguin Classics, 1st edition (Aug. 31, 2010).

inseparable from that of their teacher. Therefore, following a spiritual teacher is crucial if we aim to achieve realization.

Ashvaghosha, the author of *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*, was a highly learned Dharma master but did not have the opportunity to propagate the Dharma. Consequently, he left his monastery and embarked on a pilgrimage to a Tara statue in the east. While crossing the sea in a boat, he was kidnapped and taken to an island. He longed to return to India but did not know how, so he prayed to Tara every day. One day, Tara appeared in his dream and said, “Wherever you want to reach, sleep with your head pointing in that direction.”

Following Tara’s instruction, he eventually returned to his hometown and found that the monastery had changed significantly. Many of his Dharma peers had died, and the young sangha members did not recognize him. Consequently, he held a grudge against the residents of that island, believing they had caused his misfortunes. In retaliation, he performed a ritual and made a mudra pointing at the island. As a result, the island was suddenly struck by an earthquake and plunged into the sea.

Having done this, Ashvaghosha immediately regretted it, so he planned to purify his misdeeds by making prostrations from his hometown to the sacred site of Bodhisattva Manjushri. Then Tara appeared in his dream again, telling him, “Your misdeed won’t be purified in this way. But with the experience you’ve accumulated through years of practice, if you can identify the fastest path to Buddhahood and use that to guide many future practitioners so they can attain swift realization, your misdeeds will be offset.”

Ashvaghosha then entered several retreats and engaged in practice and contemplation. Eventually, he discovered the fastest path to Buddhahood: following the guru impeccably. He wrote down detailed instructions on how to follow a teacher, the text of which is titled *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*. On the surface, it appears to be merely a text consisting of fifty verses, but in fact, one who puts it into real practice can swiftly purify misdeeds and attain ultimate enlightenment.

Therefore, following a spiritual teacher is crucial from all viewpoints. *The Sutra of Great Compassion* says:

If one person is teaching the Dharma,
And another is listening to the authentic teaching of the Buddha,

Both can gain abundant merits.

[Such an act] can raise all Buddhist banners.

Thus, we should not see faults in the teacher's speech and actions, nor should we become deceitful. We should be people of integrity and follow the teacher with a sincere mind.

On the other hand, failing to follow the teacher with complete sincerity and honesty is a serious mistake. Always maintain a pure perception of their actions, and never deceive them, even in the slightest manner.

There is a story about Buddhajñānapada, a disciple of a great siddha. While teaching the Dharma to a large gathering, he noticed his teacher arriving, dressed in tattered beggar's clothes. Feeling embarrassed to bow before his teacher in front of the crowd, Buddhajñānapada pretended not to see him. Later that evening, after everyone had left, he went to his teacher and prostrated before him.

"Why didn't you prostrate earlier?" his teacher asked, hoping the disciple could repent for his behavior, thus eliminating its karmic effect.

"I didn't see you," Buddhajñānapada lied, unaware of his teacher's intention of kindness.

Instantly, both of his eyes fell to the ground. After he confessed and pleaded for forgiveness, his teacher, through a blessing, miraculously restored his sight.

When Buddhajñānapada had just begun to follow teachers, he also faced unfavorable conditions due to his arrogance. Here is a story:

Once, while on a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai to pay homage to Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, Buddhajñānapada encountered a disrobed monk with his monastic robe wrapped around his head. The monk was farming in a field, accompanied by an ugly woman and a filthy white female dog. Buddhajñānapada stayed overnight at their house. He took out *The Guhyasamāja Tantra* and began to recite it.

Each time he read something he doubted, the ugly woman appeared displeased. Buddhajñānapada realized she was not just an ordinary person, so he felt ashamed and asked her to clarify his doubts.

She said, "I cannot clarify your doubts. That disrobed monk is very learned about *The Guhyasamāja Tantra*."

Soon after, the monk returned drunk. By this time, Buddhajñānapada had

rid himself of his wrong thoughts and understood that the monk was engaging in extraordinary tantric practices. So, he prostrated at the monk's feet, seeking clarification for his doubts.

"Fine," the disrobed monk said. "But first, I must bestow upon you an empowerment."

Then all the mandalas of deities appeared, and the ugly woman and the dog also stood before the mandalas.

The monk asked, "From whom do you wish to receive the empowerment? The deities or me?"

Without hesitation, Buddhajñanapada replied, "From the deities."

