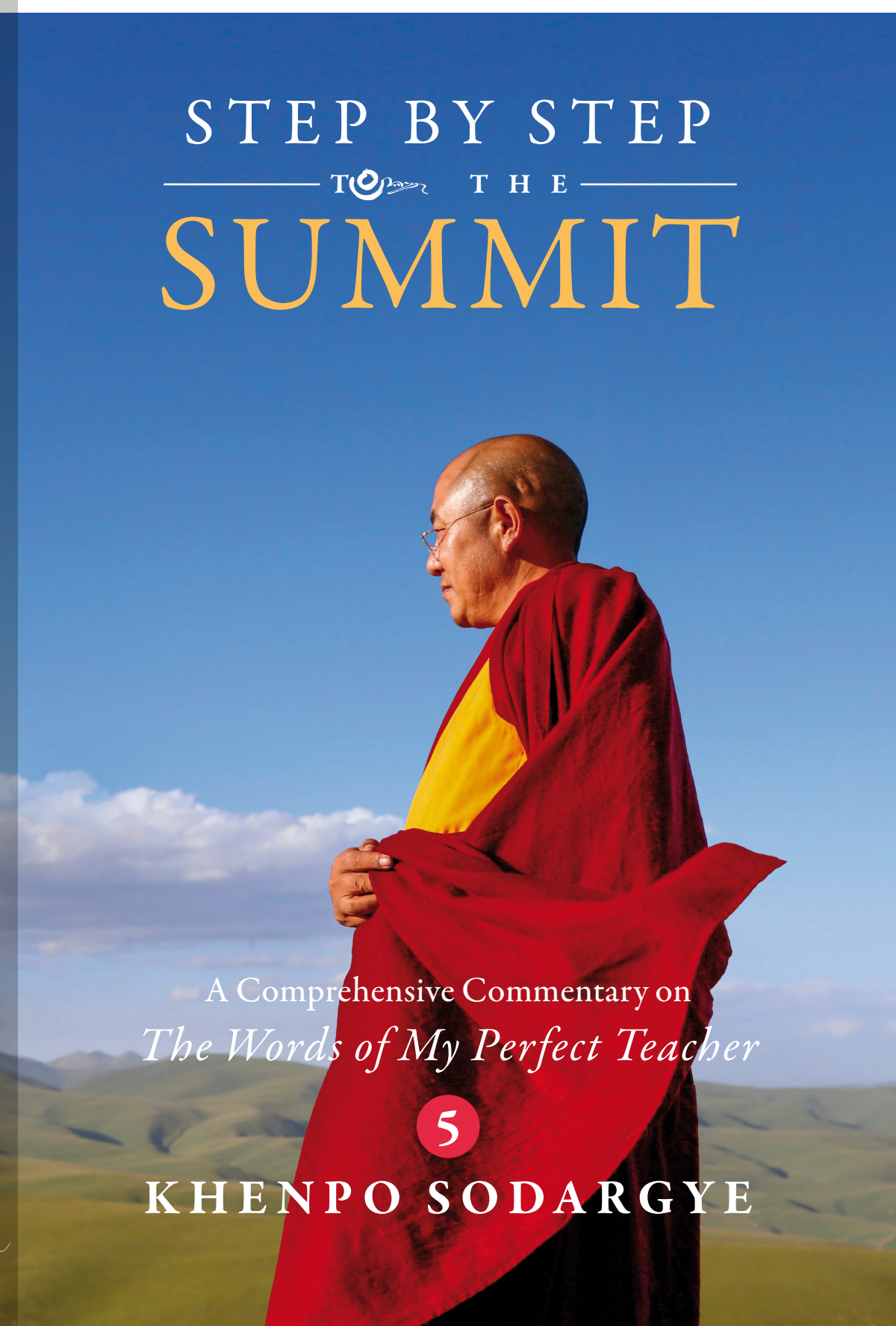




STEP BY STEP — TO — THE — SUMMIT

A Comprehensive Commentary on
The Words of My Perfect Teacher

5

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.

CONTENTS

<i>Lesson 84</i>	2
2.2. THE UNCOMMON PRELIMINARY PRACTICES	
2.2.1. TAKING REFUGE, THE FOUNDATION STONE OF ALL PATHS	
2.2.1.1. The Foundation of Taking Refuge	
<i>Lesson 85</i>	20
<i>Lesson 86</i>	39
2.2.1.2. Classification of Taking Refuge	
2.2.1.3. How to Take Refuge	
<i>Lesson 87</i>	57
2.2.1.4. Precepts of Taking Refuge	
2.2.1.4.1. The Three Things to be Abandoned	
<i>Lesson 88</i>	75
2.2.1.4.2. The Three Things to be Done	
2.2.1.4.3. The Three Supplementary Precepts	
<i>Lesson 89</i>	93
2.2.1.5. The Benefits of Taking Refuge	
<i>Lesson 90</i>	110
<i>Lesson 91</i>	128
<i>Lesson 92</i>	144
2.2.2. AROUSING BODHICITTA, THE ROOT OF THE GREAT VEHICLE	
2.2.2.1. Training the Mind in the Four Boundless Qualities	
2.2.2.1.1. Meditation on Impartiality	
<i>Lesson 93</i>	158
2.2.2.1.2. Meditation on Love	
<i>Lesson 94</i>	172
2.2.2.1.3. Meditation on Compassion	
<i>Lesson 95</i>	187
<i>Lesson 96</i>	200

<i>Lesson 97</i>	214
<i>Lesson 98</i>	231
2.2.2.1.4. Meditation on Sympathetic Joy	
<i>Lesson 99</i>	246
<i>Lesson 100</i>	262
2.2.2.2. Arousing Bodhicitta	
2.2.2.2.1. Classification of Bodhicitta	
2.2.2.2.2. Taking the Vow of Bodhicitta	
<i>Lesson 101</i>	282
2.2.2.3. Training in the Bodhicitta Precepts	
2.2.2.3.1. Training in the Precepts of the Bodhicitta of Intention	
2.2.2.3.1.1. Considering Others As Equal To Oneself	
2.2.2.3.1.2. Exchanging Oneself and Others	
<i>Lesson 102</i>	298
<i>Lesson 103</i>	314
2.2.2.3.1.3. Considering Others More Important than Oneself	
<i>Lesson 104</i>	327
<i>About the Author</i>	343
<i>About the Translator</i>	344

THE UNCOMMON PRELIMINARIES



TAKING REFUGE, THE FOUNDATION
STONE OF ALL PATHS

AROUSING BODHICITTA, THE ROOT OF
THE GREAT VEHICLE

MEDITATING ON THE TEACHER
AS VAJRASATTVA TO CLEANSE ALL
OBSCURATIONS

ACCUMULATING MERIT AND WISDOM
THROUGH OFFERING THE MANDALA
AND THE KUSALI'S ACCUMULATION

GURU YOGA, ENTRANCE-WAY FOR
BLESSINGS, THE ULTIMATE WAY TO
AROUSE THE WISDOM OF REALIZATION





Lesson 84

“Crowned with the Three Jewels of the outer refuge... will reach you. If you have no faith and devotion at all, you will get absolutely nothing.” [page 171–173]

2.2. THE UNCOMMON PRELIMINARY PRACTICES

Now we begin to study the section on the uncommon preliminaries in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

♦ What does “uncommon” mean?

These practices are “uncommon” because:

1) They are uncommon to the practices in Theravada Buddhism. The Theravada teachings cover practices on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, the principle of cause and effect, and the defects of samsara. But they do not include the uncommon practices found in Mahayana Buddhism, which are driven by the motivation to benefit all beings. These include taking refuge, arousing bodhicitta, meditating on Vajrasattva, offering the mandala and Kusali’s accumulation, Guru Yoga, and transferring consciousness.

2) They are uncommon to the practices in Chinese Buddhism and Southern Buddhism. It is only in the instructions of Tibetan Buddhism that uncommon preliminaries are emphasized.

3) They are uncommon to the practices in other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, such as Gelug, Sakya, Kagyu, Jonang, and others. The preliminary practices across different school of Tibetan Buddhism are generally very similar, but the instructions and the particular teachings from each lineage teachers of each school vary. The following practices you are about to study are unique to the Nyingma school, so they are considered “uncommon.”

♦ Uncommon preliminaries across schools of Tibetan Buddhism

Different schools of Tibetan Buddhism have different ways to practice uncommon preliminaries. For example, Sakya and Kagyu require four uncommon preliminary practices, including taking refuge, making prostrations, reciting the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, and offering the mandala. These two schools don't include the practices of arousing bodhicitta and Guru Yoga in their uncommon preliminaries.

Gelug requires nine uncommon preliminary practices, with the first five practices being the same as those of Nyingma, plus Dorje Khadro practice,¹ reciting the Samaya Vajra mantra, making tsa-tsas,² and offering water. Some other schools of Tibetan Buddhism require six uncommon preliminary practices. Despite variances across schools, the core aspect of the uncommon preliminaries that is shared by all schools doesn't differ significantly in itself.

According to the tradition of Longchen Nyingtik Ngöndro in Nyingma, if the practice of Guru Yoga is not combined with the prostration practice, there are in total six practices of uncommon preliminaries. These include one hundred thousand repetitions of making prostrations, taking refuge, arousing bodhicitta, reciting the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, and offering the mandala, respectively; as well as ten million repetitions of reciting the Padmasambhava mantra as the Guru Yoga practice. If the practice of Guru Yoga is combined with prostration practice,³ then there are in total five components in the uncommon preliminaries.

Regardless of the school of Tibetan Buddhism, the preliminary practices are

¹ Dorje Khadro (Vajra Daka) practice, in which black sesame seeds are visualized negativities offered in a fire to the mouth of the fierce deity Dorje Khadro, who consumes them.

² Tsa-tsa refers to clay or plaster images of the Buddha.

³ This means that a practitioner is performing prostrations while reciting the Guru Yoga prayer.

largely similar, with only minor variations. For instance, the refuge practice in all schools involves taking refuge in the Three Jewels for the benefit of all sentient beings. Similarly, the bodhicitta practice focuses on aspiring to achieve perfect enlightenment to help all sentient beings reach the same goal. The Vajrasattva, Mandala, and Guru Yoga practices also share a fundamental similarity.

The differences across schools mainly pertain to the lineage masters visualized in the field of merit, the specific prayers used in Guru Yoga practice, the number of heaps created in a mandala offering (which can be five, seven, or thirty-seven), and other minor details.

♦ **The requirement for practicing the uncommon preliminaries**

Whichever school's uncommon preliminaries you choose to practice, only when you've attained the signs that the practices have penetrated your mind, or certain experiences and realizations have arisen, can you claim to have perfected the preliminary practices.

If you just complete the accumulation of the number of repetitions, but your mind hasn't been tamed, your preliminary practices are not yet perfected. Therefore, from now on you must devote yourself to the uncommon preliminary practices.

The foundations of the uncommon preliminaries are the four thoughts that turn the mind, and the instructions on how to follow the teacher, which you've studied and practiced. Of course, to follow the practice sequence doesn't mean you have to perfect all the prior practices before moving to the next one. If this was the case, some may even never perfect the practice of "the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages," then they would never have the opportunity to move forward in their practice.

In fact, following the practical sequence refers to meditating as much as possible on each of the four thoughts until you've assimilated and internalized the teachings, then moving forward. This is most vital for your practice.

As of today, I'm beginning to teach the uncommon preliminaries, about which I am really happy. Why is that? This is because you may have engaged in the practices of taking refuge, arousing bodhicitta, purifying obscurations, and accumulating merit and wisdom.

However, many of you may have just followed the formalities, without knowing the true meanings of those practices. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* offers detailed explanations of those practices. If you have the opportunity to study the text you'll gain understanding of the uncommon preliminaries, and then put them into real practice. By so doing, you'll obtain the real benefits.

Now, with the blessings of the teacher and the Three Jewels, you have the opportunity to study and practice the Dharma, which you should truly appreciate. Meanwhile, as you study, make sure to rely on the Dharma, not the teacher. I may lack great qualities and the necessary characteristics for you to follow. However, the Dharma I am teaching you is absolutely pure and untainted, and it will certainly enable you to attain certain transcendental qualities. Therefore, although I am an insignificant teacher, the Dharma I am sharing will never hinder your practice.

At this time, I hope each of you will study and practice the uncommon preliminaries very well. Meanwhile, you'd better accomplish the practices in both quantity and quality. If you really cannot ensure the quality, at least you should finish the quantity, as per the request of our lineage masters.

Those who accomplish both quantity and quality in their preliminary practices benefit not only themselves but also many others. One such individual is Geshe Lama Konchog (1927–2001) from the Gelug school, who spent a total of twenty-six years in isolated mountain retreat, near the Himalayan mountains of Nepal. He lived a similar life of practice as Milarepa, so he was mistaken as a “wild man,” when first spotted by villagers.

During his life Geshe Lama Konchog accomplished 1.5 million prostrations, 1.2 million mandala offerings, eight hundred thousand repetitions of taking refuge and arousing bodhicitta, and more. He accumulated a large number of preliminary practices. When he passed into parinirvana in 2001, dozens of exquisite śarīras, or relics, were left behind after his cremation. I've seen the photos featuring the relics, and they are truly amazing. Inspired by the relics, many people from Taiwan, Hong Kong and other countries in Southeast Asia, have taken refuge in the Three Jewels.

Therefore, when the Dharma penetrates a person's mind, they naturally develop extraordinary qualities and states of realization, inspiring countless others to have faith in them. However, these achievements depend on the faith and devotion of the practitioner and the blessings of the Three Jewels. This is a crucial point that everyone should grasp.

2.2.1. TAKING REFUGE, THE FOUNDATION STONE OF ALL PATHS

Now we begin to study the uncommon preliminaries. Each of you should listen to the profound teachings with joy.

First, Patrul Rinpoche pays homage to his root guru with this verse:

*You honor and uphold the Three Jewels, the outer refuge;
 You have realized the Three Roots, the inner refuge;
 You have manifested the three kayas, the ultimate refuge—
 Peerless Teacher, at your feet I humbly bow.*

What are the great qualities of Patrul Rinpoche's root guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu? He is crowned with the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha of the outer refuge; he has truly realized the Three Roots of the guru, the deity, and the dakini of the inner refuge; and he has made manifest the three kayas of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya of the ultimate refuge. Such a teacher is peerless in the three worlds, and Patrul Rinpoche prostrates at his feet with great veneration.

It also says in *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*:

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are the three outer
 refuges...;
 The Guru, the Deity, and the Dakini are the three inner
 refuges...;
 The channels, energies, and essences are the three secret
 refuges...;
 Appearance, emptiness, and non-distinction are the three
 ultimate refuges.
 ...
 If you want to be freed from boundless suffering,
 Take refuge with both your body and mind,
 Put all your trust in the Three Jewels.

Here Patrul Rinpoche praises his root guru, from the outer, inner, and ultimate

perspectives. Many of you have your own lineage masters, and they may appear differently from each other. Some are learned monastics, and some are ordinary practitioners, but they are all emanations of buddhas and bodhisattvas. We learned this in the chapter of “How to Follow a Spiritual Friend.” Therefore, you should have impartial faith in all the lineage masters.

Some monastics or householders have joy and respect for all the gurus, which is good. However, some Buddhists insist on taking the guru as their “private possession,” thinking, “This guru is only mine.” They become jealous or annoyed when noticing others with joy paying homage to the guru. Alas!

Every Buddhist can pray and pay homage to Buddha Shakyamuni, and no one should regard the Buddha as their “private possession.” Everyone can appreciate the sun and the moon that shine upon the whole world, and no one can take them as their own. Likewise, if a teacher is an authentic sublime master, then everyone can follow and appreciate them with respect and joy. We need to understand this well.

In particular, our lineage masters, especially our root guru, who has offered us inconceivable kindness by teaching us the Dharma, and other sublime teachers still living in this world from whom we haven’t received teachings, are all objects of our refuge. To all of them, we should pay homage with joy and pure perception.

Taking refuge, the foundation stone of all paths, is explained under several headings: approaches to taking refuge, how to take refuge, and the precepts and benefits of taking refuge.

2.2.1.1. The Foundation of Taking Refuge

♦ The importance of faith

It is taking refuge that opens the gateway to all authentic teachings and practices. Venerable Atisha said that it’s taking refuge, rather than other actions, clothing, or doctrines, that marks the distinction between Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

Furthermore, it is faith that opens the gateway to taking refuge. Therefore, it is very important for us to develop solid and lasting faith, as it is the first step in taking refuge. Without faith, although the Three Jewels have boundless great qualities, you won’t attain any benefit from them, whereas with faith, you can naturally obtain great benefit. Therefore, faith is the foundation of all. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

Faith, as the Buddha asserted,
Is the foundation of all virtues.

The Mahayana Sutra of Previous Lives and Contemplation of the Mind-ground
also says:

To enter the ocean of the Dharma,
Faith is the root;
To cross the river of birth and death,
Precepts are the ferryboat.

In fact, faith is important even to worldly people. The other day I happened to witness a couple quarrelling. The woman argued while crying, “You don’t have faith in me! Then, what’s the point for me to live?” By “faith” she probably means “trust,” in this context. As you see, worldly people also consider faith very fundamental; without it, they cannot get along with each other.

For us Buddhists, faith holds even greater significance. Many laypeople and monastics possess unwavering faith in the teacher and the Three Jewels, which is evident in their expressions, speech, and actions. With this faith, they can easily progress in their Dharma practice, allowing inconceivable blessings to naturally flow into their minds.

Conversely, if a practitioner lacks devotion, joy, and faith, no matter how great the qualities of the teacher and the Three Jewels, they will struggle to derive any substantial benefit. This situation is akin to a water container with a cover that obstructs the reflection of the moon on its surface. Therefore, it is essential not to block the gateway of faith.

♦ Types of faith

There are three kinds of faith: vivid faith, eager faith, and confident faith.

1) Vivid faith

Vivid faith arises within us when we reflect on the great compassion of the buddhas and qualified teachers. We may experience this kind of faith when we enter a shrine hall adorned with representations of the Buddha’s body, speech, and

mind,⁴ or when we encounter a great teacher or an esteem master in person, or hear of their remarkable achievements and inspiring life stories.

When closely examining vivid faith, we'll realize it is primarily an intense emotional state. This state, which includes excitement, awe, ecstasy, gratitude, and the like, wavers and doesn't last long. Many people can't help but shed tears when they, for the first time, see the Buddha's statue, hear sutras chanted, or prostrate in front of a stupa. These people may weep emotionally when encountering a great Buddhist teacher, saying, "Dear teacher, you look so compassionate. The more I look at you, the more I want to cry!" This is the vivid faith.

I have met Dharma students who cried very easily at the beginning. However, perhaps this exhausted their reservoir of tears, because later they shed not even a single drop of faith tears. I often tease my disciples, "Maybe it's better to 'cry smartly,' so there is always some stock of tears left for your future use." (The audience laughs.)

However vivid faith still generates great merit, as related in a story in the *Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra*:

A girl was riding a chariot on her way to a garden when she happened to meet the Buddha, who was heading to the city. She immediately gave way for the Buddha, and due to his majestic appearance, she was filled with joy and appreciation. This vivid faith brought her rebirth in the god realm. When Indra asked about the cause of her rebirth, she answered:

Seeing the Buddha entering the city,
I yielded my chariot and gave way to him,
And I happily developed faith and respect.
Because of this, I was reborn in the god realm.

What the girl had is vivid faith, which resulted in her rebirth in the god realm.

Therefore, when we encounter a great master walking, we should also yield the roadside with respect and joy. When Dakini Mumtso Rinpoche was heading to the Larung Gar Nun's Dharma Hall for the consecration of the site, I saw many lay persons cry upon seeing her on the way there, shedding tears of joy and faith. A non-Buddhist might think the laypersons silly and wonder, "Why did they cry like that? Is it because the sublime master is so compassionate, or the Dharma hall

⁴ The representations are statues of the buddhas, scriptures, and stupas.

is so majestic?” But this person wouldn’t understand that their tears signaled the awakening of those laypersons’ dormant virtues.

It is necessary for a Buddhist to have vivid faith. If you remain emotionless like a rock when seeing an image of the Buddha or meeting a teacher, or even worse, if you give a scornful or disdainful look, the blessings from the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and teachers cannot merge into your mind.

Therefore, it is necessary that we sometimes get emotional. We don’t need to question people experiencing vivid faith, asking, “Why are they so thrilled? Why are they crying? Why are they so ecstatic?” When someone jumps with joy upon seeing their teachers, we should not think they are abnormal. Their joy simply reflects their vivid faith.