The monk said, "Fine." He then left with the ugly woman and the dog, and all the deities vanished, leaving Buddhajñanapada alone. It was then he realized that all the deities in the mandala were merely emanations of the teacher.

There is a similar story about the Indian Mahasiddha Kṛṣṇācārya. One day, while sailing at sea with many disciples, he thought to himself, "My teacher is a true siddha, but from a worldly perspective, I surpass him because I am wealthier and have more attendants."

Immediately, his ship sank into the ocean. Struggling in the water, he prayed fervently to his teacher, who appeared in person and rescued him from drowning.

"That was the consequence of your great arrogance," his teacher said. "If I had sought wealth and attendants, I could have had them too. But I chose not to pursue such things."

There was an Indian yogi whose teacher was a commoner from the noble caste of brahmins. This yogi attained some common accomplishments, including the ability to fly freely in the air. One day, while flying, he noticed his teacher teaching the Dharma below. In a fit of arrogance, he intentionally flew over his teacher's head but ended up crashing to the ground. He lost his ability to fly forever after that.

As we know, many of the Buddha's disciples attained Arhathood, so why was it that Ananda, who had been the Buddha's attendant for so long, was unable to do so? In a previous life, he was the master of a prince during the time of Buddha Kassapa, and due to his arrogance, he repeatedly refused to meet the Buddha. For

this reason, it remained difficult for him to achieve accomplishments during the time of Buddha Shakyamuni.

Another example is Nyak Jñanakumara. He faced seven life-threatening obstacles simply because he believed himself to be slightly smarter than his teacher.

Here is another example: Geshe Gonpawa had a disciple who, no matter how hard he tried, could not make any progress in his meditation.

Later, the disciple consulted Geshe Gonpawa, who asked, “Have you ever done anything disrespectful to one of your gurus?”

The disciple replied, “Yes, I have.”

Geshe Gonpawa suggested that he sincerely ask for forgiveness from that guru. The disciple followed this advice. After he genuinely repented for his wrongdoings, he was able to obtain direct experience in his meditation.

In fact, it is easy for a disciple to become arrogant. For example, if the teacher seems to know little about architecture or mathematics, and you happen to be an expert in those fields, you may think you are superior to the teacher. As soon as this thought arises, you should immediately recognize that “surely the teacher knows more, as he possesses the wisdom of understanding all things in their multiplicity. It’s just that, in conformity with the conventional world, he pretends to know little.”

If you have extraordinary devotion to the teacher, even a small cause or condition can lead to enlightenment. Once, a monk of Chinese Buddhism was fetching water to prepare a bath for his teacher. He noticed the bath was already full, so he splashed the remaining water on the ground.

Seeing this, the teacher was upset and scolded him, “You fool! Why waste the water? Everything has its purpose, so why not use it? If you water a tree, the tree will thrive; if you water a flower, the flower will flourish. And the water remains alive.”

Hearing this, the monk attained sudden realization and changed his Dharma name to *Dishui*, meaning “water dripping.” He later became known as Dishui Monk.

As we should know, the kindness of our teacher is immeasurable! In the past, countless buddhas have appeared, but their compassion has not been enough to liberate us. Thus, we remain adrift in the ocean of suffering of samsara. As Shantideva says:

Striving for the benefit of all that lives,
 Unnumbered buddhas have already lived and passed away.
 But I, by virtue of my sins, have failed
 To come within the compass of their healing works.⁹⁷

Since ancient times, countless great teachers have appeared, yet we have not been fortunate enough to enjoy their compassionate care or even simply meet them. Maitreya says in *The Ornament of Clear Realization*:

Though the god of rain may send rainfalls,
 An unsuitable seed will not grow.
 Likewise, though buddhas come forth,
 The unsuitable will not come to enjoy any good.⁹⁸

Though raindrops fall, a burned seed cannot sprout. Similarly, although many buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spiritual teachers have appeared in this world to deliver countless Dharma teachings, we gain no benefit from them due to our unsuitable dispositions. Therefore, we must first make ourselves receptive to the Dharma. Otherwise, no matter how great a Buddha or how kind a spiritual teacher is, we cannot be tamed and liberated.

These days, the Buddha's teachings are coming to an end. The five degenerations are increasingly prevalent, and despite having attained human life, we are deeply entangled in our negative actions, uncertain of what to do and what not to do. Like a blind person wandering aimlessly across a desolate plain, we are lost. Yet, our supreme teachers care for us with their great compassion, appearing in human form according to our needs. Their kindness is truly immeasurable!

When helping us, the teacher uses the Dharma rather than wealth, status, or other means. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* states:

If a person teaches the Dharma,
 To benefit and help others,
 He is like a parent,

⁹⁷ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

⁹⁸ *Groundless Paths: The Prajnaparamita Sutras, The Ornament of Clear Realization, and Its Commentaries in the Tibetan Nyingma Tradition*, translated and introduced by Karl Brunnhölzl, Snow Lion, 2012.

Who shows the abode of nirvana.

What a great verse! If a person benefits others through teaching the Dharma, they are as kind as one's own parent. Parents offer us knowledge about life, whereas spiritual teachers guide us to the abode of nirvana, which uproots our suffering.

Samsara is truly a vast ocean of suffering that each of us should deeply understand. Regardless of the merit we possess, without being freed from the cycle of life and death, we cannot attain true happiness. It's like there is no fragrance in a filthy room. Only by following a spiritual teacher and receiving their guidance can we truly transform our mindstream, as stated in *The Sutra of the Great Compassion*:

When sentient beings encounter a spiritual teacher,
They can generate virtuous mind...
And all their actions will become virtuous.

Therefore, the Buddha's teachings are of vital importance. Many worldly people lack spiritual nourishment. Thus, even if they seem to live a good life, they do not feel genuinely happy. In comparison, many sangha members at Larung Gar or other monasteries lead a carefree life with little stress and worry, and they will be reborn in the Land of Great Bliss after death. It is difficult for an urban dweller to experience such carefreeness. Where does it come from? It comes from following a teacher properly.

Of course, the way to follow a teacher is not merely to have him smile or praise us, or simply to receive a blessing. Those are the skillful means the teacher uses to guide us, but we must identify the most essential way to follow him. What is that? The most essential way is to adhere to the guru's instructions on what to do and what not to do. Only in this way can we truly change our minds and behavior, which in turn will bring positive changes to our lives and surroundings.

Though they have achieved the realization of the buddhas, in their actions they are attuned to how we are. They also have to eat and walk. Take Marpa, for example: When he was furious,⁹⁹ he also appeared to be full of anger, which scared his disciples. However, you cannot find fault in the teacher with the support of a scriptural verse,¹⁰⁰ telling him, "Alas! How many merits have been shattered by your single flash of anger!"

⁹⁹ "Furious" here suggests wrathful compassion.

¹⁰⁰ "All the good works gathered in a thousand ages, such as deeds of generosity and offerings

Through their skillful methods, our teachers accept us as disciples, introduce us to the authentic Dharma, illuminate the distinctions between right and wrong, and unerringly show us the best path to liberation and ultimate wisdom.

Many people today think, “My guru is sick! Isn’t he a buddha? How can he be sick?” The *Vimalakirti Sutra* offers a good explanation:

It is like an elder whose only son becomes ill, and the parents become ill as well. If the son recovers from the illness, the parents also recover. Bodhisattvas are like this. They have affection for sentient beings as if for their own children. As stated in the sutra:

When sentient beings are ill,
The bodhisattvas are ill also,
When sentient beings recover from their illness,
The bodhisattvas recover also.¹⁰¹

This is the reason why spiritual teachers, the emanations of buddhas and bodhisattvas, experience sickness.

Moreover, to tame and liberate us, spiritual teachers must appear like ordinary beings who experience birth, aging, sickness, and death. Otherwise, it would be difficult for them to remain among ordinary beings.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said:

When buddhas and bodhisattvas tame and liberate animals,
they appear as animals; otherwise, they cannot relate to them.

For example, to tame and liberate a flock of sparrows, a buddha or a bodhisattva must become a sparrow himself so he can eat, sleep, sing, and play with the others. In doing so, he is able to liberate them. If he appears as a tulku, the sparrows would be scared away by seeing him, let alone listen to his teachings.

Therefore, a spiritual teacher is attuned to who we are and can even become a butcher or a prostitute in order to benefit those beings.

In truth, the teacher is no different from the Buddha. But it is the teacher, appearing in human form, who expounds the Dharma and guides us on the path,

to the Blissful Ones—A single flash of anger shatters them.” [Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011]

¹⁰¹ It is translated by John R. McRae.

helping us cultivate virtuous roots. Thus, compared to the Buddha, the teacher's kindness in caring for us is even greater. Therefore, at all times and in all places, we should follow the teacher with the utmost respect and devotion, applying ourselves wholeheartedly with the three kinds of faith.