2) Eager faith

Eager faith arises within us when we hear about the sufferings of the lower realms and feel a strong desire to be free from them; when we learn of the happiness of the higher realms and liberation, we yearn to experience them; when we hear of the benefits of positive actions, we are inspired to engage in them; and when we recognize the harm caused by negative actions, we are determined to avoid them.

Eager faith, which is not merely emotional but also rational, is more reliable than vivid faith. At the beginning, you might not understand why it is necessary to engage in positive actions. Now that you are completely aware of the benefits, this faith is unlikely to stumble. For this reason, you may eventually attain liberation, and free yourself from all suffering. It is stated in the *Compendium of the Essentials of Dharma*:

If one has a pure intention,
And always pays homage to all the buddhas,
One can attain supreme auspiciousness,
And be freed from all fears.

Compared with vivid faith that is often a temporary state of excitement or ecstasy, eager faith arises after a good understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. For example, a Dharma student first hears and contemplates the benefits that positive actions bring and the harms that negative actions cause, and they then generate eagerness to engage in good action or to avoid negative actions. For this

reason, eager faith enables us to progress steadily on the path to liberation, and to eventually liberate ourselves from samsara *The Meeting of Father and Son* says:

Hearing the Buddha's teachings in Dharma assemblies,
 Thus, generating pure and confident faith,
 And then diligently practicing sublime actions that leads to
 bodhi,
 One will be free from the samsaric ocean of birth and death.

Therefore, eager faith is far more powerful than vivid faith. I hope each of you can cultivate it soon. Faith serves as an admission ticket to liberation; without it, one cannot enter the “Dharma Theater” to witness the “miraculous show” of the Three Jewels.

3) Confident faith

Confident faith is the deep-seated faith in the Three Jewels that arises within us when we recognize their extraordinary qualities and blessings through Dharma studies. It is a complete trust in the Three Jewels as our only unfailing refuge at all times, regardless of our circumstances—whether we are happy, sad, in pain, ill, living, or dead. Apart from the Three Jewels, there is no other reliable refuge.

Confident faith is the most precious. It is to the bone, not just skin deep. Confident faith brings total trust in the Three Jewels, so a practitioner believes, “In this life and in many lives to come, whether happy or in pain, I trust the Three Jewels in everything. They are my only refuge.” Having such faith is like an orphan placing total trust in the person who wholeheartedly helps them.

Here is a story from the Dhammapada:⁵

Once upon a time, there was a country where Tirthikas⁶ were part of the mainstream population. People there suffered tremendous hardships because no rain had fallen in three years. The king called upon all the Brahmins of the nation

⁵ The Dhammapada is a collection of sayings of the Buddha in verse form and is one of the most widely read and best-known Buddhist scriptures. The original version of the Dhammapada is in the Khuddaka Nikaya, a division of the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism.

⁶ Tirthika (Sanskrit: tīrthika, Pali: titthiya, “ford-maker,” meaning one who is attempting to cross the stream of samsara) is a general term referring to heretics, or non-Buddhists in general. In the Tipitaka the term may refer specifically to adherents of Jainism. Whereas a Buddhist takes refuge in the Three Jewels and treads the middle way between extremes, a tirthika does not.

and requested them to find answers from the celestial god: Why had this severe drought arisen?

After some observation, the Brahmins proposed a big sacrifice to the gods. The king was asked to prepare as many as twenty chariots of firewood, cheese, honey, ointment, oil, flowers, incense, banners, gold, silver, and sacrificial utensils. In addition, the king had to select seven people to be sent to the celestial realm by cremation, so they could ask for the cause of the drought.

After the prayer ceremony the crowd watched the seven people climb to the top of the wood pile, which was soon set on fire. When the flame reached them, they started to cry for help, but to no avail. They cried in great desperation, “We’ll take refuge in whomever can relieve our suffering from the burning fire!”

Hearing them the Buddha appeared and said,

You may take refuge in a mountain, a river, or a tree god
And draw images of those refuge objects,
And then pray in front of them for protection.
But this is not the most auspicious and supreme refuge,
Because it cannot liberate you from suffering.
Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the most auspicious and
supreme,
Because the Three Jewels can free you from all suffering.

Then the flames extinguished and the seven were saved. Upon witnessing the whole event, all the Brahmins generated confident faith—they fervently and totally trusted the Three Jewels. They all decided to take ordination from the Buddha, and later they attained arhathood. The king, the ministers, and the citizens also took refuge in the Buddha and started to practice the Dharma. Very soon it started to rain, and the crisis of drought was finally over.

The verses the Buddha said to the seven men are quoted in many Buddhist scriptures such as Vasubandhu’s⁷ *Auto-commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*

⁷ Vasubandhu (Sanskrit; traditional Chinese: ; pinyin: Shìqīn; Wylie: dbyiggyen) (fl. 4th to 5th century CE) was an influential Buddhist monk and scholar from Gandhara. He was a philosopher who wrote commentary on the *Abhidharma*, from the perspectives of the Sarvastivada and Sautrāntika schools. After his conversion to Mahayana Buddhism, along with his half-brother Asanga, he was also one of the main founders of the Yogacara school.

(*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*), and Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo's⁸ *Entering the Way of the Great Vehicle*, and the *Dhammapada*—one of the most widely read and best-known Buddhist scriptures. Therefore, these are very important verses.

When in danger a worldly person may try to take refuge in a person, a spirit, a mountain, or a river. However, none of these are the ultimate refuge that brings ultimate liberation. In this world, the Three Jewels are the only unfailing refuge that can guide us and free us from the ocean of samsara. *The Sutra of the Woman with the Name of Attained Taintlessness* also says:

There is nowhere else to take refuge
That can save and protect sentient beings.
Only the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—
The Three Jewels can save and protect everyone.

Therefore, we should chant these verses often and develop total trust in the Three Jewels. If we can maintain this kind of faith all the time, we have taken genuine refuge.

However, when worldly people encounter difficulties and pain, they may recklessly take refuge in anything that can protect them, without careful consideration. Recently I saw in the news that American entrepreneur Robert Vicino was building Doomsday bunkers as a backup plan, in case of apocalypse as depicted in the film “2012.”

Located about nine meters below ground level, the bunker is designed to withstand earthquakes of magnitude ten, floods lasting five hundred hours, fire of 677 Celsius lasting ten days and ten nights, and life-extinction catastrophes such as nuclear, biological, and chemical attacks. The bunker residents will remain safe amid these future disasters.

Vicino planned to build twenty Doomsday bunkers near major U.S. cities,

⁸ Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (Skt. Dharmabhadra; Tib. རོང་མཆོག་འཇཉག་པོ་, Wyl. rongzom-choskyibzangpo) aka Rongzompa lived in the 11th century. His dates have been given as 1012–1088. He was born in Tsang rong and met Atisha in his youth. He mastered the teachings of both Nyingma and Sarma traditions. He translated many works on secret mantra, some of which are preserved in the Kangyur and some of which did not survive. Many of his original writings have sadly been lost, but among those still to be found today are his commentary on the Guhyagarbha Tantra, his introduction to Mahayana called *Introduction to the Way of the Great Vehicle* (Wyl. *theg pa chenpo'itsbul la 'jug pa*) and his famous *Establishing All Appearances as Divine* (Wyl. *snangbalharsgrub*). His commentary on The Secret Essence Tantra begins with the line: “The nature of the Three Jewels is the enlightened mind,” and so it became known as *The Jewel Commentary*.

which can accommodate four thousand people. The bunkers are scheduled to open by Dec. 21, 2012. They are equipped with TVs, broadband internet, treadmills, and other living facilities, as well as with a year's supply of food. So whatever disasters happen, the people in the bunkers can remain safe.

It is said that a person has to spend up to \$35,000 to be a resident in a Doomsday bunker for a year. Nevertheless, Vicino claimed that more than one thousand people had bought shares entitling them to a space in a bunker. Once the bunker is fully occupied, no one can get in no matter how rich he is.

I found this project has bugs. If the entire world were to be completely destroyed, what would be the point of living for another year? What will the residents of the bunker do once they run out of food after a year? Of course, Doomsday is merely hearsay, and the world isn't going to end in 2012.

When faced with emergencies, worldly individuals often seek refuge in various forms of protection, such as bunkers, mountains, rivers, ghosts, and spirits. In contrast, we Buddhists should free our minds from doubt and pray one-pointedly to the Three Jewels as our only refuge. Our commitment to the Three Jewels is not based on blind faith; it is not simply because someone praises the extraordinary power of the Three Jewels, especially the qualities of the Buddha, that we take refuge in them.

Instead, we cultivate confident faith through systematic study of the Dharma. For instance, by studying the valid knowledge chapter (*Pramanasiddhi*) of the *Commentary on Valid Cognition* (*Pramāṇavārttika*), we come to understand the Buddha as a valid source of knowledge. Through studying *The Noble Sutra of Recalling the Three Jewels* deepens our appreciation of the inconceivable qualities of the Three Jewels, further strengthening our confident faith.

The Sutra on the Mahayana Principle of Six Paramitas says:

Only the Buddha Bhagavant,⁹
A great noble teacher with sun-like wisdom,
Can exterminate our doubts,
So, he is the genuine refuge.

Nevertheless, how many people in the world can truly understand this? There

⁹ Bhagavant (adj. n.) means fortunate, illustrious, and sublime, functioning as both an epithet and title meaning "Lord." Thus, it is applied to the Buddha and his predecessors.

are some Buddhists who, a dozen years ago, received a refuge certificate that was stamped and signed; yet they haven't developed genuine faith in the Buddha, rendering their refuge superficial. In their minds, there may be no distinction between the Buddha and the earth spirit or heavenly kings. If they must choose only one object to take refuge in, they may even select an earth spirit. Taking refuge in this manner cannot be considered genuine refuge. It is merely a pseudo-refuge without substance.

Therefore, I sincerely hope every Buddhist takes real refuge. Even if it starts from vivid faith, gradually it should become refuge backed up by confident faith or irreversible faith. It is only then that we can contribute greatly to Buddhist activities such as propagating the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings. Here is a story that corresponds to this.

Kanishka, the king of the Kusha Empire,¹⁰ was an aggressive, hot-tempered, and rigid person who liked to hunt. Once in a forest he spotted a little white rabbit, so he went after it with his bow and arrow. Suddenly, the rabbit disappeared, and a boy appeared making a meter-high stupa.

The king asked, "Why are you making this?"

The boy answered, "Before his parinirvana, Buddha Shakyamuni foretold that four hundred years later, a king named Kanishka would erect a stupa on this spot and contribute greatly to Buddhism. I am here to give you a hint with this mud stupa." After saying that, the boy disappeared.

Hearing this King Kanishka instantly generated faith and a sense of joy, thinking, "How extraordinary was Buddha Shakyamuni! He knew I would be here! Since the Buddha has so prophesied, I should convert to Buddhism." After his conversion to Buddhism, gradually he became an open-hearted, benevolent, and faithful ruler.

He not only believed in Buddhism, but also encouraged its teachings. He built a Dharma hall in his palace, and invited different learned masters to give teachings

¹⁰ The Kushan Empire was a syncretic empire, formed by the Yuezhi, in the Bactrian territories in the early 1st century. It spread to encompass much of Afghanistan, and then the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent at least as far as Saketa and Sarnath near Varanasi (Benares), where inscriptions have been found dating to the era of the Kushan Emperor Kanishka the Great. Emperor Kanishka was a great patron of Buddhism. He played an important role in the establishment of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent and its spread to Central Asia and China.

on a daily basis. Through his study, King Kanishka's faith was getting stronger. As he progressed further on the path, his trust in the Buddha and the Dharma ripened.

Soon King Kanishka noticed that each master had his own interpretation about the same section of sutra. Befuddled, the king didn't know which one he should follow, so he asked Pārśva, a renowned Buddhist monk, why so many variations existed. Pārśva answered, "It has been four hundred years since Buddha Shakyamuni's parinirvana. Various Buddhist schools such as the Theravada¹¹ and the Mahasamghika¹² disagree with each other on the interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. It is time to organize the 4th Buddhist Council, which will mark an important turning point for Buddhism."

Knowing this could bring great benefits to sentient beings, the king adopted Pārśva's suggestion and gathered five hundred bhikkhus in Kashmir, headed by Vasumitra, to systematize the *Sarvastivadin*¹³ *Abhidharma* texts. The main fruit of this council was the vast commentary known as the *Abhidharma Mahavibhasa Shastra* (*Great Exegesis*), an extensive compendium and reference work on a portion of the *Sarvastivadin Abhidharma*.

When King Kanishka first heard the Buddha's prophecy to him, he generated vivid faith. Then, after he systematically heard and contemplated on the Buddha's

¹¹ Theravada (Pāli, lit. "School of the Elders") is the most ancient branch of extant Buddhism today, and the one that preserved their version of the teachings of Gautama Buddha in the Pāli Canon. The Pāli Canon is the only complete Buddhist canon that survives in the classical Indian language Pāli, which serves as the sacred language and lingua franca of Theravāda Buddhism. For more than a millennium Theravāda has focused on preserving the dhamma as written in its texts, and it tends to be very conservative with regard to matters of doctrine and monastic discipline. Since the 19th century, meditation practice has been re-introduced, and has become popular with a lay audience, both in traditional Theravada countries and in the West.

¹² Mahasamghika (Sanskrit "of the great Sangha") was one of the early Buddhist schools. Interest in the origins of the Mahasamghika school lies in the fact that their Vinaya recension appears in several ways to represent an older redaction overall. Many scholars also look to the Mahasamghika branch for the initial development of Mahayana Buddhism.

¹³ The Sarvastivada were an early school of Buddhism established around the reign of Asoka (third century BC). It was particularly known as an Abhidharma tradition, with a unique set of seven Abhidharma works. The Sarvastivadins were one of the most influential Buddhist monastic groups, flourishing throughout North India (especially Kashmir) and Central Asia until the 7th century. The orthodox Kashmiri branch of the school composed the large and encyclopedic Mahavibhasa Shastra during the reign of Kanishka (c. 127–150 CE). Because of this, orthodox Sarvastivadins who upheld the doctrines in the Mahavibhasa were called Vaibhasikas. The Sarvastivadins are believed to have given rise to the Mulasarvastivada sect as well as the Sautrantika tradition, although the relationship between these groups has not yet been fully determined.

teachings, he developed confident faith, and eventually renounced worldly endeavors and devoted himself to the propagation of the Dharma.

Many Dharma students may have a similar experience. They were inspired during their first encounter with a great teacher or the Three Jewels; they didn't know too much about the Dharma then but were guided to Buddhism in accord with their affinities. Later they developed confident faith in the Three Jewels through systematic studies, from which they began to have a sound grasp of the teachings to appreciate the extraordinary qualities of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

♦ The importance of faith

Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava says:

With the faith of total trust, one can receive blessings.

Without the mind of doubt, one can achieve whatever one wishes.

With fervent faith, you will obtain blessings. Being free from doubt, you can achieve your wish. The *Sutralankara* says:

Those who prostrate to the feet of the Buddha with fervent faith,

Won't stay in the cycle of birth and death for too long.

Faith is like a seed from which all positive things can grow. If one lacks faith, it is as though that seed has been burned. The sutras¹⁴ say:

In those without faith,

Nothing positive will grow,

Just as a seed burned by fire

Can never sprout green shoots.

Of the seven noble riches,¹⁵ faith is the most important. It is said:

Faith is like a precious wheel,

Turning day and night along the path of virtue.

¹⁴ One of the sutras is the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*.

¹⁵ Seven noble riches include faith, discipline, generosity, learning, dignity, propriety, and wisdom.

Faith is like a precious treasure trove—the source of an inexhaustible supply of virtues. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

Faith is the basis of the Path, the mother of virtues,
Nourishing and growing all good ways,
Cutting away the net of doubt, freeing from the torrent of
passion,
Revealing the unsurpassed road of ultimate peace.
When faith is undefiled, the mind is pure;
Obliterating pride, it is the root of reverence,
And the foremost wealth in the treasury of religion,
Being a pure hand to receive the practices.¹⁶

Faith is like a pair of legs, enabling us to embark on the path to liberation. It is also like a pair of arms, capable of gathering everything positive into our mindstreams. It is said:

Faith is the supreme treasure trove, the best of legs,
A pair of arms that gather all virtues.

Thus, faith can gather all virtues and can generate all great qualities.

The compassion and blessings of the Three Jewels are inconceivable, yet for them to truly permeate us, it entirely depends on our faith and devotion. With immense faith and devotion, we will receive equally immense compassion and blessings from our teacher and the Three Jewels. With moderate faith and devotion, we will receive moderate compassion and blessings. With only a little faith and devotion, we will receive only a little compassion and blessings. With no faith and devotion whatsoever, we will receive absolutely nothing.

Please do bear this in your mind! Sometimes you may complain, “What’s wrong? I have been praying every day but get no result at all!”

Maybe you should run a full “scan” on yourself. While your body is prostrating and your speech is praying, is there fervent faith in your mind? If the answer is no, it makes sense that you cannot receive the inconceivable compassion and blessings

¹⁶ Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, a translation of the Avataksaka Sutra, page 331, Shambhala Publications, 1993.

of the teacher and the Three Jewels. Therefore, it is indispensable that we try our very best to grow faith.

Faith can grow through the studies of the Dharma, so hearing the Buddha's teachings and contemplating them are essential. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

If one always has faith in the honorable Dharma,
One will tirelessly listen to the Buddha's teaching.
If one hears the Buddha's teaching without tiring of it,
One's faith in the Dharma is inconceivable.

The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* contains a story about Hastaka, a layperson who took rebirth in the heaven of Śuddhāvāsa.¹⁷ Hastaka said there were three reasons for his rebirth in the god realm:

“First, I'm never wearied of seeing the buddhas and making offerings to them; second, I'm never wearied of hearing the Dharma; and third, I'm never tired of making offerings to the Sangha.”

Therefore, we should continuously study the Dharma. The better we understand the Dharma, the more faith we'll generate. If we put the Dharma aside, then our faith, however strong it may be at the beginning, will surely fade.

¹⁷ Śuddhāvāsa: the 'Pure Abodes', are a group of five heavens belonging to the fine-material world rūpa-loka see: loka where only the Non-returners see: anāgāmī are reborn, and in which they attain Arahantship and Nibbānaariya-puggala The names of the inhabitants of these Pure Abodes are: Āviha, Ātappa, Sudassa, Sudassī, Akanittha Anagami, Ten hindrances, Buddhist cosmology.



Lesson 85

“absolutely nothing. Without faith, even meeting the Buddha himself and ... devotion, is indispensable. It opens the door to taking refuge.” [page 173–176]

Now let us continue to study “taking refuge,” an uncommon preliminary practice.

Previously we studied the importance of faith: if we have immense faith and devotion, the compassion and blessings we receive will be equally immense, whereas if we have no faith and devotion at all, we will get absolutely nothing. The instructions are very profound, so make sure you contemplate them over and over again.

In the process of studying the Dharma, in-depth contemplation is very crucial. You should emulate past eminent masters who would read at least a few pages of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* every day, and then ponder over the meaning. By doing so, gradually your faith will surely grow.

A couple of days ago when I was teaching Longchenpa’s *Finding Rest in Illusion*, I mentioned I would not accept any material offerings, so if someone insisted, they could make a Dharma offering. Then many female sangha members submitted me their “written reports” of Dharma offerings.

Later I mentioned this in class, and then many male sangha members also sent me their “reports.” I really appreciate what you’ve done. I feel quite happy after reading your reports. I have quite a few “sample reports,” and I can share them with you later.

Today a person made vows in front of me. Maybe she wouldn't like me to tell you her name, so let's keep it just to myself. Now I am inviting a sangha member to read her "plan" of Dharma offering.

Homage to my guru of great kindness!

I vow to offer my body, speech, and mind to you, my guru, and volunteer for your Dharma activities for the rest of my life. While volunteering, I vow to put aside selfishness, to commit virtuous acts, and to generate supreme bodhicitta.

I repent seeing my guru as an ordinary person. I vow to purify this misthought, and to develop the irreversible faith of seeing the guru as the Buddha.

I repent not being filial to my family members. I vow to practice true great filial piety to them from now on.

I once vowed to sleep only four hours a day, but failed to do so, which worries me. Now I vow again in the presence of my guru, that I will only sleep four hours a day.

I vow to do the following on a daily basis: 320 full prostrations; at least twenty-one times the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva; *Amitabha Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra*, the Shurangama Mantra, *The Verses of the Eight Noble Auspicious Ones*, *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, *The Ritual of the Practice of Buddha Shakyamuni*, the Heart Sutra, *The Confessing of Downfalls to the Thirty-Five Buddhas*, *The Noble Sutra of Recalling the Three Jewels*, *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*, *Aspiration to be Cared For in Every Lifetime*, *Prayer of Constantly Chanting*, *An Aspiration toward the Meaning of the Indivisible Ground*, *Path and Fruition of the Great Perfection Manjushri*, *The Song of Victory*; and ten thousand times the Buddha's name. I will also recite ten times each, the Manjushri mantra, Amitabha mantra, Vajrasattva mantra, Padmasambhava mantra, and Avalokiteshvara mantra.

I vow to offer at least twenty-one butter lamps and three oil lamps, and to make a fire offering once daily, if circumstances allow.

I vow to read at least two pages of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* every day.

I vow to have one meditation session on Guru Yoga, preliminaries, relative bodhicitta, and ultimate bodhicitta respectively, and for practice to last at least half an hour in total on a daily basis.

I vow to only find faults in myself, to always appreciate others' kindness, to cut off wrong thoughts, and to avoid worthless chatter. Whenever I violate this vow, I will repent at once.

I wish to offer the abovementioned vows to my guru. May the guru live long and always turn the Dharma wheel. May this Dharma offering repay the Four Kindnesses above and relieve the sufferings of those in the Three Paths below. May the Buddha's wisdom always prevail. May all the sentient beings and I purify our negative actions obscurations, be freed from the cycle of birth and death in this very lifetime and get reborn in the Pure Land!

May the guru always bless me, so I can soon obtain wisdom, compassion, and power inseparable from the guru's own, so I can carry on with the Buddha's activities and vastly benefit sentient beings.

If the above vows are not put into practice, I am willing to suffer in hell forever.

A humble disciple

Nov. 16, 2010

Nice! All of you who are present have been practicing Dharma and doing good deeds together. You may reflect on how well you have been doing. I believe this disciple is not just paying lip service; these words come from the bottom of her heart. She may have been doing all these on a daily basis, including reciting sutras and chanting mantras many times, as well as reading two pages of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. In this way, her good deeds can surpass those of several lazy individuals combined.

When I first came to Larung Gar, I felt that sleeping four hours every night was excessive, and I vowed to minimize my sleep as much as possible. However, as I've

gotten older and busier, I've found it challenging to uphold that vow. Still, making such vows is beneficial, as they help instill discipline in our lives.

Now let's start today's lesson.

♦ **Those without faith cannot be saved, even by the Buddha**

Regarding the importance of faith, Patrul Rinpoche also says the following in the text:

Without faith, even encountering the Buddha in person and becoming his disciple would be quite useless—just as it was for the monk Sunaksatra, whose story was mentioned in the previous chapter, and for the Buddha's cousin, Devadatta.

Nobody surpasses the Buddha in this world, but because his disciples Sunaksatra and Devadatta lacked faith, they couldn't tame their minds even after years of hearing the Buddha's teachings.

Often someone asks me, "So-and-so has been staying at Larung Gar for many years and has heard many teachings given by their gurus, yet why does he still conduct such misdeeds and hold such wrong views?" The answer lies in his disposition and faith. A faithless person would see no virtue in the Buddha himself, let alone in an ordinary spiritual teacher.

The Buddha said in the *Discourse on the Arising and Manifestation of the Tathagata*:

Just as the sun is shining upon the world,
But a born-blind person cannot perceive it.

...

A living being who has lost his innate purity,
Generates no faith in the Tathagata's wisdom.

Though the sun shines upon the whole world, a born blind person cannot see it. Likewise, though the Buddha's wisdom is the most supreme, those who hold wrong thoughts and lack pure perception won't believe in it. Without faith, no matter how many years those individuals have been pursuing the Dharma, they can hardly achieve any realization.

Here is a story from the *Ekottara Agama*:

One day the Buddha was giving teachings to the sangha at Kalandaka

Venuvana (Bamboo Grove Monastery). A senior monk blatantly disregarded stares from sangha members while pointing his feet toward the Dharma seat where the Buddha sat—inappropriate etiquette signaling disrespect—and then fell asleep during the teaching. Meanwhile an eight-year-old novice monk sat beside the Buddha, keeping his back straight in the proper manner and attentively listening to the teachings, with great appreciation and respect.

Seeing this, the Buddha said, “The title of venerable master is not necessarily appropriate for monastics who long ago received ordination. If these so-called venerable masters lack wisdom, stupid behaviors will surface. But if someone really knows the truth of the Dharma and his six faculties aren’t tainted by afflictions, even if that person is a novice monk, he is eligible for the title of venerable master.”

Then the Buddha asked, “Have you noticed the senior monk sleeping with his feet pointing forward?”

“Yes, we do,” the sangha answered.

Next the Buddha asked, “Have you noticed the eight-year-old samanera?”¹⁸

“Yes, we do,” the sangha answered.

The Buddha continued, “They differ greatly in reverence and faith in the Three Jewels. The maturations of their karma also differ significantly. The senior monk was a *naga*¹⁹ in five hundred previous lives. After this life he will be reborn as a naga again, due to his lack of reverence in the Three Jewels. The novice monk has listened to the Dharma teaching with great veneration, so within seven days he will attain realization.”

No matter how long a Buddhist has been studying the Dharma, it may be useless if they lack faith. They just become impervious. Whatever teaching they attend, they will be just like Sunakshatra and Devadatta, thinking, “I know it already.” As a result, the Dharma cannot penetrate them. How pitiful!

What Buddhists need most is faith, and it’s better to have irreversible faith. Though we ordinary people may find it hard to develop irreversible faith, we should

18 A samanera is a novice male monastic in a Buddhist context.

19 Naga is a Sanskrit word that refers to a serpent or snake, especially the king cobra. The term naga in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism denotes divine or semi-divine deities, or a semi-divine race of half-human half-serpent beings that resides in the heavenly Patala (netherworld) and can occasionally take human form. They are principally depicted in three forms: humans with snakes on their heads and necks, common serpents, or as half-human half-snake beings.

at least have vivid faith and eager faith. Otherwise without such faith, we cannot even open the gateway to the Dharma.

Therefore, no matter who we are, we must have genuine faith and devotion. In this way, our sincere prayer can invoke the Buddha, who will bestow us blessings.

♦ **The Buddha's blessings are always available to us**

Whichever deity or buddha it may be, their compassion toward living beings is the same and impartial. As long as we pray, they are always present, and their empowerments and blessings are always available to us. As it is said in a sutra:

Whoever thinks of him with sincere faith,
The Buddha is present before them,
Bestowing empowerments and blessings.

Similarly, the body, speech, mind, precious qualities, and activities of the guru are everywhere. If we always remember and pray to the guru, we'll without doubt receive the guru's unfailing blessings.

The Mahayana Sutra on the Inconceivable Secrets of the Tathagata says:

Just like empty space that is vast,
The Buddha's body is vast;
Because the Buddha's body is vast and boundless,
The Buddha's luminosity is vast likewise;
Because the Buddha's luminosity is vast,
The Buddha's secret speech is vast likewise;
Because the Buddha's secret speech is vast,
The Buddha's wisdom mind is vast likewise.

Buddha is indeed everywhere—in rooms, on trains, in planes, in libraries, at farmers' markets; his body, qualities, and activities are ubiquitous. Whenever we pray with faith and devotion the Buddha's blessings emerge effortlessly, as the moon's reflection appears in clear water.

Whether the blessings of the Three Jewels reach us or not depends entirely on our faith and devotion. When your faith is absent, the Buddha's blessings, however great they are, may not be of benefit to you. When you have faith, even if the sea

has become free of tides, the Buddha's benefit and help to sentient beings will never vanish or expire. The *Mula-Sarvastivada Vinaya* says:

Even when the ocean tides stop rising and falling,
The Buddha will never stop liberating sentient beings.

Why does a buddha continue to liberate sentient beings? If the time for a buddha's teachings to remain in this world has come to an end, then we must not be karmically connected to those teachings. Does that mean that buddha is no longer able to benefit us? The answer is that when his teaching era concludes, it marks the end of the time for that buddha to liberate beings connected to his teachings. However, the blessings of that buddha continue. The blessings of that buddha continue even after the era is complete. Whomever of the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa we pray to, be it Buddha Vipasyin or Buddha Kashyapa of the past, or Buddha Maitreya of the future, their compassion and blessings will always reach us swiftly. There are many corresponding historical accounts.

The Buddha's blessings never part from us. However, due to our lack of devotion and pure perception, we sometimes regard the Buddha as an ordinary person without any blessings. In this circumstance it makes sense that we receive no blessings. It's not the fault of the Buddha, but of our own ignorance.

When Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) was about to leave Tibet for the country of Rakshasas,²⁰ a place with many demonic beings, Tibetans supplicated him to stay and to continue bestowing empowerments and blessings on the Land of Snows. Padmasambhava says,

For every man and woman who has faith in me,
I, Padmasambhava, have never departed anywhere.
For me, there is never a moment of death;
Before each person with faith, there is a Padmasambhava.

Even now many years later, whenever we pray to Padmasambhava by chanting his mantra—*Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hum*—his blessings, albeit invisible, are there for us. This is like a blind person who receives help from another and knows he is being helped, even though he cannot see the helper.

²⁰ A Rakshasa is a demonic being from Hindu mythology which was later incorporated into Buddhism. Rakshasas are also called man eaters (Nri-chakshas, Kravyads). A female rakshasa is known as a Rakshasi. A female Rakshasa in human form is a Manushya-Rakshasi.

It took Asanga twelve years of practice to finally have a vision of Maitreya. At the sight of Maitreya, Asanga cried, “How unkind you are! I have been praying to you for such a long time, yet you didn’t show me your face until now!”

“It is not that I have not shown myself,” Maitreya answered, “You and I have never been separated. But your own negative actions and obscurations were too intense for you to be able to see me.”

When praying to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, we should firmly believe they are right in front of us. This is very important. A person with little faith may see the buddhas and bodhisattvas as no different from worldly ghosts or spirits. In this case, if they see no immediate effect from praying, their thin faith in the Three Jewels will dissipate easily.

In contrast, when a person has confident faith, the compassion of the buddhas and bodhisattvas can be present in anything. This is illustrated by the story of the faithful old woman who attained Buddhahood with the help of a dog’s tooth.

♦ The old woman and a dog tooth

Here is the renowned Tibetan story:

There was once an old woman whose son frequently traveled to India for trade. She once told him, “Bodh Gaya, the sacred place where the fully enlightened Buddha came from, is in India. Please bring me some sacred relic from there so I can do my prostrations to it.”

Though she reminded him repeatedly, her son always forgot and never brought back what she had requested.

One day, as the son was about to depart for India again, the old woman warned him, “If you fail to bring me something for my prostrations this time, I will take my own life right before your eyes!”

[The old woman was really upset, because she had requested many times, not just once or twice, but still had received nothing from her son. In fact, something like a leaf from Bodh Gaya, a piece of the robe covering the Buddha statue in the sanctum of the Mahabodhi Temple, or a piece of stone from Deer Park in Sarnath where Buddha Shakyamuni first taught the Dharma, would have been just fine, but his mother got nothing. So, she had no choice but to threaten her son with her life.]

The son traveled to India, completed his intended business, and returned

home, once again forgetting his mother's request. Only as he approached home did her words resurface in his mind.

"What should I do now?" he wondered. "I've brought nothing for my mother's prostrations. If I return empty-handed, she'll kill herself!"

While looking around, he noticed a dog's skull lying on the ground. He plucked a tooth from it, wrapped it in silk, and presented it to his mother upon arriving home. "Here," he said, "is a tooth from the Buddha himself. You may use it as a support for your prayers."

[What a son! He gave a dog's tooth to his mother, saying it was the Buddha's tooth. Yet the mother was also a bit dim-witted; otherwise, she would have known that a human's tooth differed from a dog's tooth.]

The old woman believed his son's words. She had great faith in the tooth, as though it were truly a relic of the Buddha. She devoted herself to constant prostrations and offerings, and from that dog's tooth, many miraculous pearls emerged. Upon her passing, a radiant canopy of rainbow light enveloped her, accompanied by other extraordinary signs of spiritual attainment.

Unlike the old woman, many people nowadays have an excess of discursive thoughts and are very complicated; they tend to generate various misconceptions about what is actually true. In particular, those lacking merit and right views have many erroneous thoughts, whereas those with merit and wisdom can easily establish correct views and rarely have any wrong views. *The Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

It's easy for a man of virtue to conduct good deeds,
 It's hard for a man of vice to conduct good deeds,
 It's easy for a man of vice to commit bad deeds,
 It's hard for a man of virtue to commit bad deeds.

The old woman attained accomplishment not because of the dog's tooth. Otherwise, there is no need for us to go on pilgrimage, as we can simply obtain blessing from a dog's tooth. However, after hearing this story, someone may still think, "This is a Tibetan story about an old woman attaining Buddhahood with the help of a dog's tooth. It seems that such a tooth contains a lot of blessings. When I find a dog's tooth, I should bring it back home to my parents, as a support for their prayers." This is not the right way to understand the story.

In this story, the old woman's faith was so fervent that she firmly believed the dog's tooth to be a genuine relic of the Buddha. Through her faith, the Buddha's blessings infused the dog's tooth, until it eventually became indistinguishable from a real Buddha's tooth.

Thus, faith is the most crucial factor for obtaining blessings. Even if the object is not a real support of great qualities, as long as we have developed genuine faith, it will naturally become an object carrying the qualities and blessings. Therefore, faith is extremely important in Buddhism.

Not only Tibetan Buddhism attaches great importance to faith, but also Chinese Buddhism. It says in the *Collected Works of Master Yin Guang*:

To obtain real benefit from the Dharma,
One must pursue it with respect and devotion.
The amount of respect and devotion one has
Dictates the amount of negative karma one can purify,
And the amount of merit and wisdom one will accumulate.

Patrul Rinpoche says exactly the same thing. That is, the more faith and devotion we have, the more we can purify negative karma and increase merit and wisdom. If we have no faith and devotion at all, the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas can hardly penetrate into our mind.

♦ Villagers and their faith

The fourth Chapter in the *Dhammapada* has covered the merits of having faith. Here is one of the stories told in the chapter:

During the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, to the southeast of the city of Shravasti, there was a great river, very deep and wide. On the banks of this river were five hundred households of villagers, all of whom made their livings through negative actions such as deceit.

One day the Buddha noticed the time to tame them had ripened, so he came to the riverside and sat down beneath a tree, his body glowing. The villagers, who were full of awe and curiosity after seeing the glory of the Buddha's appearance, approached him with reverence to worship him. The Buddha asked them to sit down and began to teach them the Dharma. But the villagers didn't believe in the teachings.

At this point, the Buddha caused the appearance of an illusory man coming from the south side of the river, walking on the surface of the water, with just his ankles getting wet. After the man crossed the river, he approached the Buddha and prostrated before him.

Seeing this, the villagers were astonished, so they asked the man, “This river is very deep, and the current is strong. How did you manage to walk on the surface of the water and not get engulfed in the stream?”

The man replied, “I reside on the southern bank of the river, and have ever lived in ignorance. I heard the Buddha was here teaching the Dharma, so I was very looking forward to listening to the Buddha’s instructions. When I came to the bank of the river, I found no boat was available. I asked a person about the depth of the river, and he told me, ‘The water is at the depth of your ankle, so why not cross it over by yourself?’ I believed his words, so I was able to walk over the river. Other than this, I don’t have any magic.”

The Buddha praised him, “Excellent! If you have faith, you can truly cross the abyss of birth and death. So, why be surprised by the idea of walking across a river that is merely a few li wide?” Then, the Buddha spoke the following lines:

Faith can cross over any abyss,
Acceptance is the boatman,
Diligence can remove suffering,
Wisdom reaches the other shore...

Hearing these words, the villagers knew the power of faith through that man’s experience. Filled with faith, they took refuge in the Three Jewels and received the layman’s five precepts. Eventually they were all able to believe in the Buddha. In the end, they were all freed from samsara.

Faith is the prerequisite to enter the Dharma. Some Dharma fellows often complain, “My family and friends are so immune to the Dharma!” In fact, this has a lot to do with their faith. If they have faith, then regardless of their social status they will have the opportunity to enter the Dharma. If they don’t have faith, however nice, intelligent, and compassionate they are, they will not enter the Dharma at all.

Faith is indeed very important. With devout faith, the old woman really believed the dog’s tooth as the Buddha’s without doubt, and through wholehearted prayers she indeed obtained the same blessing as praying to the actual Buddha’s

tooth. Many Dharma practitioners share this fervent faith, whether it is in a vajra knot, a book, or a Buddha statue. They consistently pray and prostrate before these objects. Even if the object is of lesser quality, the blessings they receive are incredible.

A similar thing happened to a very good practitioner from Domang Monastery, my home monastery in Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. He had been wandering in sacred mountains around Lhasa for a dozen years and practicing in secluded places. I was told he had finished chanting one hundred million times the Manjushri mantra.

In the 1990s, I found a small bronze statue of Padmasambhava in a local store at Barkam, a county in Eastern Tibetan region, and gave it to him as a gift for a certain reason. The statue cost 5 Chinese Yuan, then equivalent to 70 U.S. cents, so its quality was not very good.

After receiving the statue, this practitioner has kept it with him, and never put it away. Recently he showed me the statue, and I offered to replace it with a better-quality one.

But he immediately declined, saying, “I have great faith in this statue. In the past many years, it has helped me dispel many unfavorable conditions. Last year when I was going through Indian customs, I was so afraid it would get confiscated. Luckily, everything was fine.”

I replied jokingly, “Of course this statue of Padmasambhava wouldn’t be confiscated. Since it can dispel your adversities, it surely can dispel its own adversities.”

This practitioner vividly demonstrated the importance of faith. Without faith he wouldn’t have had carried with him a poor-quality statue for more than a dozen years. With faith, he must have dispelled many obscurations and received many extraordinary blessings, with this statue as the support of his practice. Each of us should try to develop such untainted faith!

♦ Jowo Ben and Jowo Rinpoche

The Jowo Rinpoche is a statue shaped as when Buddha Shakyamuni was twelve years old. It is enshrined in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa and was brought to Tibet by Princess Wencheng. Recently a government official, a young man half-Tibetan and half-Han Chinese who knows little about Buddhism, said, “Ah! I really don’t

understand why a statue brought by a Han Chinese woman is so much worshipped by Tibetans.” Sometimes words from a person who knows neither history nor the power of blessings are truly laughable.

Tibetans think it is a great pity if a person comes into this world but never sees the Jowo Rinpoche. Therefore, many elder Tibetans consider pilgrimage to the Jowo Rinpoche their biggest wish in life. In the past, to repay their parents’ kindness, when possible, some Tibetan children would bring their parents to Lhasa for a pilgrimage to the Jowo Rinpoche.

There used to be a tradition like this. However, today’s young Tibetans seem to care little about it. When they have money, they emulate some Han Chinese and also choose to buy a house or a bicycle for their parents. Oh, I’m just kidding—not the bicycle.

Here is the story:

In the region of Kongpo, there once lived a simple-minded man Kongpo Ben, who later became known as Jowo Ben. He embarked on a pilgrimage to Central Tibet to see the sacred Jowo Rinpoche.

Upon his arrival before the sacred statue, Kongpo Ben found that no caretaker or anyone else was around. Noticing the food offerings and the butter lamps placed before Jowo Rinpoche, he imagined that the Jowo Rinpoche must eat the offering cakes by dipping them into the melted butter of the lamps. He further conjectured that the burning wicks in the butter lamps served to keep the butter in a liquid state for this purpose.

He thought to himself, “Perhaps I should eat some, just as Jowo Rinpoche does.” So, he took a piece of dough from the offering tormas, dipped it in butter, and ate it. Glancing up, he saw the smiling face of Jowo Rinpoche.

“You truly are a kind lama,” Kongpo Ben remarked. “Even when dogs steal the offerings meant for you, you smile. Even when the wind makes the lamps sputter, you keep smiling. Here, I’ll leave my boots with you. Please watch over them while I circumambulate you.”

He removed his boots and placed them before the statue.

As he began walking around the middle pathway that circles the temple, the caretaker noticed the boots. Just as the caretaker was about to throw them out, the statue spoke:

“Do not throw those boots away. Kongpo Ben has entrusted them to me!”