*Though I have met a sublime teacher, I am still led astray
by negative behavior;*

*Though I have found the supreme path, I still drift onto
the wrong path;*

Bless me and all beings like me with flawed characters

That our minds may be tamed by the authentic Dharma.

In this closing verse, Patrul Rinpoche humbly expresses, "I've encountered a sublime teacher who is the emanation of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, yet I still yield to my inclinations to commit misdeeds. I've discovered the supreme path that can lead me to liberation within this lifetime, but I struggle to practice well and continue to engage in wrongdoings. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas, please bless me and all those with flawed characters like me. Tame our minds through the authentic Dharma, so we may no longer be so stubborn and rigid."

What a tremendous opportunity it is for each of us to be born in Jambudvīpa, to attain the jewel-like human life, to encounter a Buddha-like spiritual teacher, and to hear the nectar-like teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. It would be a great loss if we do not seek liberation within this precious human life.

Therefore, even if you've attended only one class, you should cultivate yourself with the class content and internalize the teachings in your mind. Without nourishment from the Dharma, many people become increasingly immoral, committing more misdeeds while performing fewer good deeds. Additionally, they face many unfavorable conditions when performing positive actions. Thus, under such circumstances, we must discipline ourselves with mindfulness and vigilance, striving to overcome difficulties and perform virtuous deeds.

Of course, you should first pray for the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas so that you may encounter a qualified teacher. Otherwise, those lacking merit often fall prey to charlatans, investing their time, money, and effort to no avail, even having their roots of merit severed. What a great pity!

Therefore, when you meet a teacher, be sure to examine him carefully and do not follow him hastily. Many people fail to scrutinize a teacher. When they hear of a teacher's visit, they rush to follow him immediately. How dangerous!

If the teacher is widely recognized as a great master and has many followers, it is acceptable to follow him directly without further examination. However, generally speaking, you should not blindly follow a teacher in haste.

Also, after following the teacher, the Dharma practices you engage in should be those that many great masters have practiced since ancient times. Many people today neglect well-recognized practices and instead pursue those that are fabricated or contrived, which is not right. It's akin to a patient rejecting the medicine prescribed by a reputable doctor in favor of that prescribed by an unlicensed practitioner without medical training. The patient's choice may not be beneficial. So please pay attention to this issue when following a spiritual teacher.

[This concludes *How to Follow a Teacher*.]

That's all for the common preliminary practices. In particular, the practice on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, the defects of samsara, and the principle of cause and effect comprises the four thoughts, the four contemplations that turn the mind away from samsara. To attain such a state of practice, we must rely on the guidance of a spiritual teacher. This also applies to other content we will learn in the text.

These supreme instructions should be taken seriously. If you truly have faith in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, even without putting the teachings into practice, you may still attain liberation simply by hearing the teachings.

As mentioned in my book titled *The Short Stories of Rainbow-Body Accomplishers in Mantrayana*, there was a person named Gyaje Gontso in my hometown of Zhaggo. As a child, he was no different from other ordinary people. Later, while listening to the teachings on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, he attained sudden realization of the nature of the mind.

From that point on, he stopped studying the Dharma, manifested his clairvoyance, and engaged in various unconventional behaviors. Many auspicious signs occurred at the time of his death. The people in my hometown built a stupa to pay homage to his body. In 1959, when the stupa was demolished, his body had shrunk

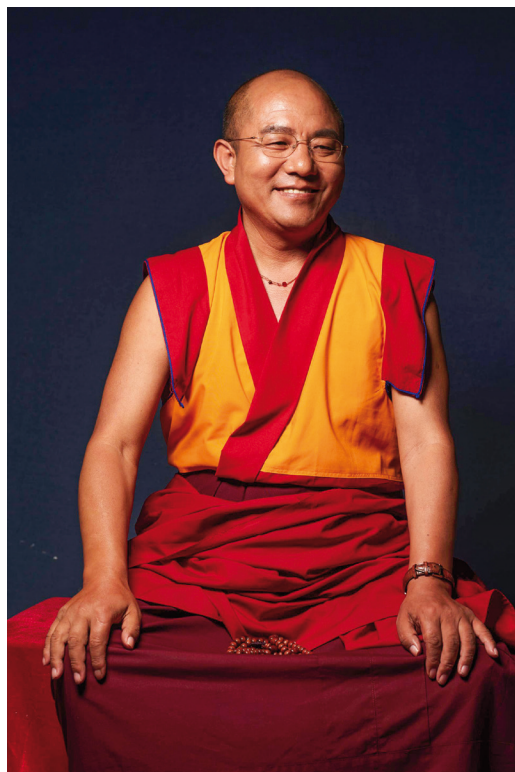
to the size of an eight-year-old and remained unrotten and intact. Many people from Upper Lokorma witnessed this, and I have interviewed them for verification.