[The caretaker might have been so scared, thinking Kongpo Ben was a great sublime master.]

Kongpo Ben eventually returned to retrieve his boots.

“You truly live up to your reputation as a good lama!” he exclaimed to the statue. “Next year, please pay us a visit. I’ll prepare a feast for you—slaughter an old pig and brew some fine barley beer.”

“I will come,” replied Jowo Rinpoche.

[The caretaker might have lost consciousness here.]

Ben returned home and informed his wife, “I’ve invited Jowo Rinpoche, but I’m not certain when he’ll come. Make sure to keep an eye out for him.”

A year passed. One day, while fetching water from the river, Ben’s wife noticed a vivid reflection of Jowo Rinpoche in the water.

She hurried back and told Kongpo Ben, “There’s something in the river... Could it be the guest you invited?”

Ben hurried to the river and saw the radiant image of Jowo Rinpoche shimmering in the water. Believing that Jowo Rinpoche had fallen into the river, Kongpo Ben jumped in after him. His fervent faith allowed him to grasp the image and carry it with him.

As they made their way toward Kongpo Ben’s home, they came upon a massive rock by the roadside. Jowo Rinpoche refused to go any further.

“I do not enter the homes of laypeople,” he declared, and then vanished into the rock.

The place where Jowo Rinpoche appeared is now known as Jowo Dolé, and the river where the image first emerged is called Jowo River. Even today, it is believed that this sacred site holds the same blessings as Jowo Rinpoche in Lhasa. Thus, people make offerings and prostrations there, honoring its spiritual significance.

In the past when elder Tibetans went to Lhasa, they would travel either by making full prostrations or by walking. The transportation then was not as convenient as it is now, when people can travel by train, bus, or plane. When these Tibetans passed Kongpo via the route from Sershul, they would go on pilgrimage to Jowo Dolé and the Jowo River, then head for Lhasa. Some Tibetans still travel

in this way now. Therefore, Jowo Ben's story truly happened, and it is definitely not a fabricated tale or hearsay.

In this story, Kongpo Ben's faith enabled him to experience the Buddha's compassion. Despite his actions that might otherwise be considered improper—such as consuming butter from the lamps and food from the offerings, and placing his boots before Jowo Rinpoche—the power of his faith transformed these actions into something entirely positive. Because of his faith, Jowo Rinpoche talked to him twice and even appeared in his village. Thus, people with faith can often experience the compassion and blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, in their daily lives.

♦ **An orphan and the Green Tara**

Here is another tale about a Tibetan boy. There was a poor child who lost both parents. It made him very sad whenever he noticed another child having a loving mother.

There was a big stone statue of Green Tara near where he lived, so he would go talk to the Green Tara every day, imagining Tara was his mother. When he was in a bad mood he would share his feelings with Tara, in the way a beloved child would speak to an affectionate mother.

Once he was bullied and became very sad, he embraced the statue, crying. Then the Green Tara statue moved. Tara held him in her arms, cuddling and comforting him just as a mother would do to her child, and played with him. When he was about to leave, the Green Tara removed her necklace and put it around his neck, to relieve his poverty.

Later people noticed an exquisite necklace on the boy and asked him where he got it. The boy answered, "My mother gave it to me."

"Aren't you an orphan?" they asked.

He said, "My mother is that stone statue of Green Tara!"

Not believing his words people went to check the statue and found that the necklace was indeed gone and there was no sign it was chipped away by tools. Since then, people have even more faith in the statue.

The list of such stories goes on and on. Please do not think these are just superstition or myths. It would be foolish if you negated all the miraculous

components in these stories. In contrast, if you develop faith and devotion because of the stories, you will definitely obtain the corresponding blessings and merit.

♦ Faith and the absolute truth

Not to mention the attainment of ordinary spiritual experiences, the realization of absolute truth also depends solely on faith. Therefore, the realization of emptiness and the Great Perfection relies entirely on faith. According to Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*, those with great faith in the profound teachings of emptiness will become great vessels of the Dharma. The Buddha says:

O Sariputra, it is only through faith that one can realize the absolute truth.

When we cultivate extraordinary faith, its power allows the blessings of the teacher and the Three Jewels to enter us and permeate our being. Once such causes and conditions come together, true realization will naturally arise, and we will see the natural state as it truly is. When this occurs, we will develop unwavering faith in the teacher and the Three Jewels, and this faith is even more extraordinary and becomes irreversible. In this way, confident faith and the realization of the natural state support each other.

Even if confident faith hasn't yet arisen in you, just a split second of faith in the Buddha can prevent you from falling into a lower realm. The *Śrīgupta Sutra* says:

Having wholehearted reverence and faith
In the supreme transcendental teacher
Results in not falling into the lower realms
For infinite millions of kalpas.

Therefore, it is especially important to have faith in the Buddha, because he is indeed the refuge of all. The *Lotus Sutra* says:

The World Honored One is so extraordinary,
And hard to encounter;
He has infinite great qualities,
And offers refuge to us all.

There are many other scriptural sources that talk about the merit of faith.

Milarepa had two important disciples: Dagpo Rinpoche and Rechungpa. Rechungpa followed Milarepa for quite a long time, but he violated the guru's instructions three times, so he failed to attain perfect enlightenment within his lifetime. On the other hand, Dagpo Rinpoche developed extraordinary faith in Milarepa upon first hearing his name. He always followed Milarepa's instructions after following him.

When Dagpo Rinpoche met Milarepa for the first time, Milarepa handed Dagpo Rinpoche a bowl of liquor. Though as a monk Dagpo Rinpoche was not supposed to drink alcohol as per monastic precepts, he finished the drink in faith. Because of this auspicious omen Milarepa knew he was a worthy Dharma vessel, who could uphold the lineage and take in all the instructions.

Dagpo Rinpoche didn't stay too long with Milarepa. They were together for roughly thirteen months, just over a year. Nevertheless, Dagpo Rinpoche had received all the blessings from his guru. Once, he had a vision of the seven medicine Buddhas, followed by the thousand Buddhas of the Good Kalpa.

He immediately went to see his guru. Before he could describe his vision, Milarepa told him, "What you saw are only the Rupakaya,²¹ or the form bodies, of the buddhas. You'll see the Dharmakaya later.²² You don't have to stay with me any longer. You may go and leave me. You should build a monastery at the sacred Mount Gampodar, to propagate the Dharma and benefit all beings."

Before leaving Milarepa, Dagpo Rinpoche asked, "After the monastery is built, when will it be time for me to take on disciples and give teachings?"

Milarepa responded, "Once you have a realization that brings you an extraordinarily clear vision of the nature of mind, which is quite different from the one you have now, and you see me as a true buddha, that will be the time for you to begin taking on disciples and giving teachings."

[This is also a very important instruction to us later-generation practitioners. Someone took ordination at Larung Gar, and after attending a few classes, he asked me, "May I go back to my hometown and start to take disciples? I am going to make a nicely designed certificate of taking refuge for each of my disciples. May you grant

²¹ Rupakaya (Skt. rūpakāya; Tib. རུཔ་ཀུ་མུ་, zukku; Wyl. gzugs sku) refers to the two 'form kayas' of a buddha: nirmanakaya and sambhogakaya. It is said that the rupakaya arises from the accumulation of merit and the dharmakaya from the accumulation of wisdom.

²² It implies that Dagpo Rinpoche will realize the nature of the mind later.

me permission? If yes, I will go back and take many disciples. I will keep those who are more capable and offer the rest to you.”]

Mount Gampodar, where Milarepa foretold Dagpo Rinpoche would build a monastery, looks like a king sitting on a cushion. Dagpo started to give teachings at a site near the neck of the mountain, a place that was recommended by Milarepa. Dagpo Rinpoche founded Daklha Gampo Monastery in 1121, held the Dagpo Kagyu Lineage, and is called “Gampopa” by later generations. His lineage disciples are still everywhere in the world, and there are many of them.

When Dagpo Rinpoche left, Milarepa saw him off to a grove where there was a river with a small bridge over it. Milarepa told him, “To comply with dependent origination, I won’t cross the river. Farewell, my disciple. You may go.” Dagpo Rinpoche prostrated to his guru multiple times, praying to him while crying.

Milarepa felt it was not a good dependent origination, so he appeared upset. Then Dagpo Rinpoche left, albeit reluctantly. Though he didn’t follow Milarepa for long, as a disciple of superior faculties, he later realized the true nature of the mind and perceived Milarepa as no different from the Buddha.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often said:

When you see the root guru as no different from the Buddha,
and you recognize the nature of mind through the pointing-out
instructions of the guru, you can take disciples and propagate the
Dharma, which will then create auspicious dependent origination.

Therefore, it depends entirely on our faith and devotion that the compassion and blessings of the teacher and the Three Jewels can enter us. Here is a story:

Once, a disciple knocked hard on Atisha’s door and called out to the teacher’s name, “Jowo, I’m unwell—give me your blessing!”

After the disciple knocked three rounds, Atisha finally opened the door, appearing displeased, saying, “Lax disciple, give me your devotion...”

Therefore, regardless of who they are, if a person lacks devotion to the teacher or to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, it is impossible for them to receive blessings. I often encounter people with no faith in Buddhism who ask me to bestow blessings on them. They say, “Come on! Place your hand on my head! Tap me, tap me!” When I indeed “tap” them, they don’t bother to bend down even a little bit, as if their spines were stainless steel poles.

With this kind of attitude, they cannot receive any blessings, As you've already seen, it is only unwavering and extraordinary faith and devotion that can open the gateway to taking refuge and receiving blessings. Therefore, faith is indispensable for each of us.



Lesson 86

“There are three different levels of motivation for taking refuge ... sessions and make it your constant and most important practice.” [page 176–180]

Previously we learned that faith opens the gateway to taking refuge, and that faith itself is of three kinds: vivid faith, eager faith, and confident faith, which is irreversible. Today we will move to the motivation for taking refuge.

2.2.1.2. Classification of Taking Refuge

♦ Three types of taking refuge

There are three different levels of motivation underlying the act of taking refuge with faith. You should be able to distinguish these three levels of motivation. You may be a monastic or a householder who already took refuge, but do you know which level of motivation your refuge is driven by? Is your refuge that of lesser beings, of middling beings, or of great beings?

1) The refuge of lesser beings

Fear of the sufferings in the three lower realms—the hell realm, the preta realm, and the animal realm—drives one to take refuge with the sole intention of obtaining the happiness of gods and humans. This is the refuge of lesser beings.

Many people take refuge in such a way. I have noticed that some Buddhists’ refuge is even worse than this. They pay no attention to the next life, and instead take refuge only for this life, for the sake of safety, good fortune, family peace,

promotion, wealth, and the like. Such a motivation is much lower than that of lesser beings.

Although many people frequent monasteries or temples and seek a certificate of taking refuge, they often pursue happiness and avoid pain solely for this life. In that case, they may not have taken true refuge.

If in the future you teach others the three refuges and five precepts, you should be well-acquainted with the three different levels of motivation for taking refuge. Meanwhile, you should reflect on yourself by asking, “What was my initial motivation for taking refuge? What is it now?” Each of us should often contemplate this.

2) The refuge of middling beings

Through hearing, contemplation, and meditation, one comes to understand that regardless of being born into the high or low realms of samsara, everyone in samsara is subject to suffering. True happiness cannot be found within samsara, just as a pleasant fragrance cannot exist in a filthy room. To escape the sufferings of samsara and attain the fruition of nirvana—the ultimate peace—one takes refuge in the Three Jewels.

For example, some people aspire to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, after knowing the supreme great qualities of this Buddha-field. However, such an aspiration is for the sake of their own liberation and being free from suffering. Therefore, it is the refuge of middling beings, not the utmost refuge.

3) The refuge of great beings

The sight of all beings immersed in the vast ocean of samsara’s endless suffering, experiencing unimaginable torments, motivates one to take refuge in the aspiration to help them attain the unsurpassable and omniscient state of perfect Buddhahood. This motivation is what we should cultivate.

♦ The reason of taking the refuge of great beings

Of course, no matter which type of refuge you take, it brings great merit, as said in the *Itivuttaka*.²³

²³ The *Itivuttaka* (Pali for “as it was said”) is a Buddhist scripture, part of the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism and is attributed to Khujjuttara’s recollection of Buddha’s discourses. It is included there in the Sutta Pitaka’s Khuddaka Nikaya. It comprises 112 short teachings ascribed in the text to the Buddha, each consisting of a prose portion followed by a verse

There are three most supreme (jewels),
 Namely, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha;
 Whoever develops pure faith in them,
 Can realize the most supreme Dharma.

Therefore, taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the most fortunate thing to do, as well as the biggest attainment we can get, from coming to this world. That said, of these three levels of motivation, we should choose the way of great beings, taking refuge with the intention of helping all sentient beings achieve the state of perfect Buddhahood. We shouldn't take refuge only for the sake of having a good rebirth in the human or god realm, or for our own liberation. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

To eliminate all kinds of mental poisons,
 One should contemplate and meditate on the utmost wisdom,
 Not for the sake of one's own happiness,
 But for the liberation of all beings from suffering.

At first glance, the happiness of gods and humans may seem like true happiness. However, it is not free from suffering. Once the karmic effects of the positive actions that lead beings to such states of happiness are exhausted, they inevitably fall back into the lower realms.

Here is a story from the *Sundry Similes Sutra*:

Once upon a time, one hundred thousand monks engaged in ascetic practice in a place in India. Of these fifty thousand had attained arhathood so they were free from afflictions and had obtained six kinds of miraculous power, and the remaining fifty thousand had either attained one of the three preceding stages of attainment²⁴ or no realization. An elderly man had faith in them, so he made offerings to them with the idea of obtaining the happiness of gods and men for himself. When dedicating the merit, the most senior master in the sangha told the elderly man, "By making offerings, you actually committed a grave misdeed today."

portion. The latter may be a paraphrase of the former, or complementary. Some scholars consider it one of the earliest of all Buddhist scriptures, while others consider it somewhat later. Latest translation by Samanera Mahinda was published in 2018.

²⁴ Before achieving Arhathood, which is the highest level of attainment in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, there are three preceding stages of attainment which are Sotāpanna (stream-enterer), Sakadāgāmi (once-returner), and Anāgāmi (non-returner).

The monks who hadn't attained arhathood didn't understand his words, thinking the most senior master was too old and somewhat senile. The master explained, "This patron's offering is for obtaining the happiness of gods and men. In the future when he obtains such happiness, he will be so arrogant that he will not seek liberation and will show no respect to the Three Jewels. When the effects of his good action exhausts, he will definitely fall into a lower realm."

Therefore, no matter what good deeds we perform, they should not be done for the sake of obtaining temporary happiness in the higher realms. Also, we shouldn't seek the fruitions of the shravakas or pratyekabuddhas, as their nirvana, though bringing peace and happiness, is for themselves alone. When all beings—our mothers and fathers since beginningless time—are sinking in samsara's infinite ocean of suffering, it would not be right for us to not help them. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels with the intention of helping all sentient beings attain Buddhahood is, therefore, the way of great beings and the gateway to infinite merit. This is the way we should adopt.

It is said in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland of the Middle Way*:

As the kinds of beings are infinite,
The aspiration to help them is infinite, too.

Since the number of sentient beings is infinite, the wish to help them through the six perfections and innumerable bodhisattva actions is also infinite. Consequently, the merit generated from this wish is also infinite. This is because the very act of wishing to help an infinite number of beings can itself yield infinite merit.

In the practice of taking refuge, you must know the merit of taking refuge as a great being. Otherwise, if you take refuge just for your own temporary benefits, not only does this refuge not generate great merit, but also it may become a cause of bad rebirth, just as the elder patron would have had experienced.

The Sutra on the Samadhi of the Four Youths says:

How can there be happiness in the three worlds?
One is born and reborn over and over again,
One dies and experiences rebirth yet again,
Which just increases suffering, making it uninterrupted.

All sentient beings are revolving in the circle of birth and death, and in so doing we experience more and more suffering. How meaningless! Therefore, we should take refuge with the motivation of bodhicitta, aspiring to sever the root of samsara for all sentient beings so that they will be freed from the ocean of samsara's infinite sufferings.

In short, as Mahayanists, we must not forget the motivation of helping all beings, regardless of the circumstances. You should always keep this in mind during your preliminary practices. Whichever practice you are doing, at the very beginning you should remind yourself, "It is not for my own liberation, but for the benefit of all beings."

You must not think like this: "I practice preliminaries so that I can have access to the main practice of the tantric teachings. If I don't complete preliminaries, I won't be qualified to receive the tantric transmissions." If this is your motivation, then you are heading in the wrong direction!

2.2.1.3. How to Take Refuge

♦ The methods of taking refuge

1) The method in the Basic Vehicle

In the Basic Vehicle, one takes refuge in the Buddha as the teacher, the Dharma as the path, and the Sangha as the companions along the way.

This is the refuge of Sutrayana. It's like going to India: one must find a guide who has experience or knowledge, then one must find the path—either via air or on highway. Lastly one also needs companions to look after each other during the trip.

Likewise, to attain perfect and complete Buddhahood, we must first take refuge in the Buddha who, as a guide, can show us how and where to go. Then, since the Buddha has attained Buddhahood through practicing the Dharma, we must take refuge in the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings, which is the path we should embark on. Last we must also take refuge in the sangha, who accompany us along the path to liberation, so we won't get scared from being alone or in the face of obstacles.

[Someone may travel together with his Dharma fellows, but due to their conflicting thoughts and ideas, they stop talking to each other after the trip. Please

pay attention to this, because there are cases like this. Two Dharma friends traveled or pilgrimaged together; at the very beginning, they were on such good terms that they even put their money together; later they were in conflict, so they divided their money and refused to talk to each other. This is not good.]

Above is the refuge of basic vehicle.

2) The method in the extraordinary Vajrayana²⁵

The general method of Vajrayana refers to taking refuge by offering body, speech, and mind to the teacher, with the deities as support and the dakinis as companions.

When taking refuge, we should offer body, speech and mind to the teacher because they are the root of all blessings, we take deities such as Manjushri or Avalokiteshvara as supports because they are the root of all accomplishment, and we take the dakinis as companions because they are the root of all enlightened activities. The teacher, deity, and dakini are known as the Three Roots. Taking refuge in the Three Roots is the refuge of the general method of Tantrayana.

3) The special method of the Vajra Essence²⁶

The special, sublime method of the Vajra Essence is to take refuge in the swift path, where one utilizes the channels as the Nirmanakaya, trains the energies as the Sambhogakaya, and purifies the essences as the Dharmakaya.

As said in *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the refuge according to the special, sublime method of the Vajra Essence comprises the fixed channels as the Sangha and the Nirmanakaya, the moving energies as the Dharma and the Sambhogakaya, and the structured essences as the Buddha and the Dharmakaya.

4) The ultimate and infallible refuge in the indestructible natural state²⁷

The ultimate and infallible refuge in the indestructible natural state is grounded in the primal wisdom inherent in the refuge. The essence of the primal wisdom is emptiness, its nature is luminosity, and its compassion is all-pervasive. In this context, taking refuge means to realize and stabilize the inseparability of

²⁵ Here it refers to the kriya (action) tantra and the charya (conduct) tantra. Both are the outer classes of tantra.

²⁶ Here it refers to mahayoga and anuyoga.

²⁷ Here it refers to atiyoga.

the three aspects of primal wisdom in one's own mindstream through prolonged practice.

In particular, the empty essence is the Buddha and the Dharmakaya, the luminous nature is the Dharma and the Sambhogakaya, and the all-pervasive compassion is the Sangha and the Nirmanakaya. Padmasambhava has explained this with an extraordinary pith instruction in the *Khandro Nyingtik* (*The Heart Essence of the Dakinis*).

♦ Refuge prayer

When reciting the refuge prayer, you may choose the prayer in the Longchen Nyingtik Ngöndro (*The preliminary practices for the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse*). This starts with, “In the Sugatas of the Three Roots, the true Three Jewels, ...” Another choice is the one in Mipham Rinpoche's *Illuminating the Path to Liberation: A Preliminary Practice*, which starts with, “I and all beings of the six classes respectfully take refuge...”

You may choose whichever prayer to recite, and make sure you can complete the one hundred thousand repetitions.

Some of you told me you had completed the refuge practice of Jonang, Gelug, or other schools, in which I rejoice. But if you want to receive the tantric teachings of the Great Perfection, the pinnacle of all vehicles, you'd better complete the preliminary practices of the Longchen Nyingtik lineage.

This is my personal opinion. I do not mean to suggest that if you have completed the preliminaries of another school, you will gain nothing from Dzogchen teachings unless you also finish the Nyingma cycle of preliminaries. That is not my intention, and I would not make such a claim. However, I believe the blessings, accomplishments, and views can vary across different schools. Therefore, even if you have completed the preliminaries of another school of Tibetan Buddhism, I strongly recommend also completing the preliminaries according to the liturgy of Longchen Nyingtik Ngöndro or Mipham Rinpoche's. I am very familiar with the teachings of Longchen Nyingtik, and I believe that perfecting these preliminary practices together could create extraordinary conditions for many aspects of our practice.

Of course, it is totally fine if you practice the preliminaries of another school. As long as it is the pure Dharma, not based on a liturgy of someone's ordinary

thoughts, you are qualified to receive the tantric teaching after finishing the preliminaries. Otherwise, I cannot guarantee whether the preliminaries you chose to practice will be effective. Please pay attention to this.

♦ Visualize the field of merit



THE FIELD OF REFUGE

Having clearly understood all these ways to take refuge, we now proceed to the actual practice of taking refuge. Begin by visualizing the field of merit before which you will take refuge.

If you are capable, you may visualize everything in the field of merit step-by-step. If you are not so capable, you may simply visualize like this: “In front of me is a wish-fulfilling tree with five great branches, on which there are Padmasambhava—the embodiment of the Three Jewels, and the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.” This simplified visualization also works.

I heard that a few senior Dharma fellows in the audience couldn’t even memorize the mani mantra, so it might be challenging for them to memorize the refuge prayer. Aside from them, the rest of you should have no problem memorizing the refuge prayer, so you must complete the recitation of the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times.

During the practice, you should visualize the space around you as a Buddha-field, exquisitely beautiful and pleasant, made entirely of precious materials. The ground is perfectly smooth, like the surface of a mirror, free from any hills, valleys, or unevenness.

As said in *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, Brahama Sikhin said the Buddha-field of Buddha Shakyamuni was equal to the splendor of, for example, the heavenly palace of Ishvara, yet Sariputra disagreed. Then the Buddha touched the ground with his big toe, and the whole cosmos of a billion worlds suddenly was transformed into a display of splendor.

The Buddha said:

Sariputra, this Buddha-field is always thus pure; it is just that some beings failed to see the purity of it. When celestial beings eat the same food, due to the differences of their merits, they experience different tastes. Likewise, due to the differences of all beings’ karma, some cannot see the splendor of my Buddha-field. Only those with the mind of purity can see the purity of all phenomena.

Knowing this, you should first regard the place where you are is of purity. This is the first step of your refuge practice.

Then, in the middle, visualize a wish-fulfilling tree in front of you, with five great branches spreading from its trunk. It is lush with leaves, blooming with

flowers, and full of fruit. The branches extend so far to the east, south, west, and north that they fill the entire sky. Every branch and twig is adorned with various ornaments made of precious jewels and bells. This scene can be found on thangkas and pictures of the field of merit. You may take a good look at the image if you find it hard to visualize, then you may proceed to visualize the objects on each of the five branches.

During your practice you don't have to visualize details other than these. Some practitioners ask further, "How many twigs and leaves in total should I visualize?" and the like. In fact, if you can visualize what is described in the text, you are doing a pretty good job already. For me it's good enough to visualize according to the description, so you don't need to add more details.

On the central branch: the root teacher

Here you visualize your root teacher, the embodiment of all past, present, and future Buddhas, appearing in the form of Padmasambhava. This visualization is different from that described in *Finding Rest in Illusion*, in which Longchenpa stresses that the guru's image remains unchanged during the visualization. But here the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said that if your root teacher is old and wrinkled, you shouldn't visualize his real appearance, and instead you should visualize him in the form of Padmasambhava and his consort. The requirement of each practice is not the same.

In this practice, visualize in the following way:

On the central branch is your root guru—the incomparable source of great compassion and the embodiment of all buddhas of the three times, appearing in the form of the great Vajradhara of Oddiyana (Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava). His body is a captivating white color with a rosy gleam, featuring one face, two arms, and two legs, seated in the royal posture on a jeweled throne upheld by eight lions. This throne has a seat consisting of a multi-colored lotus, a sun, and a moon. In his right hand, he holds a pure golden five-pronged vajra in a threatening gesture, while his left hand rests in the meditation gesture, cradling a skull cup containing a vase filled with the ambrosia of deathless wisdom. At the opening of the vase sits a wish-fulfilling tree.

Guru Rinpoche is dressed in a brocade cloak, monastic robes, and a long-sleeved blue tunic, with the lotus hat upon his head. Seated in union with

him is his consort, the white dakini Yeshe Tsogyal, who holds a hooked knife and a skull cup. Visualize them clearly in this form before you, facing you.

If you have faith in Vajrayana, you may visualize Padmasambhava seating in union with his consort Yeshe Tsogyal. If you have no faith in the union image and even generate some impure ordinary thoughts, you may visualize Padmasambhava alone.

On the top branch: the lineage teachers

Above Guru Rinpoche's head are all the lamas of the lineage, seated one above the other, with each not quite touching the one below. There are innumerable lineage teachers in each school of Tibetan Buddhism. Gelug has its own lineage teachers, Kagyu has its own lineage teachers, and so forth. Just within our Nyingma school, there are lineage teachers for different tantric teachings. According to historical accounts in Buddhism, in Nyingma school there are respective lineage teachers for the Chetsün, Longchen Nyingtik, Vimalamitra Great Perfection, and other Dzogchen traditions. But here, we visualize the main teachers of the Longchen Nyingtik tradition.

In the appendix of the Chinese version of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you may find pictures of these lineage masters. Their brief introductions and pictures can also be found in Longchenpa's *Lama Nyingtik*,²⁸ which you should carefully go through one by one. These lineage masters offer indispensable dependent origination to our realization of the Great Perfection, so we must visualize them.

The lineage masters are: Samantabhadra, the Dharmakaya; Vajrasattva, the Sambhogakaya; Garab Dorje, the Nirmanakaya; the master Manjushrimitra; Guru Shri Singha; the learned Jñanasutra; the great pandita Vimalamitra; Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava; the king Trisong Detsen; the great translator Vairotsana; the dakini Yeshe Tsogyal; the omniscient Longchenpa; and Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa. The specific introductions of these masters are in the Guru Yoga chapter of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

If you can keep on visualizing, there are also Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, Patrul Rinpoche, Mipham Rinpoche, Thubga Rinpoche, and then my root guru, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. They are my lineage masters, who transmitted *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* one by one, successively,

²⁸ Specifically, it is in the chapter titled The Treatise on the Garland of Histories.

and from the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, I received its uninterrupted transmission.

If you receive the teaching from another lineage line other than that of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, the list of the lineage masters could be different. Regarding *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, all teachers from Samantabhadra, the Dharmakaya, to the one who teaches you this text are your lineage masters.

Each lineage master should be visualized with their own particular attires and ornaments. They are seated one above the other, each not quite touching the one below. These lineage masters are surrounded by an inconceivable multitude of deities of the four sections of tantra, along with dakas and dakinis.

On the front branch: the buddhas of the past, present, and future

On the front branch sits Buddha Shakyamuni, encircled by the 1,002 buddhas of this Great Kalpa, along with all the buddhas of the past, present, and future from the ten directions. They all appear in the supreme Nirmanakaya form, adorned in monastic robes and displaying the thirty-two major marks of Buddhahood—such as the crown protuberance and the wheels on the soles of their feet—as well as the eighty minor signs. Seated in the vajra posture, their bodies are white, yellow, red, green, or blue, radiating inconceivable rays of light.

This is how you visualize the buddhas. Some scriptures say there are one thousand buddhas in the Good Kalpa, and some say 1,002 buddhas. Nevertheless, only three buddhas are depicted in the field of merit, which respectively represent the buddhas of the past, the buddhas of the present, and the buddhas of the future. The buddhas are in the same supreme Nirmanakaya form as Buddha Shakyamuni. Such a visualization is about taking refuge in the Buddha. The previous visualization of the teachers is about taking refuge in the guru.

On the right-hand branch: the sangha of bodhisattvas

On the branch to the right, visualize the eight great bodhisattvas,²⁹ led by Manjushri, Vajrapani, and Avalokiteshvara. They are surrounded by the whole

²⁹ The main Bodhisattvas in Buddha Shakyamuni's retinue: Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, Vajrapani, Maitreya, Akasagarbha, Ksitigarbha, Sarvanivaranaviskambhin, and Samantabhadra.

noble sangha of bodhisattvas. They appear in white, yellow, red, green, or blue, adorned with the thirteen ornaments of the Sambhogakaya, and standing with both feet together.

On the left-hand branch: the sangha of Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas

On the branch to the left, visualize the two principal shravakas—Sariputra and Maudgalyayana—surrounded by the noble sangha of shravakas and pratyekabuddhas. They are all white in color, clad in the three monastic robes. They too are standing upright, holding their staffs and alms-bowls in their hands.

On the rear branch: the Dharma in the form of piles of books

On the rear branch, visualize the Jewel of the Dharma in the form of piles of texts. At the very top, surrounded by a lattice of light, are the six million four hundred thousand tantras of the Great Perfection, with the label of each volume facing toward you. All these texts appear vividly and distinctly, resonating with the spontaneous melody of the vowels and consonants.

Between the branches: the male and female Dharma protectors

Between the branches are Dharma protectors, including both wisdom protectors and those bound by the karmic effects of their past actions. The male protectors face outward, preventing outer obstacles from coming in and shielding us from obstacles and unfavorable conditions that hinder our practice of the Dharma and attainment of enlightenment. The female protectors face inward, ensuring to keep our inner accomplishments from leaking out. As said in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, all these Dharma protectors are emanations of the buddhas, with infinite qualities of wisdom, compassion, and power, and they are all very kind to us. One must think this way during the refuge practice.

♦ The how of visualization

If it is hard for you to visualize all these figures of refuge at the same time,

you may switch your focus during the practice. For example, you may visualize Padmasambhava on the central branch for a while; then move to the sangha of Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas on the left-hand branch; then the sangha of Bodhisattvas on the right-hand branch; then the Dharma in the form of piles of books on the rear branch; and the buddhas of the past, present, and future on the front branch. You should do the refuge practice in distinct sessions, reciting the prayer while doing the visualization.

These are the figures of refuge for this practice, but what's most important is what you are thinking about. First, to take refuge you should entrust everything, including your body and life, to the Three Jewels. In so doing, you may achieve what's described in the *Compilation of Anecdotes in Sutras and Vinayas*:

Those who take refuge in the Buddha
 Won't be reborn in the three lower realms;
 They'll enjoy happiness in the god and human realms,
 And eventually attain the state of nirvana.

You should make sure that your goal of taking refuge is to benefit countless beings, not for your own health or access to tantric teachings. You shouldn't hastily complete the recitation of the refuge prayers one hundred thousand times just to keep pace with your Dharma peers. When doing the refuge practice, you should remind yourself over and over again, "I take refuge for the purpose of benefiting innumerable beings."

During the practice, how should you visualize yourself and your surroundings?

Visualize your father from this lifetime standing to your right and your mother to your left. In front of you is an immense crowd covering the surface of the earth, comprising all beings from the three realms and the six realms. In the first row of the crowd are all your enemies who harbor hatred toward you and all obstacle makers who harm you.

Specifically, your parents in this life are with you on both sides in your visualization, because they have been very kind to you. It says in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and other texts that we must be grateful to our parents. Meanwhile, you should put all your adversaries in front of you.

A Dharma fellow told me the other day, "I am doing my preliminaries. I am on bad terms with so many people, so I have to visualize a large crowd of Dharma

friends in front of me...and today I have to add one more.” Each time she has a conflict with someone, and after the argument, she has to put that person in front of her during her practice. However, her way of visualization is right.

If you don’t have any enemy, you may put beings of the six realms in the front. You don’t have to visualize a specific person of importance. Or you may put in front all obstacle makers who harm you, or those who slander or hurt you for no reason.

Together with all these beings, you stand with your hands joined in reverence. Express respect with your body by performing prostrations. Express respect with your speech by reciting the refuge prayer. Express respect with your mind by cultivating the following thought:

“O Teacher and the Three Jewels, whether I face joy or sorrow, ease or hardship, fortune or misfortune, illness or suffering, I turn to no one but you for refuge or protection. You are my only protector, my only guide, my only shelter, and my only hope. From this moment until I attain perfect enlightenment, I place all my trust and faith in you. I will not rely on my father’s opinion, my mother’s advice, or my own judgment. Instead, I take you, my teacher, and the Three Jewels as my support. To you, I dedicate my offerings. To you, I commit myself entirely. I have no other refuge, no other hope but you!”

As ordinary beings, we may not be able to cultivate such a thought at all times, but at the very least, we should do so during each of our meditation sessions.

Regarding “I place all my trust and faith in you,” it reminds me of a person. He is a government official in my hometown who is not nice to me. He neglected my application for building a non-profit school, and always tried to avoid me. Once he had a conflict with the locals, and he really couldn’t solve the issue. So he called me, asking me to be the mediator. At that time, he showed having a lot of faith in me, and told me over and over again, “I place all my trust and faith in you!”

In the Three Jewels, we should have complete trust and faith. Whatever happens to us, good or bad, think, “I place all my trust and faith in the Three Jewels!” It is not easy to develop such fervent faith and devotion, but without it there is little meaning to paying lip service by reciting, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.” Therefore, please pay attention to the quality of your practice. You must repeatedly contemplate the meaning of key phrases such as “benefiting all sentient beings,” “whole-heartedly,” and “placing all my trust and faith in you.” Otherwise, the result of your refuge practice may not be very good.

To become a true disciple of the Three Jewels, you must have such motivation. If you recite the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times in such a manner, the quality of your practice will definitely be good. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said that it's better to practice preliminaries in retreat so you don't get distracted, and so you remain in a state of calm and peace every day.

In particular, your practice will be perfect if you can do it with the three supreme methods. At the beginning of each session, you generate bodhicitta; in the middle, you place an image of the field of merit for taking refuge, make offerings, and then recite the liturgy and prayer one-pointedly. In the end, you dedicate the merit.

This time I'm giving very extensive teaching on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. This is the first time in this life, as well as the last time, that I will teach the text like this. So please, don't miss it carelessly. You should devote yourself to the study and to the practice.

With fervent conviction, recite the following text:

*In the Sugatas of the Three Roots, the true Three Jewels,
In the bodhicitta, nature of the channels, energies and
essences
And in the mandala of essential nature, natural expression
and compassion,
I take refuge until I reach the heart of enlightenment.³⁰*

Repeat this prayer at least one hundred thousand times for your refuge practice. Or, you may also recite the refuge prayer in Mipham Rinpoche's *Illuminating the Path to Liberation: A Preliminary Practice*:

I and all beings of the six classes respectfully take refuge
In the gurus, yidam deities and hosts of dakinis,
And the Buddha, Dharma and noble Sangha,
Who fill the expanse of space at the level of the sky.³¹

³⁰ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 180.

³¹ Translated by Adam Pearcey, 2019.

The two prayers don't differ significantly, so you may recite either one.

As of tomorrow, you will start the refuge practice. Those who follow this teaching through audio or video should complete reciting the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times. Those who are present in my class should finish the refuge practice soon. If possible, you should practice in a secluded retreat. If not, you may finish this preliminary in the format of group practice.

In short, you must complete one hundred thousand repetitions of the refuge prayer. This has always been emphasized by our Nyingma lineage masters, as well as by masters of other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Nowadays, a few individuals suggest that it is acceptable not to engage in the preliminary practices before proceeding to the main practice, which is beyond my understanding.

As Patrul Rinpoche says in the text, "Say this as many times as possible in each session, until you have said it at least one hundred thousand times." In the tradition of many enlightened masters such as Patrul Rinpoche, Mipham Rinpoche, and the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, a person is not eligible to listen to any tantric teaching without completing the full cycle of preliminaries.

So, I hope you will devote yourself in the preliminary practices this time, not only in quantity, but also in quality. It does take time and effort to practice preliminaries, but if you want to attain liberation, you definitely have to make an effort. Otherwise, even if you live to seventy or eighty years old, your practice might not be successful.

As Geshe Chekawa said, most of our lives are spent on matters related to food, clothing, and illness, and the time we have for practice may total fewer than five years. Many of us share this experience. We may have been busy our entire lives and never managed to complete even one cycle of the preliminaries. We should reflect on how many rounds of preliminaries past eminent masters completed during their lifetimes. A Dharma student may not be regarded as a true practitioner if they haven't finished at least one cycle of the preliminaries with good quality.

If you want to practice the preliminaries well, you should do so in the format of distinct sessions,³² as recommended by Patrul Rinpoche. I hope you can follow this

³² To practise systematically it is recommended that one allots a regular period of time, during which one concentrates on the practice without interruption. This might be just once a day, or, in an intensive retreat, for instance, as many as four sessions a day: in the early morning, mid-morning, afternoon and evening. (source: notes in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, page 386).

suggestion as much as possible. If you cannot, at least you should avoid distractions when practicing.

Should you put aside the preliminaries once you are done with the cycle? The answer is no. You should continue with the practices during your daily life, and for example you should continue to practice taking refuge whenever is needed. Please do pay attention to this.



Lesson 87

“You might wonder why your enemies... of Secret Mantrayana.” [page 180–183]

During the last class, I introduced the field of merit for taking refuge. Specifically, the center of the merit field is the root guru in the form of Padmasambhava. Above him are all the masters of the lineage, in front of whom are the buddhas of the past, the present, and the future. Behind him is the Dharma in the form of piles of books, including the Seventeen Tantras of the Great Perfection. To the right and left of the root guru are the sangha of bodhisattvas, and the sangha of shravakas and pratyekabuddhas respectively. Surrounding them all are the glorious dharma protectors.

Meanwhile, you should visualize your enemies and obstacle-makers in front of you, together with all beings of the six realms of existence. Visualize your father and mother in this lifetime, beside you on your right and left sides respectively. All these beings with you are standing up and facing the field of merit. They are reciting the refuge prayer, while prostrating with respect.

According to some masters’ traditions, it is acceptable to combine prostrations with refuge practice in the same sessions. This is how I initially did my preliminaries. During my early years at Larung Gar, I guided some Dharma fellows in their preliminary practices and encouraged them to combine prostrations with refuge practice.

During the practice, you should visualize yourself standing together with all beings of the three worlds and the six realms. You are all prostrating with the

body, reciting the refuge prayer with speech, and cultivating a thought of refuge commitment in the mind.

That thought should be, “From now until I attain perfect enlightenment, I place all my trust and faith in you. I seek no other refuge than you, not even in my dreams. Whatever I am doing, I shall neither seek my father’s counsel, nor ask my mother’s advice, nor decide on my own. I take only you as my support.” Then, you whole-heartedly pray to the Three Jewels with devotion.

If you can recite the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times with such a thought in mind, it means you have vowed in front of the Three Jewels one hundred thousand times. The reason you have to repeat the prayer so many times is because taking refuge is extremely important. If you vow in front of the Three Jewels over and over again you will develop more conviction, so you won’t easily regress on the path.

Whether you are a Dharma fellow who is present for today’s teaching, or a Buddhist who will receive the teaching through my transcripts and videos, if you really want to become a devoted Buddhist you must complete the preliminaries. This is the requirement passed on by the lineage masters. Except for a very few medical patients and elder individuals, you must try your very best to complete the preliminaries in this lifetime.

I hope everyone can take a vow about this, which is very important for all of us. If you’ve done very good practice on the preliminaries, your future practice will be steady and unwavering. Of course, except for the very few individuals with eminently superior faculties who don’t need to practice preliminaries, the majority of us are just ordinary practitioners. Therefore, we must follow the tradition of lineage masters, which will create very good dependent origination for ourselves.

It is a very rare opportunity for us to practice the preliminaries together at this time, so you must appreciate it as much as possible. Some people think they have already reached a high state, so they don’t need the practice. If this is really the case, I won’t impose the preliminaries on them.

However, many past lineage masters completed several rounds of the full cycle of preliminary practices, even though they had attained high realization. So please do think carefully about what you should be doing.

Now, let’s move to today’s teaching:

♦ **Your enemies and obstacle-makers benefit you more than your parents**

Someone might ask, “In the refuge practice, why do we visualize our kind parents on our left and right, but place our disliked enemies and obstacle makers in front of us? Why are they given more importance than our parents?”