Please have faith in this text. Don't view it merely as a text on preliminary practices, thinking, "It's just something basic. I don't need the preliminaries. I want the main practice!"

Without a solid foundation, even the highest teachings on the main practice may not benefit you. It's like a farmer who must first plow the field, remove all the weeds, and nourish the soil with fertilizer and water to ensure a bountiful harvest.

The same principle applies to Dharma practice. This is also my own experience, accumulated over years of studying and practicing the Dharma, which I am happy to share with you. Of course, whether it resonates with you depends entirely on your own inclination and readiness.

**The part on
the *Common Preliminaries*
is hence complete.**

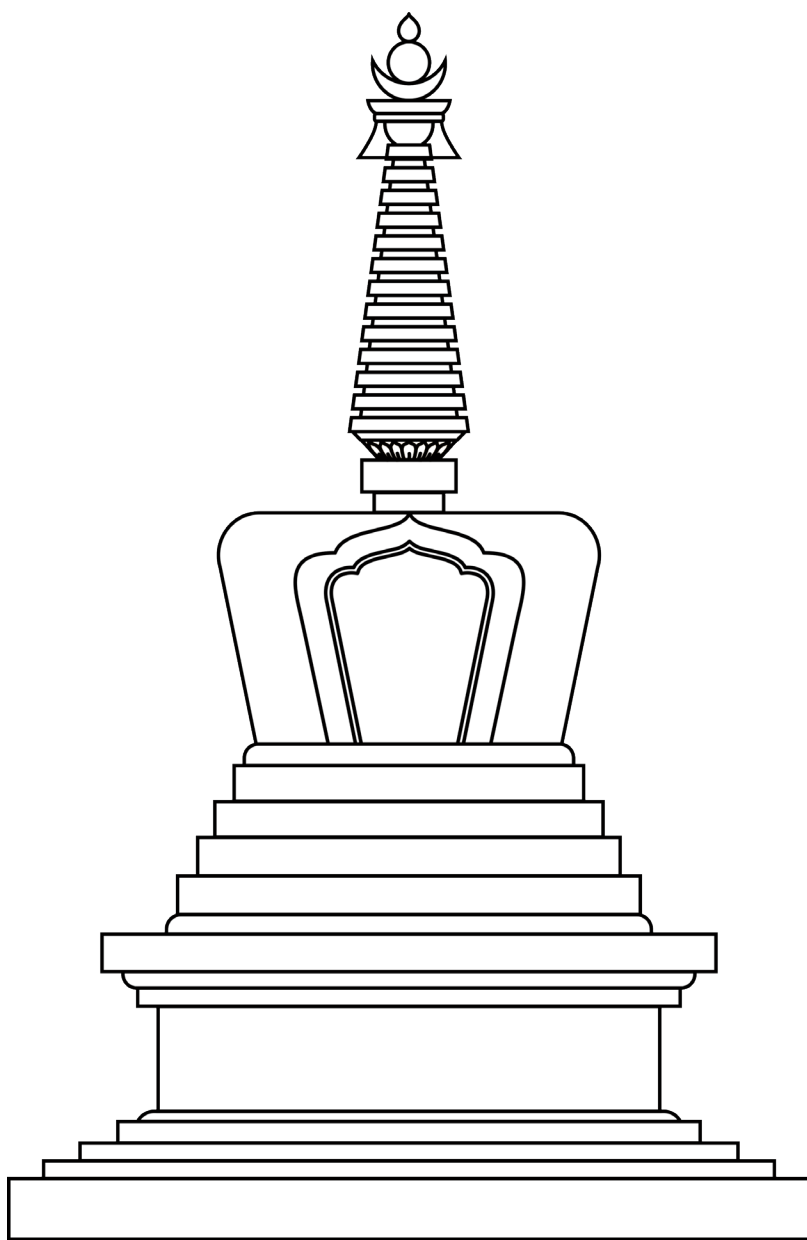


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KHENPO SODARGYE was born in 1962 into a nomadic family in a small valley of the Tibetan region of Kham. He was ordained in 1985 and went on to become a lineage holder of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition, as well as a preeminent practitioner 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.





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