This is because, as practitioners who have undertaken the Mahayana path, we must have the love and compassion of bodhicitta impartially toward all beings. Take Buddha Shakyamuni for example, he treated Rahula and Devadatta impartially. The Buddha didn’t hold a grudge against Devadatta, who often slandered him, nor did he give special affection to Rahula, who was his son. Likewise, we should emulate the Buddha’s impartial love and compassion of bodhicitta. Even if we used to have hatred and prejudice against someone, we must get rid of such thoughts.

More specifically, to complete the vast accumulation of merit and prevent the waste of the merit we have already accumulated, it is essential to make patience our primary practice. Otherwise, a single thought of hatred can destroy the merit we have been accumulating through the practice of generosity, discipline and the like, for a hundred or even a thousand great kalpas. Shantideva also says,

If there was no one to be angry with,
Who could you practice patience on?

Therefore, it is the harm inflicted by enemies and obstacle makers that provides us the opportunity to cultivate patience. Thus, to bodhisattvas, those who offer the opportunity of practicing patience are like a wish-fulfilling jewel found in the house of a poor man, which is very precious. Because those enemies and obstacle makers help us in our bodhisattva activities, we should be happy we encountered them. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

So, like a treasure found at home,
That I have gained without fatigue,
My enemies are helpers in my Bodhisattva work
And therefore they should be a joy to me.³³

However, many people, due to their lack of practice, are unwilling to see or

³³ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 6, verse 107.

hear their enemies; they only want to engage with those who are kind to them or who align with them in the Dharma. This is why they struggle to practice patience. In fact, if we don't have anyone who makes us angry, how can we truly practice patience?

Of the six paramitas, or the six transcendent perfections, the one listed first is relatively easier to practice than those listed later. For example, compared to generosity it is harder to practice discipline, which in turn is relatively easier to practice than patience. So, for ordinary people, it is not too hard to make generous offerings or to observe precepts, but very few people can remain patient when harmed by enemies.

However, careful observation will reveal that, from the perspective of Dharma, enemies and obstacle makers are actually kinder to us than our own parents. While our parents teach us the tricks and deceptions necessary for success in this world, they may inadvertently hinder our ability to escape the depths of the lower realms in future lives. Consequently, their kindness is not as great as it seems.

Some individuals' parents may have taught them how to take an animal's life, how to date, and other things that constantly reinforce their greed, anger, and ignorance. As a result, the parents' influence brings them endless rebirths in the lower realms.

In fact, our enemies and obstacle makers are immensely kind to us. The harm they cause provides us with the opportunity to practice patience. Whether we like it or not, they help separate us from our wealth and possessions—the bonds that prevent us from being free from samsara and are therefore the source of all suffering. As such, they are actually very kind to us.

Here is a story from the *Parables Sutra*:

There was once a rich man who had two sons. When he was dying, he asked the elder son to take good care of his younger brother. Later, the elder son got married, and his wife was afraid the younger brother was going to take away part of the rich man's inheritance when he grew older. Thus, the wife always told her husband to get rid of the younger brother.

After being told this over and over again, the elder son followed his wife's suggestion and took his younger brother to a cemetery outside the city. As he couldn't bear to kill his younger brother himself, he tied him tightly to a tree, hoping he would be eaten up by a tiger or a wolf.

Before he left, he lied to his younger brother, saying, “You always irritate me, so I have you stay here today to reflect on your behaviors. I will bring you back tomorrow.” Then he left.

As dusk descended and wild beasts howled around him, the younger brother felt an overwhelming fear, but he couldn’t move. In his desperation, he gazed up at the sky and cried out, “Is there a place of love and compassion in this world where I can find refuge?”

Hearing the younger brother’s cry for help, the Buddha first emitted the great ray of light called *Dispelling Darkness*, which illuminated the cemetery; secondly the light called *Untightening*, which loosened the rope around him, so he no longer felt pain; and thirdly the light called *Filling All*, which relieved his hunger. Then the Buddha appeared in front of the younger brother, untied him, and gave him teachings. The younger brother attained the level of realization called “patience for the non-arising of phenomena.”

He was grateful to his elder brother and his wife, because without their harm he wouldn’t have had this experience. So, he rushed back home with his miraculous power of prompt moving. Seeing him, the elder brother and his wife were very ashamed and embarrassed. Then the younger brother gave them Dharma teachings, and they attained the fruition of stream-enterer right away.

Milarepa was also brought to the Dharma because his uncle and aunt robbed him of all his wealth.

His life stories were brought up several times in my previous teachings. Had his father not died and his uncle and aunt not harmed him, he would never have attained such high realization. It was because they made him so miserable, which brought him great hatred, that the subsequent events happened.

To revenge his uncle and aunt, he left his hometown to study the arts of casting spells, with several others. His mother saw him off, saying, “You are different from your companions. They learn how to cast spells out of curiosity or to make a living, while we have no other choice. If you don’t grasp the skill this time, I will die in front of you when you come back.”

Later when Milarepa was practicing the evil spells, he often thought of his mother’s words, which motivated him to revenge his uncle and aunt with the spells. Then he indeed committed grave crimes by casting spells. But seeing so many people and animals he had killed he was very regretful, so he engaged in diligent

practice of the Dharma and eventually attained enlightenment. Therefore, having enemies was the only causal factor that brought Milarepa the opportunity to attain perfect enlightenment within this very life. After his enlightenment, Milarepa often dedicated his merit to his uncle, aunt, and other enemies

As shown in the stories, enemies can bring one to the Dharma. As many sangha members present today may reflect, when you first began studying Buddhism, wasn't it due to various difficulties in your life? In particular, some of you may not only have lacked faith in Buddhism initially but may have even strongly rejected it. However, it was often through the harm caused by enemies that you gradually began to enter the path of the Dharma. Had those torments never occurred, you might have remained lost in the five desires of worldly life and would never have sought liberation. Therefore, you should be grateful to your enemies.

In the same way, obstacle makers also provide us with opportunities to practice patience. The physical illnesses, emotional distress, and various hardships they bring can help purify our past negative actions. This was true for the nun Palmo, who, after being afflicted with leprosy by a demonic naga, dedicated herself to the practice of Avalokiteshvara and ultimately attained supreme realization.

Nun Palmo used to be a pretty princess, to whom many princes and descendants of noble families proposed marriage, but she accepted none of the proposals. At the age of sixteen, the princess unfortunately contracted leprosy. Then those who had proposed marriage to her ran away, and even the king and queen, her loving parents, kept a distance from her.

Saddened by the fickleness of human nature, the princess left the palace alone. She hid herself in a cave of a snow mountain and practiced prostrations to Avalokiteshvara with great diligence, wishing the Bodhisattva could relieve her mental and physical pain.

Twelve years passed. One day while she was prostrating, she had a vision of Avalokiteshvara standing in front of her. At once she felt great ease, and her leprosy was gone.

The princess asked Avalokiteshvara, "There are so many deluded beings in this world. Is there any way to liberate them?" The Bodhisattva answered, "I have many ways to liberate beings, and each of them is attuned to the specific being's disposition and need."

Then Avalokiteshvara appeared in the form of the eleven-faced Bodhisattva

and transmitted the tantric teaching to her, so the princess could use the teaching to liberate beings.

Thus, she started to benefit beings with the tantric teaching of the eleven-faced Avalokiteshvara, established the Palmo lineage, and became the founding master of the eleven-faced Avalokiteshvara tantric practice.

During our visit to India in the past, a great master gave us this teaching. The Avalokiteshvara practice of the Palmo lineage is so supreme that it still thrives in the Tibetan region. *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History* also mentions certain teachings of this lineage.

Had the nun Palmo never been stricken with leprosy, perhaps she wouldn't have had the opportunity to attain enlightenment. Some sangha members at Larung Gar chose to take ordination here because of severe illness; they now wholeheartedly take refuge in the Three Jewels, putting their illness aside. It turned out that, thanks to the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, their illnesses such as cancer were cured without any medical treatment. As far as I know, there are quite a few such cases at Larung Gar.

Such examples show that enemies and obstacles can bring us to the Dharma, so they are really a source of kindness. Without these enemies and obstacles, many people would still remain deeply trapped in the ocean of suffering made up of the eight worldly concerns and would have no chance to be liberated.

♦ Longchenpa's opinions

Venerable Longchenpa explains why we should thank enemies and obstacle-makers in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*. Specifically, he says:

You may have come to the Dharma because of injuries inflicted on you, but because you thus found the path to liberation, those who harmed you did you a great kindness.³⁴

Here is a story from Asvaghosa's *Sutralankara*:

In Madhura of India there once lived an intelligent brahmin who didn't believe in Buddhism. One day, on his behalf, several of his brahmin enemies invited the sangha to his home for a food offering. These enemies aimed to scheme him,

³⁴ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

knowing he disliked the sangha. They couldn't help but smirk, at the thought that the next day he would be notorious for not being able to host the sangha.

The next morning, the sangha arrived at his house. He was surprised by the visit but calmed down right away. He realized it was a deliberate scheme from his enemies who aimed to catch him off guard, and to ruin his reputation by his not respecting the sangha. With great respect he invited the monks in and ordered his staff to prepare a good meal as soon as possible. So, he managed to make the food offering to the sangha.

After the meal, the monks told him, "After receiving a householder's offering, the sangha teaches the Dharma to the householder. Although you are not a Buddhist, you may still listen to the teaching." So, the brahmin sat upright and listened to the teachings, on the defect of samsara and the Four Noble Truths. Since his root of merit had ripened, the brahmin developed great faith in the Three Jewels and attained the fruition of stream enterer, on the spot.

As you see, sometimes those who harm us actually do help us, because they give us the opportunity to discover the Dharma and to find the way to liberation.

You may have come to the Dharma because suffering made you dissatisfied, but because you can now find lasting happiness, those who caused that suffering did you a great kindness.³⁵

Dagpo Rinpoche was in great relationship with his wife, but then his wife died suddenly of the plague, which saddened him tremendously. Eventually he went to follow Milarepa and attained a very high level of realization.

The Nun Utpalavarna also discovered the Dharma and eventually attained liberation, because of the enormous sufferings she had experienced in life.

This may be the case for some of you as well. The sufferings you experienced give you the opportunity to pursue the Dharma. Therefore, we should thank those factors that cause harm to us.

You may have come to the Dharma because nonhuman beings harmed you, but because you can now discover fearlessness, those demons did you a great kindness.³⁶

³⁵ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

³⁶ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron,

When Milarepa was practicing meditation at the Lashi Snow Mountain, non-humans and demons attacked him multiple times. Milarepa told the demonic army: “To me, the afflictions and obstacles are illusions caused by demons, and they are the glories of a yogi’s mind. The greater these afflictions, the more I gain on the path to enlightenment.”

Knowing this, you don’t need to worry about bad things arising in your practice. Also, when you see a person with whom you don’t get along, you don’t need to turn around and dodge him.

You may have come to the Dharma because humans or other beings were hostile to you, but because you thus found benefit and happiness, those hostile to you did you a great kindness.³⁷

During the Tang dynasty there was a man named Ma Ziyun, who was in charge of transporting requisition grains to the capital city. Once his ships sank, losing ten thousand measures of imperial rice, and he was imprisoned. After that Ma Ziyun began to practice the Dharma wholeheartedly. Five years later the king granted Ma Ziyun clemency, so he was released. After that Ma Ziyun lived in a temple and devoted himself to Dharma practice. Eventually he attained realization and obtained rebirth in the Land of Great Bliss.

Therefore, the unfavorable circumstances Ma Ziyun encountered in life actually became a favorable circumstance for him to find the way to liberation.

You may have come to the Dharma because of disastrous conditions, but because you thus found the path to the unchanging state, those responsible for the unfavorable conditions did you a great kindness.³⁸

Through encountering cruel adversities, such as illness and obstacles, we are drawn to the Dharma and discover the precious teachings, so that we have the opportunity to attain the enlightenment of boundless bliss. Therefore, the benefit of these adversities to us is truly immense.

As I said before, Lama Garcho constantly received public humiliation and

Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

³⁷ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

³⁸ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

torture during the Cultural Revolution. Every time when he was in this situation, he would practice Tonglen³⁹ with the three supreme methods. As he neared his death, he said, “All my life I have been practicing Tonglen. This pith instruction is most effective and beneficial to my practice.”

We are often torn apart or broken-hearted when encountering obstacles and difficulties, but the sublime ones aren’t like us at all. For example, when Thogme Zangpo⁴⁰ (1295–1369) was sick his disciple asked about his treatment, and Thogme Zangpo answered:

If my illness is beneficial to all living beings, may I be sick;
If my death is beneficial to all living beings, may I die;
If my health is beneficial to all living beings, may I be healthy;
Other than praying to the Three Jewels whole-heartedly,
I don’t need any other treatment.

When I translated Thogme Zangpo’s biography, this answer he gave inspired me greatly. Later when I was sick or encountered difficulties, I would recite this verse, even if I was not able to reach his sublime state. Nevertheless, it helped settle my mind.

Therefore, practitioners can transform adversities onto the path to liberation, which differs significantly from the way in which worldly people handle the same situations. As is said in some mind-training instructions, to a good doctor all types of vegetation are medicines, and likewise, to a good practitioner, all circumstances—happiness or suffering, health or illness—can be transformed into support of Dharma practice.

You may have come to the Dharma because others pressured you, but because you thus found what is quintessentially meaningful, those who pressured you did you a great kindness.⁴¹

³⁹ Tonglen (Tibetan: གཏོང་ལེན་) is Tibetan for ‘giving and taking’ (or sending and receiving), and refers to a meditation practice found in Tibetan Buddhism. Tong means “giving or sending,” and len means “receiving or taking.” Tonglen is also known as exchanging self with other. It’s the seventh slogan, under Relative Bodhicitta, in Lojong. And is aspirational Bodhicitta precepts training in the Longchen Nyingthig Ngöndro, to see others as equal to self by exchanging self and other, where applying Bodhicitta begins with giving.

⁴⁰ Thogme Zangpo (1295–1369), also known as Gyalse NgulchuThogme, is a great master of the Nyingma and Sakya traditions and author of *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* and a famous commentary on Shantideva’s *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

⁴¹ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron,

A person may be brought to Larung Gar by others. When he took refuge with so-and-so master, he had no idea about anything, not even about how to make prostrations. But through Dharma study, he eventually became a chief master. There are many such individuals, and one of them is among us right now.

Feel gratitude for all of these beings equally and dedicate the effects of your positive actions to them.⁴²

We should impartially dedicate our merit to all beings, whether they are our kind parents or our enemies and demons.

Through the analysis above, Patrul Rinpoche explained why we should give our enemies and obstacle-makers precedence over our parents in the refuge practice. They have not only been very kind to us in this life but have also been our parents in countless past lives. Knowing this, we will no longer feel uncomfortable when giving them such an important place in the refuge practice.

♦ How to conclude the session

At the conclusion of the session, with our heartfelt devotion, visualize that Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava and all the other refuge deities emanate boundless rays of light, illuminating us and all other sentient beings. As these luminous rays touch every sentient being, we ascent together like birds startled into flight by a slingstone with a whirring sound, and we dissolve into the assembly of the refuge deities.

[This is not a very high practice of the generation and perfection stages, so all of us should be able to do this visualization.]

Next, visualize the surrounding refuge deities gradually dissolving into light from the periphery inward, merging into Guru Rinpoche and his consort at the center. All the deities arranged in tiers above also slowly dissolve into Guru Rinpoche below. Guru Rinpoche then dissolves into light, and the light itself vanishes into Dharmadhatu. Finally, let your mind rest for as long as possible in the natural state of the Dharmakaya, free from all conceptual elaboration and distraction. During the practice, it is beneficial to abide in this state for a while and visualize in this way.

Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

⁴² Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

When arising from this meditation, we should dedicate the merit to all sentient beings by reciting the following verse:

*Through the merit of this practice,
May I swiftly accomplish the Three Jewels
And establish every single being,
Without exception, on their level.⁴³*

When today's teaching is over and it's time for us to do the refuge practice together, you will follow the same sequence. First, you visualize the refuge deities as taught here and repeat the refuge prayer:

*I and all beings of the six classes respectfully take refuge
In the gurus, yidam deities and hosts of dakinis,
And the Buddha, Dharma and noble Sangha,
Who fill the expanse of space at the level of the sky.⁴⁴*

Then you visualize the dissolving process of the deities as mentioned above and rest in the primordial state a bit, and when you arise from the meditation, you recite the above dedication prayer in the root text to dedicate the merit to all beings. Lastly, you can recite this dedication prayer:

*By this accumulation of merit,
May I obtain all-seeing omniscience,
And may all faults be defeated.
The whirling, turbulent waves of birth, aging, sickness,
And death--from this ocean of samsara,
May I liberate beings.⁴⁵*

This is not hard to practice. You must do so accordingly. As your practice starts to grow, the blessings of the Three Jewels will naturally dissolve into your mind,

⁴³ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 182.

⁴⁴ Translated by Adam Pearcey, 2019.

⁴⁵ Translated by Thinley Norbu Rinpoche.

and your practice will go smoothly. Nowadays many people prefer the practice of channels, energies, and essences, but they haven't gained any experience after years of practice. This is because they haven't built a solid foundation. If you have done good refuge practice, it won't be too hard for you to develop the state of the Great Perfection.

♦ The refuge practice in daily life

At all times and in all places, we should remember the refuge deities constantly with mindfulness.

As we walk, we should visualize them in space above our right shoulder and imagine that we are circumambulating them.

As we sit, we should visualize them above our head, serving as the support of our prayers. Many past masters often did this. Whenever and wherever they sat, they would visualize the refuge deities, mainly their lineage masters and Padmasambhava, above their head. Those masters would pray to them by reciting, “*Lama Chenno*.”

As we eat, we should visualize them in our throat and offer them the first portion of our food or drink. Many practitioners do so when eating, which is good. It is written in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, that we should recite the food offering prayer before each meal:

To the precious Buddha, the unsurpassable teacher,

To the precious Dharma, the unsurpassable protection,

To the precious Sangha, the unsurpassable guides—

*To you, the three rare and supreme sources of refuge, I offer.*⁴⁶

If you want to pray to the Three Jewels, you may change “*chöpar bul*” (I offer) into “*söl wa dep*” (I pray), so the last line would be, “To you, the three rare and

⁴⁶ The corresponding Tibetan version is:

tönpalamésangyérinpoche

To the precious Buddha, the unsurpassable teacher,

kyobpalamédamchörinpoche

To the precious Dharma, the unsurpassable protection,

drenpalamégendünrinpoche

To the precious Sangha, the unsurpassable guides—

kyabnékönchok sum la chöpar bul

To you, the three rare and supreme sources of refuge, I offer. (Source: Rigpawki.org)

supreme sources of refuge, I pray.” Meanwhile, you visualize the Three Jewels above your head.

As we sleep, we should visualize them in the center of our heart or near our pillow, caring for us with compassion. This practice is essential for dissolving delusions in the dream into the state of luminosity.

No matter what activity we are engaged in, we should always maintain a vivid and clear mental image of the refuge deities in our minds. In fact, it is fine if we don’t know how to engage in other practices. If we never part from the Three Jewels in whatever we are doing, we are already a very good practitioner. Moreover, since our practice is driven by the motivation of benefiting all beings, this is the superior type of taking refuge. Therefore, with total confidence, we should wholeheartedly take refuge in the Three Jewels and devote ourselves entirely to the refuge practice.

Some people do not persevere in their refuge practice. They spend one or two months on the refuge practice, and when it is completed with the required number of repetitions, they no longer do the refuge practice. This is not right. A true practitioner will never stop practicing refuge in this lifetime, and consistent practice can be of benefit to them.

I have been engaging in preliminaries for more than twenty years. Over such a long time, although I don’t meditate well and I cannot always remember the refuge deities, I do understand the importance of refuge. Whenever I think of it, I will visualize the refuge deities in all situations. I will keep on doing this for the rest of my life.

I cannot guarantee that I will continue this even in my next life, as it is difficult to say whether I can still maintain this mindfulness after my rebirth. However, in this life, since it is unlikely for me to develop wrong thoughts and lose mindfulness and vigilance, I will continue to do this.

When Khenpo Depa taught me *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, he gave a very detailed explanation on taking refuge, and urged me, over and over again, to put them into practice. Those experienced senior practitioners are different from us. They not only teach others to take refuge, but also walk the talk in their own lives.

Later when I came to Larung Gar, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often told us, “We Buddhists should never separate ourselves from a clear mental image of the refuge deities.”

By taking the instructions of my teachers, although I can’t claim to have

attained a high level of enlightenment, I do keep deeply in mind the importance of remembering the refuge deities and following the practice sequence. I dare not say I remember this every day, but at least I have a few sessions of meditation on refuge every month.

Therefore, I hope you can also regard refuge as your primary practice in this life. You shouldn't engage in the practice merely to complete the preliminaries in order to access the tantric teachings. As Buddhists who have taken refuge in the Three Jewels, we should all consider taking refuge as our primary practice for the rest of our lives.

2.2.1.4. Precepts of Taking Refuge

The precepts of taking refuge include the three things to be abandoned, three things to be done, and three additional attitudes that are to be observed.

2.2.1.4.1. The Three Things to be Abandoned

When taking refuge, we receive the precepts of refuge. Next, we'll study the precepts pertaining to the three things to be abandoned.

1) After taking refuge in the Buddha, we must refrain from venerating deities that are still bound within samsara. This includes gods worshipped in non-Buddhist traditions, such as Ishvara or Visnu, as well as local gods, owners of the ground, and other powerful worldly gods and spirits. Since they are not free from the cycle of suffering in samsara, we should not seek refuge in them for our future liberation, making offerings or prostrating to them.

Of course, in a broad sense all religions should live in harmony, but in a narrow sense we must not take ghosts, spirits, or celestial gods as our refuge, after we have taken refuge in the Buddha.

Many people argue this is only an opinion of Tibetan Buddhism. But in fact, Chinese Buddhism shares the same thought. It says in the 8th volume of *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*:

Those who take refuge in the Buddha
Are the true Upasakas,⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Upasaka (Skt. upāsaka; Tib. དགེ་བསྐྱེན་, genyen, Wyl. dgebsnyen) or upasika (Skt. upāsikā; Tib. དགེ་བསྐྱེན་མ་, genyenma, Wyl. dgebsnyen ma) — respectively, a male or female lay practitioner,

Who will never take refuge
In other celestial gods.

As you see, this is not just from Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, having taken refuge in the Buddha, we no longer pay homage to celestial gods, owners of the ground, and the like.

In some places there exist local traditions of making offerings to owners of the ground, worldly protectors, nagas, fox spirits, and the like. Make sure you don't take refuge in them. Instead, you should consider them helpers on your path to enlightenment who can help you achieve Dharma activities.

Many sadhanas composed by Padmasambhava contain verses making offerings to ghosts, spirits, and the eight classes of devas and nagas. The protectors in those prayers simply took refuge in front of Padmasambhava or other sublime beings and promised to support our practice. They are unlike the wisdom protectors and the protectors constrained by the effect of their past actions who have attained transcendental achievement.

Therefore, ghosts, spirits, and the eight classes of devas and nagas are not the support of our refuge. Taking refuge and making offerings are quite different from each other, which I hope you understand well.

Many internet users often interpret the Dharma out of context. For instance, yesterday I posted about the three types of refuge on my microblog. Almost immediately, someone commented, "Isn't it true that Buddhism teaches that everything is equal? If that's the case, why are there different levels of refuge?" This comment reflects a misunderstanding of the term "equal" in this context.

Nowadays, many people are not very knowledgeable in the Dharma, but they like to interpret a phrase or sentence simply based on its face value, relying on their own fabricated thoughts. In doing so, they may not even provide a correct interpretation based on worldly knowledge, let alone on the profound Dharma. Therefore, when I encounter questions from such individuals, I find it really difficult to have a meaningful discussion with them.

2) After taking refuge in the Dharma, we should abandon all actions that bring harm to others, even in our dreams. We should diligently strive to protect sentient beings to the best of our ability.

or 'pursuer of virtue'.

Someone has taken refuge in the Three Jewels, but they still kill chickens, bugs, mosquitoes, cockroaches, and the like. Even worse, some Dharma masters allow them to do so. However, the Buddha has told us clearly that taking life is not right. As is said in *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*:

Having taken refuge in the Dharma,
One shall refrain from killing others.

The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra says “refrain from killing others,” whereas *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* says “not to harm others,” meaning one shall not bring the slightest harm to beings, let alone kill them.

Therefore, Buddhists must refrain from killing. Otherwise, having taken refuge, if a Buddhist still takes the lives of sentient beings, then they are damaging their refuge precepts; in that case, they can hardly be called a true Buddhist.

3) After taking refuge in the Sangha, we should not get involved with non-Buddhist traditions, which means we should avoid forming close relationships with those who do not believe in the Dharma and the Buddha who taught it.

Of course, sometimes it is inevitable for us to talk to or dine with non-Buddhists. However, we must ensure that our views remain untainted. Even though there are no true non-Buddhist traditions in the Tibetan region, we should still avoid associating with anyone who behaves like a tirthika—such as those who insult or criticize our Dharma teacher and the Dharma, or who disparage the profound tantric teachings.

As it is said in *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*:

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to avoid destructive
friends,
In whose company the three poisons of the mind grow stronger,
And we engage less and less in study, reflection and meditation,
So that love and compassion fade away until they are no more.⁴⁸

If we stay too long with those who denigrate the Dharma, our sources of merit will be destroyed. As is said in *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*:

⁴⁸ Thogme Zangpo, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of All the Bodhisattvas*, translated by Adam Pearcey, 2006.

Those who have taken refuge in the sublime sangha
Should not seek help from the tirthikas.
To take refuge in the Three Jewels in such a manner,
One attains fearlessness.

It is said in another sutra:

By venerating the Three Jewels,
One will attain the three bodhis,
Stay away from the three (wrong) views,
And be devoid of suffering.

That said, we must understand very well all these things about taking refuge.



Lesson 88

“Having taken refuge in the Buddha, honour and respect even a tiny piece ... We should really be like that layman.”
[page 183–186]

We are currently studying the precepts of taking refuge, namely, the nine precepts we must observe after taking refuge. Yesterday we learned the precepts about the three things to be abandoned. Let’s continue:

2.2.1.4.2. The Three Things to be Done

There are three things to be done after taking refuge.

1) After taking refuge in the Buddha, we should honor and respect any representation of the Buddha, even a tiny fragment of a broken statue or image. Treat it with reverence, hold it above our heads, place it in a clean location, have faith, and perceive it with pure perception, considering it the true Jewel of the Buddha.

The Buddha manifested parinirvana at the end of his life 2,500 years ago, but it is said in many scriptures that the Buddha’s statues or images are the manifestation of the Buddha himself. Thus, Nagarjuna says, in *Letter to a Friend*, that the wise will venerate even a wooden statue of the Buddha.

As Buddhists who have taken refuge in Buddhism, we should not only show respect and pay homage to thangkas and statues of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas but also to pieces of broken statues or fragments of thangkas. We must ensure that

these statues and thangkas are placed in clean areas to prevent them from being trampled upon.

During the degenerate age, the Buddha manifests in the form of statues and images to liberate all beings. Therefore, we should regard these statues and images as the true Jewel of the Buddha and have appreciation and veneration toward them. We must not denigrate the statues and images or show disrespectful attitudes, such as failing to remove our hats when in their presence.

2) After taking refuge in the Dharma, we should respect all the sutras, shastras, and tantras, as well as even a fragment of paper bearing a single syllable of the scriptures. We should place it above our heads and consider it the true Jewel of the Dharma.

As recorded in the sutras, the Buddha said that during the degenerate age, his presence will be manifested in the form of texts to benefit all beings. Therefore, we should respect not only Buddhist scriptures but also, in a broader sense, worldly magazines and newspapers that can guide people on what to do and what not to do.

However, I heard that a monastic member elsewhere, while debating with others, held a copy of the *Commentary on Valid Cognition* and argued that it was nothing but a text so there was no meaning in paying it respect. Then he sat on the text. How terrible! People who hold such a wrong view and claim they are Buddhists are actually not. Of course, it is due to their ignorance that they don't know the value of the scriptures. How pitiful!

Having taken refuge in the Dharma, we must not put scriptures somewhere unclean or on the ground. We should place them on high places. Some people place scriptures and statues of the Buddha under the bed at home, or on the bottom level of the railway luggage rack when traveling, which is not right. Normally a wise person will never place Buddhist scriptures under or below his body, because it shows no respect to the Jewel of the Dharma.

During the Cultural Revolution, some Tibetans were forced by the red guards to sit on prayer wheels and Buddhist scriptures, but they chose to die rather than sit on the Jewel of the Dharma. There was no way for them to renounce their refuge in the Three Jewels. Once some red guards placed a pile of scriptures and a pile of broken glass respectively on the ground and asked a faithful Buddhist to choose between walking on the scriptures or on the broken glass. He chose to walk on the glass, rather than on the scriptures.

We must venerate all Buddhist scriptures, because we've taken refuge in the Jewel of the Dharma.

3) After taking refuge in the Sangha, we should consider anything that symbolizes it—be it a patch of red or yellow cloth—as the true Jewel of the Sangha. We should honor and respect it, hold it above our heads, place it in a clean location, and regard it with faith and pure perception.

One must not step on a monastic robe. Even if one just walks over them without stepping on it, the fault is still grave. Why is that? It is said in the sutras that the red and yellow monastic robes are what the buddhas of the past, present, and future wear when they attain perfect enlightenment, and that the robes are venerated and honored by all eight classes of devas and nagas, humans, and non-humans. According to some scriptures, garudas used to prey on nagas every day, so the naga king asked for help from the Buddha who gave him a monk's robe, telling him to tie its pieces to the nagas' horns, which could protect them from being preyed on by garudas.

Therefore, the monastic robe carries great blessing power. When wearing it, we can hardly be harmed by ghosts and spirits, unless the results of our past negative actions have fully ripened, such as killing, for example.

Nowadays some worldly people have very negative thoughts toward monastics, thinking they are all bad persons. Such an attitude toward the Sangha will lead to grave negative actions. Atisha said:

Of four monastics, there must be one sublime being.

However, it is just because our perception isn't pure, so that we fail to see such a being. Thus, it is so precious to be able to wear the red and yellow robes. That said we should keep pure perception toward the sangha, otherwise we can easily break the precepts of taking refuge.

2.2.1.4.3. The Three Supplementary Precepts

1) Regardless of the appearance or status of the teacher who teaches us what to do and what not to do, we should regard them as the true Jewel of the Buddha. We should avoid even stepping on their shadow, and instead, we should wholeheartedly serve and honor them.

Of course, it is not only in Tibetan Buddhism that one must see the teacher as the Buddha. However, several masters of Chinese Buddhism are against this view, which is only because they are not very learned.

In fact, it says in a scripture of Chinese Buddhism called *The King of Great Teachings on the Ultimate Blissful Vajra of non-emptiness Samādhi Sutra*:⁴⁹

One should develop fervent faith in the acharya,
Because the acharya is the source of endless samadhi,
The ultimate foundation of great bliss,
Who is no different from all the buddhas.
Through the acharya,
One attains the supreme ultimate.

Therefore, it makes sense to view the teacher as the Buddha and to strive to serve and honor him. Otherwise, we won't attain the siddhis and blessings of the Dharma.

2) We should regard every word of our sublime teacher as the Jewel of the Dharma. If all we do every day is to find faults in their teachings, we won't obtain any real benefit from listening to their instructions. Therefore, we shall obey the teacher's orders, respect them, and be joyful about their teachings. Even a single word or phrase from the teacher should not be ignored or taken lightly.

Nowadays some people say, "It is an outdated idea that we should respect the teacher. It's now the 21st century and everyone is equal, including the teacher and their disciples."

Such a thought doesn't even make sense from a worldly perspective, let alone in Buddhism. Imagine a situation in which a schoolteacher is completely equal to their students; the students can disobey the teacher as they wish, and they may even stand beside the teacher in class if they don't want to sit in their own seats. Without respecting the teacher, these students can hardly learn anything from them. Thus, in the current era many people are unwise. They abandon traditional norms and values, and instead go after something that may not necessarily be good.

3) We should regard the teacher's entourage, disciples, and our fellow Dharma practitioners who uphold pure conduct as the Jewel of the Sangha. We

⁴⁹ The Sanskrit name is Śrīparamādyamantrakalpakhāṇḍanāma.

should respect them with our body, speech, and mind, and never displease them, even for an instant.

Those who volunteer for the teacher's Dharma activities are also considered part of the teacher's entourage. It's not right to view them as enemies and to speak ill of them to everyone you meet, claiming, for example, that the teacher takes their side. As a Tibetan proverb says, "When seeing a horse rider, you speak ill of others while standing in front of him; when seeing a walker, you speak ill of others while sitting in front of him." It seems you can find fault with anyone involved in the teacher's activities. Certainly, disciples around a teacher can't all be lacking in virtue; there must be many with commendable qualities, just as there were with those around Buddha Shakyamuni. If you fail to see them as the Jewel of the Sangha, you may end up finding fault with them, no matter how exemplary the teacher and their entourage are. If you upset the teacher's entourage or disciples, it is no different from bringing indirect harm to the teacher.

Of course, if the teacher's entourage and disciples engage in inappropriate behavior, there is no need to blindly uphold pure perception toward them. Similarly, if the teacher is not qualified and their actions are not in alignment with the Dharma, there is nothing in the Buddha's teachings that states you must obey the teacher unconditionally.

However, if the teacher is a true qualified teacher, we must follow him with devotion. Particularly in Vajrayana, the main deity in the field of merit is the teacher. As the teacher represents the buddhas of the ten directions in front of all beings of the degenerate era, their body is the Sangha. As the teacher turns the Dharma wheel through teaching, debating, and composing, and tells beings what to do and what not to do, their speech is the Dharma. As the teacher has realized the reality of all phenomena, and their mind is indivisible from the wisdom of the Buddha, their mind is the Buddha. Therefore, the teacher embodies the essence of the Three Jewels. We should perceive all of the teacher's actions as perfect and virtuous, follow the teacher with absolute trust, and pray to the teacher with devotion at all times.

If anything we do, say, or think causes the teacher to feel displeasure or dissatisfaction, we then completely renounce the entire refuge, rendering our prayers to the buddhas and bodhisattvas for accomplishment to no avail. Therefore, we should always strive, with all our determination and effort, to please the teacher in every possible way.

However, in this degenerate era, many disciples, including some tantric practitioners, do not care about this. They view the teacher as merely a relative or a friend, so it doesn't matter if they displease the teacher. They never consider that if they displease the teacher, they must repent before the next morning. Some may not be aware of this, while others may know it but don't take it seriously. In doing so, they will achieve no accomplishments at all.

As it is said in the *Blue Udder*, the oral teaching collections of Geshe Potowa:

Of all the Mahayana doctrines,
Pleasing the teacher is of utmost importance.
When the teacher is delighted,
All your actions carry great meanings.

It's only when the teacher is pleased that everything we do has true meaning. Therefore, pleasing the teacher is extremely important in our practice. We should follow the teacher by serving them through the "three ways of pleasing them."

♦ Everything is the blessing of the Buddha

Regardless of the circumstances we encounter—whether they bring joy or suffering, good fortune or misfortune, comfort or pain—we must wholeheartedly place our trust in the teacher and the Three Jewels. If we experience happiness, we should recognize that it arises from the compassion of the Three Jewels. As stated in sutras, everything pleasant and favorable in this world, even the gentle breeze that cools our face on a scorching summer day, comes from the compassion and blessings of the Buddha.

Collection of Practices Which Enable One Endowed with Merits says:

If the Buddha doesn't appear in this world,
How can there be happiness in the three worlds?
Because the Buddha has appeared,
All of us can obtain happiness.

The Buddha came to this world and gave us the authentic Dharma that guides us on what to do and what not to do, so eventually we can obtain the happiness of liberation. Even a breeze on a hot summer day or a ray of sunlight on a cold winter day comes from the blessings of the Buddha.

As said in Mipham Rinpoche's *Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way*, that monastics can shave their heads and dye their robes also comes from the blessings of the Buddha, which people don't necessarily know. During the period when only the symbols of the Dharma remains, which will last for five hundred years, Buddha Shakyamuni's Dharma activities will reach the end in this Saha world, and it will be very difficult for people to get the Buddha's blessings.

At that time, many monastics will want to shave their heads bald, but the barber tools won't be functional anymore. Instead, they will have to cover their heads with pieces of cow leather and pretend to be bald. The monastics will also want to dye their robes yellow and red, but the colors won't adhere to the fabric. Instead, they will have to wear cowhide inside out to pretend they are wearing monastic robes.

Some people may not believe this, but that is what will happen when the Buddha's activities reach their end in the world. Anyway, you should know that all happiness, joy, and peace come from the blessings of the Buddha. Many senior, experienced practitioners always think this way. When they feel happy or even enjoy a good cup of tea, they immediately say, "This is the blessing of the Buddha! This is the blessing of the teacher!"

Similarly, even the tiniest virtuous thought that arise in our minds, such as the thought of practicing the Dharma, taking ordination, releasing lives, or cultivating bodhicitta, comes from the inconceivable power of the Buddha's blessings.

In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva says:

Just as on a dark night black with clouds,
The sudden lightning glares and all is clearly shown,
Likewise rarely, through the Buddhas' power,
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world.⁵⁰

It is not easy at all for people of this degenerate age to generate a positive thought that lasts even as briefly as a flash of lightning, including the intention to study the Dharma, faith in the Buddha, compassion toward all beings, and the like. Under such circumstances, if we generate even the slightest positive thought, it arises from the blessings of the Buddha.

⁵⁰ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 1, verse 5.

Without the Buddha's blessings, we will be trapped in the ocean of samsaric suffering forever, enduring excruciating torments. Therefore, we should recognize the Buddha's compassion and remain always grateful.

The *Prajnaparamita Sutra of Suvikrāntavikrāmin* also says:

If the Buddha Tathagatha doesn't appear in this world,
All the beings will experience grave sufferings,
And there are no longer the higher realms, but only the lower
realms,
And one only hears the sounds of suffering and afflictions in the
three lower realms.

As also said in the *Mahayana Vaipulya Sutra of Total Retention*:

If after the Buddha's parinirvana through teaching the Dharma a teacher brings beings onto the Mahayana path, and helps beings generate even just an instant of joy or shed just a drop of tears because of the Dharma, this is also due to the divine power of the Buddha.

When we are discussing the Dharma with others, some may generate joy and faith in the Buddha and are even moved to tears, which results from the blessings of the Buddha. However, ordinary people mostly cry for themselves, about things like romance or family. They may cry out a river, but their tears carry little meaning.

Once I was hospitalized, and a nurse was quite mean to me. One day I noticed she was crying, so I joked, "Are you crying for me?" She answered in anger, "I won't cry for you!" (*The audience laughs.*)

When teaching *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche told us that tears shed for living beings out of compassion, or for the Three Jewels out of faith, generate great merit. But tears shed just for oneself carry no meaning whatsoever.

Someone may ask, "If the Three Jewels are so extraordinary, does this mean that I just have to pray to the Three Jewels every day, and I don't have to seek any medical care when I am sick?"

This is not the case. If we encounter hardships such as illness, suffering, or obstacles caused by negative forces, we should first pray to the Three Jewels. Additionally, if effective methods like medical treatment or healing rituals are

necessary, we should recognize that these methods are also the activity of the Three Jewels and proceed with them. We shouldn't have the thought, "It is of no use to pray to the Three Jewels. I get well because I've received the doctor's treatment."

Actually, the fact that we go to the hospital and receive the doctor's diagnosis and prescription are due to the great blessing power of the Three Jewels. Therefore, we should cultivate faith and maintain pure perception by recognizing that all appearances are manifestations of the Three Jewels.

As we embark on any journey, whether for work or other purposes, we should go there paying homage to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha of the direction we are heading. For example, if we are about to head east, we may visualize the Tathagata of the east, and prostrate and pray to him; if we are about to head west, we then prostrate and pray to the Tathagata of the west. Or we may recite *The Verses of the Eight Noble Auspicious Ones*, and always venerate the Three Jewels with devotion. By doing so, everything will go smoothly. *The Consecration Sutra* says:

By venerating and prostrating to the Three Jewels,
And offering flowers and fragrance,
One will be protected by Indra and Brahma,
Ensuring that everything will be auspicious.

This is also the tradition in our Tibetan region. Before setting off to go somewhere, a traveler would visit a monastery, make offerings to the sangha, and request chanting from them; then the traveler himself would pay homage and prostrate to the Buddha of that direction. By doing so, everything would go smoothly for the traveler.

As said in the *Ascertaining the Three Vows*, Atisha lists five general precepts of taking refuge:

Do not forsake the Three Jewels, not for one's life or rewards.
In any situation, do not seek refuge in anything or anyone [other
than the Three Jewels].
Offer constant reverence and offerings to the Three Jewels.
Encourage oneself and others to take refuge in the Three Jewels.
Pay homage to the Buddha, of whichever direction one travels
to.

Specifically, the precepts refer to:

- 1) Having taken refuge, you must not forsake the Three Jewels, even at the cost of our lives, or in exchange for an enormous reward.
- 2) Whatever important issues arise, we must not think the Three Jewels are of no use and go after a worldly solution as the refuge.
- 3) Whatever we are doing, always remember the great qualities of the Three Jewels, and never interrupt our regular reverence and offerings.
- 4) Having recognized the great qualities of the Three Jewels, encourage ourselves and others to take refuge.

Once during a bus ride, a monk from Larung Gar made observations to other passengers, and when he found a potential prospective Buddhist, he sat beside the person and asked him with a smile, “Have you taken refuge?” However, that person didn’t appreciate his kindness and just kept smoking. Eventually the monk could no longer handle the cigarettes and had to leave.

- 5) Whichever direction we travel, pay homage to the Buddha of that direction before we set off.

♦ How to pay homage to the Three Jewels in daily life

We should incorporate the refuge prayer into our daily routine as a regular practice. This can be done using either the Longchen Nyíngtik text mentioned earlier⁵¹ or the following fourfold refuge prayer, which is common to all vehicles:

I take refuge in the Teacher.

I take refuge in the Buddha.

I take refuge in the Dharma.

I take refuge in the Sangha.

Almost all Tibetans can recite this prayer. The other day I visited a Tibetan elementary school, and I found that most students can recite this prayer. However,

⁵¹ In the Sugatas of the Three Roots, the true Three Jewels,
In the bodhicitta, nature of the channels, energies and essences
And in the mandala of essential nature, natural expression and compassion,
I take refuge until I reach the heart of enlightenment.

many Tibetan intellectuals are not like their counterparts of the past. Due to the impact of new cultures, their faith in the Three Jewels regresses day by day, which is quite worrisome.

Reciting the refuge prayer brings great merit. *The Sutra of Great Liberation* states that if one recites the refuge prayer to the Three Jewels near the ears of a dying animal, it will help prevent the animal from being reborn in a lower realm. The fourfold refuge prayer adds, “I take refuge in the Teacher” to the refuge in the Three Jewels, as the Teacher embodies the quintessential union of the Three Jewels.

Therefore, we should regularly recite the fourfold refuge prayer. In the presence of others, we should frequently praise the great qualities of the Three Jewels, encouraging them to take refuge. We should help them understand that the Three Jewels are the refuge for all beings, both in this life and the next. Thus, we should practice the refuge diligently.

However, in the current degenerate age, some people really go too far. They often criticize the Dharma, saying this is wrong, that doesn’t make sense, monks are bad, and the like. These people argue that they are telling the truth, which is not the case. They only see faults, and completely neglect the great qualities of the Three Jewels. It is because of their lack of pure perception that they are blind to the merit of taking refuge in the Three Jewels.

In fact, as far as all living beings are concerned, the most beneficial thing to all of us in this life, and many lives yet to come, is to take refuge in the Three Jewels. As is said in the *Sutra of the Miraculous Play of Manjushri*:

Only the World-Honored Ones
Can bless us and bestow the blessing of fearlessness,
So we shall fervently take refuge in
The Buddha, the Dharma, and the noble Sangha.

It is only when we take refuge with fervent devotion and faith that we can obtain happiness in this life and in future lives.

A person who truly understands the benefits of taking refuge will always share his understanding with people he happens to meet. Sometimes when he shares a hotel room with a non-Buddhist he will patiently talk about refuge, and on the next day when they part from each other, his roommate may have already taken refuge.

In comparison, some people can be quite stubborn and less receptive to the

Three Jewels. We may have spoken with such a person for a long time, but they still show no interest in the Three Jewels. In such cases, we can recite the refuge prayer or the Buddha's name to them, planting a seed of virtue that will be beneficial to them. Had they been born in the Dark Kalpas, when even the names of the Three Jewels were unheard, they would not have had the opportunity to establish a virtuous connection with the Three Jewels.

Therefore, when we encounter someone who has no interest in refuge, we may quietly recite "the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha" nearby, or recite "Namo Buddha Shakyamuni" or "Namo Buddha Amitabha" while walking or riding in an elevator with them. People may find us a bit odd, but our actions will bring great benefits to them because we are planting a seed of merit in their alaya consciousness. In this life, we may not have the opportunity to have our own sangha, to whom we can teach the Dharma, but by planting virtuous seeds in the people we encounter in daily life through this method, we are actually propagating the Dharma.

We should also visualize and remember the Three Jewels in our daily endeavors.

1) Sleep

When going to sleep at night, we should visualize the refuge deities in our hearts, focusing our minds on them as we drift off. If one hasn't yet achieved the states of the generation and perfection stages and finds this visualization challenging, one may at least think, "At this moment, my teacher and the Three Jewels are present by my pillow, gazing at me with love and compassion, caring for me, and blessing me." If we can fall asleep in this state, our ordinary dreams filled with delusions will transform into lucid dreams. Therefore, before sleeping, practice this visualization and strive to avoid a mindset of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. We should fall asleep with our minds concentrated on the Three Jewels.

2) Eat or drink

When we eat or drink, we should visualize the Three Jewels in our throats and offer them the taste of everything we consume. However, those who have a strong attachment to the existence of things may feel confined by their physical bodies and may have many unnecessary thoughts, such as: which exact part of the throat do they reside in, or, how can the Three Jewels be so tiny? As a result, it becomes very difficult for them to visualize according to the generation and perfection stages.

Actually, during our visualization, our bodies are not the usual forms of flesh and blood; rather, they are insubstantial, devoid of inherent existence, and the visualized Three Jewels are the same. It is because they appear but do not inherently exist that we can visualize that, in our throats, the infinite illusory bodies of our own are making offerings to the infinite mandalas of the buddhas. This corresponds to the state of “On a single speck of dust, there are infinite Buddha-fields and worlds.”⁵²

If one finds the visualization challenging, one may offer the first mouthful or sip, sincerely thinking, “I offer this to the Three Jewels.” This is the case for many senior Tibetan practitioners. For example, when they take a can of soft drink, they first dip a finger in it and flick three times into the air. If it is inconvenient for you to do this, you may recite once the offering prayer in your mind, and then consume the drink.

In this regard, many sangha members are doing very well. During the mealtime they put food into a bowl, place their hands together palm-to-palm, recite the offering prayer, and then they start to eat. This in itself is also a practice, and you should gradually form this habit.

Having heavy habitual tendencies on worldly matters, we often generate unwholesome thoughts and conduct negative actions; it is hard for us to think and do good things. Nevertheless, we still need to habituate ourselves on those good thoughts and actions.

3) Wearing new clothes

When we wear new clothes for the first time, we should hold them up and mentally offer them to the Three Jewels. Then, we should put them on with the thought that they have been graciously given to us by the Three Jewels.

Of course, this applies not only to new clothes, but also to anything pleasant to us, including a new house, a new meditation center, and the like. We can always offer them mentally to the Three Jewels, then visualize they were given back to you. Such a practice creates great merit.

I heard that a Dharma fellow always offered fruit to the Buddha, and after the offering was done, he would tell the Buddha, “Dear Buddha Shakyamuni, please give me back the best apple to eat!” Haha, this is fine.

⁵² It is a line from *The King of Aspiration Prayers Samantabhadra’s Aspiration to Excellent Conduct*.

4) Seeing something pleasant

Whenever we come across something that brings us joy or that we find desirable, we should mentally offer it to the Three Jewels. This includes vibrant gardens filled with flowers, crystal-clear streams, elegant homes, pleasant groves, and abundant wealth and possessions, as well as beautiful men and women in fine clothing.

5) Drawing water

When drawing water, we should sprinkle a few drops into the air and say, “I offer this water to the Three Jewels,” before pouring it into our containers. In the past when people had to draw water from a well or a spring, they would do so. But most of you are using tap water now, so it may not have to offer water in this way.

Without knowing the merit of such behaviors, modern people may find these old customs quite irrelevant. In fact, apart from what is visible to us, there also exist what is invisible to us, for example, the blessings of the Three Jewels. Believe it or not, one can accumulate abundant merit from making offerings to the Three Jewels, however minute the offerings may have been. The *Sutralankara* says:

Though having no precious jewels,
Provisions and possessions,
Those who have faith in the Three Jewels
Are the richest.

Therefore, whenever and wherever we see something pleasant, we should offer those things mentally to the Three Jewels.

Furthermore, whenever we experience happiness, prosperity, peace, success, or any form of good fortune in this life, we should recognize that it all comes from the compassion of the Three Jewels. With devotion and pure perception, we should first offer it to the Three Jewels.

All our virtuous actions, such as prostrations, offerings, deity practice, and recitation of mantras, should also be dedicated as offerings to the Three Jewels. Then, dedicate the merit of these actions to the benefit of all sentient beings.

In the life-release liturgy we usually recite, there are specific verses dedicated to offering the merit to the Three Jewels. Someone may wonder, “I just set the animals free. Why do I have to offer the merit to the Three Jewels? There’s no need!”

This opinion is incorrect. Regardless of the good deeds we have performed, we should first offer the merit to the Three Jewels and then dedicate that merit for the benefit of all beings. In doing so, we accumulate merit from both the act of offering and the act of giving.

For example, today you've heard Dharma teachings, recited *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, and practiced preliminaries. You may mentally offer the merit of these positive actions to the Three Jewels and then dedicate the merit to all living beings. On the surface, this action appears to be a deliberate mental effort; however, it will lead to a significant accumulation of enlightenment.

Especially, we should strive to make offerings to the Three Jewels as frequently as possible, on full and new moon days and in the six periods⁵³ of the day. It is essential to always observe the special times dedicated to the Three Jewels, such as the eighth, tenth, twenty-fifth, and twenty-ninth day of each Tibetan month, the day when the Buddha attained enlightenment, the birthday of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, and more. Meanwhile, do not interrupt your daily offerings to the Three Jewels.

When I was a child, I often heard my parents and our practitioner neighbors say, "Today is the tenth day of the month, we must engage in good deeds," or "Today is the eighth day of the month, all children should do virtuous things." I was brought up with such a custom.

However, this custom has changed in some Tibetan areas. I often think, "Maybe it has something to do with the merit accumulated in my previous lives; I always encountered great individuals, no matter where I was—be it in my elementary or secondary school or at home herding yaks. Therefore, I was not introduced to and tainted by bad habits. A young child can be easily influenced by their external circumstances, so good values and actions around them will have a lifelong positive impact."

Therefore, today's parents should provide positive guidance to their children through their exemplary actions. We should also share the values and views of Buddhism with the younger generation through various methods.

Therefore, we must always remember that, regardless of our circumstances—be it in times of suffering or joy—our only refuge is the Three Jewels. If we can genuinely internalize this belief, we will instinctively seek the Three Jewels for

⁵³ It refers to six times of a day: three times in the day and three times in the night.

refuge, even in moments of fear or terror during our dreams. This means that we will also take refuge in the Three Jewels during our bardo state. Until we reach such a state, it is crucial to diligently engage in the refuge practice.

♦ **Never give up refuge even at the cost of our lives**

In short, we should wholeheartedly place our trust in the Three Jewels and never give up the refuge even if it means sacrificing our lives. Here is a story from the *Sutra of the Collection of the Six Perfections*:

There was once a king who tried to rule his country through the Dharma. In order to promote the Dharma, he decreed that whoever observed precepts and had pure conduct could be exempted from all servitude and taxes.

In order to have tax relief some people appeared to take refuge in the Three Jewels, but they secretly committed negative acts. When the king found out about this, he decided to punish these people severely. To be able to identify those hypocrites, the king had a good idea.

He had notices put everywhere in the country, which said, “Anyone who believes in Buddhism shall be put to death!” As a result, those hypocrites immediately abandoned Buddhism, revealed their true character, and started to commit evil deeds without scruple.

An old Buddhist saw the king’s decree and felt very sad. He thought to himself, “It is said in sutras that the Three Jewels have great qualities. Thanks to the merit I accumulated in the past lives, I am able to take refuge in the Three Jewels in this life. I will never abandon this right path even if it is a king who asks me to do so. I will never give up the refuge even at the cost of my life.” Thus, he still placed entire trust in Buddhism, and also persuaded his son not to give up the Three Jewels.

The king was very happy about his choice, so he invited the old Buddhist to the palace, appointed him prime minister, and presented him with generous gifts. As for those hypocrites who had abandoned Buddhism, they were subjected to heavy taxes and manual labor. Since then, there had been no more hypocrisy in the country.

In fact, when we have devotion and faith in the Three Jewels, their blessings will naturally permeate us at all times. A person who never gives up refuge in the Three Jewels, even at the cost of their own life, is a true Buddhist.

Here is another story:

Once in India, a Buddhist layman was captured by a group of tirthikas who threatened him, “If you give up taking refuge in the Three Jewels, we will spare your life. Otherwise, we will kill you.”

He responded, “I might be able to renounce the refuge with my words, but I could never do so with my heart.” As a result, they executed him.

We should strive to emulate the unwavering devotion of that layman. Especially this time when we are practicing refuge together, we must contemplate this over and over again. Although we haven’t encountered an unfavorable circumstance as described above, we may nevertheless be constantly challenged by our non-Buddhist family members. In that scenario make sure we don’t give up the Three Jewels, and we must firmly uphold this vow.

[We shouldn’t even talk about renouncing taking refuge, which brings faults as well.]

During the Cultural Revolution, there are many inspiring stories of practitioners who upheld their faith in the Three Jewels in the Tibetan and Han areas of China. At that time, it was easy to identify who was a true Buddhist and who was a hypocritical one.

While we are still free from unfavorable circumstances, we should engage in more practices, and complete reciting one hundred thousand times the refuge prayer. In fact, everyone’s mind is subject to change. One might first have average confidence in the Three Jewels, but through continuous practice one will surely develop unwavering faith. Otherwise, one is simply a Buddhist in name, which has little meaning for one’s liberation.

Regarding refuge, we should first gain a good understanding and then put it into sustained practice. Only when the practice has been fully integrated into our minds can we claim to have attained a practical state. One is expected to repeat the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times to complete the preliminaries, but this is merely the minimum requirement.

After finishing the required repetitions, you may ask yourself, “If someone forces me to give up the Three Jewels or he will kill me, what will I do?” If there is a chance you would comply with his threat, it means you haven’t practiced enough. Therefore, you should continue to recite the prayers, increasing to two hundred thousand times, three hundred thousand times, or more.

In short, taking refuge is not merely paying lip service. We must develop

unwavering faith in the Three Jewels from the depths of our hearts. If one has vowed to take refuge one hundred thousand times in front of the refuge deities but has wavering faith in the Three Jewels, it would be unfortunate. Even when a worldly person makes a promise, they always keep it in mind. If the person breaks the promise, they are willing to accept the consequences. As a Buddhist, if one has wholeheartedly vowed to take refuge one hundred thousand times in front of the Three Jewels, one should be resolute and not break the vow easily.



Lesson 89

“Once we give up taking refuge in the Three Jewels, ... Devadatta would become a pratyekabuddha called Utterly Determined.” [page 186–189]

Let us continue our study on the precepts of taking refuge:

As learned in the previous class, now that we have taken refuge, we should place our entire trust in the Three Jewels, and never give up the refuge even at the cost of our lives. If we renounce taking refuge in the Three Jewels, no matter how profound our practices may be, we are no longer even part of the Buddhist community. It is said by Atisha:

It is the refuge that distinguishes a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist.

Atisha was a peerless great pandita in India at his time. When he was invited to teach the Dharma in Tibet, he emphasized two main points in his teachings: the principle of cause and effect and taking refuge. Especially, when speaking of refuge, he said the difference between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist is refuge, instead of external appearance and other precepts one observes. Many tirthikas also refrain from harmful actions, meditate on deities, practice on the channels and energies, and have achieved common accomplishments.

In order to invite Atisha to Tibet, Lha Lama Yeshe Ö sent several Tibetan messengers to India, and he himself even sacrificed his life for the cause. Long

before Atisha came to Tibet, a Tibetan translator who delivered the invitation was with him all the time. Once, at the Ganges River, Atisha and the translator saw an old Brahmin carry the corpse of a boy while walking to the river. The old Brahmin washed the corpse in the river, placed it beside him, and then started to meditate. Soon they noticed that the boy came back to life, while the old Brahmin died. Then the boy threw the old Brahmin's corpse into the river and walked away. The Tibetan translator was in great awe, asking Atisha what that was. Atisha told him it was a tirthika's practice, to revive in a new guise.

[There is a similar practice in Tibetan Buddhism as well, called "forceful projection." When Marpa's son fell off a horse and died, he was reborn by transferring his consciousness to a corpse. Of course, the corpse receiving one's consciousness has to be intact, not injured or disabled.]

From this story we know that tirthikas not only recite mantras, uphold precepts, and engage in wholesome acts, but also obtain incredible accomplishments such as swimming in water like a fish, flying in the air like a bird, going through rocks without hindrance. However, without taking refuge in the Three Jewels, they are not on the path to liberation and will remain trapped in samsara.

Many people in this world spend their whole lives going after fame, status, and wealth. In fact, temporary happiness in this lifetime is not important. What is the most important thing to go after? It is to be freed from samsara forever. In order to achieve this goal, you must first take refuge in the Three Jewels.

The Precious Mirror of the Lotus Lineage of Mount Lu says:

The Buddha says that if living beings
Do not take refuge in the Three Jewels,
They will be in the three lower realms for countless kalpas.

The Mahayana Sutra on the Way to Six Paramitas has a similar verse that says:

Having taken refuge in the Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma,
and the Sangha,
One can have the skillful means to be freed from sufferings;
If one doesn't take refuge, how regretful one will be!

Therefore, the best way to be liberated from samsara is to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

Tibetans, young or old, male or female, pay special attention to refuge. They have faith and devotion in the Three Jewels since youth, and normally recite the refuge prayer many times. A few days ago, an old lama at Larung Gar passed away. He had recited the refuge prayer many times (I don't know the exact number of repetitions), the Avalokiteshvara mantra six hundred million times, *The Confession of Downfalls to the Thirty-Five Buddhas* one hundred thousand times, and *The King of Aspiration Prayers* one million times.

The old lama's name was Tendro and many of our sangha members knew him. When I first came to Larung Gar, he was already here. At his death he had no fear and was very carefree, as if he was heading for another place. He had been practicing the Dharma all his life and died at the age of eighty-four.

Khenpo Sherab Zangpo mentioned in his biography that he was with Lama Tendro when he first arrived in Larung Gar. According to his neighbors in Larung Gar, Lama Tendro was not a fast learner of the Dharma, but he devoted himself to recitation and meditation. He practiced diligently day and night and didn't sleep much. In fact, when we first arrive in this world, we are all the same; but when we leave, some have gained a lot, while others are empty-handed.

It is impossible for us to be liberated from samsara without having taken refuge in the Three Jewels. Jowo Atisha was a renowned master during Tibetan Buddhism's later propagation period. He came to Tibet at the age of fifty-nine around 1040, more than one hundred years after King Langdarma's⁵⁴ persecution and suppression of Buddhism. Atisha started his Dharma propagation at Ngari, and eventually spread it to the entire Tibetan area.

Atisha was familiar with every sutra and tantra teaching, having read them all. For those with the appropriate karmic connections, he also bestowed tantric empowerments and pith instructions. However, he believed that the practice of taking refuge held such primary importance that he focused on it in his teachings to his disciples. This emphasis earned him the nickname "Refuge Pandita."

Some disciples asked Venerable Atisha, "You are such a renowned great pandita in India, but Tibetans call you 'Refuge Pandita.' Is that an insult to you,

⁵⁴ Langdarma (803–842)—The brother and successor of Ralpachen, he became ruler of Tibet in 836 when he began a persecution and suppression of Buddhism at the instigation of several powerful Bön families who were hostile to Buddhism. He was assassinated by Buddhist monk—Belgi Dorje (Tib., dpal gyi rdo je), an event commemorated in the so-called 'Black Hat Dance'. After his assassination, the Tibetan royal dynasty of Yar lung ended and Tibet entered a period of civil and cultural chaos. (Source: Oxford Reference)

because the teaching on refuge is so simple?” Atisha answered, “Taking refuge is the foundation of all practices. It is a great compliment for Tibetans to call me ‘Refuge Pandita.’ I will continue to promote taking refuge.”

From this we can see that taking refuge is of great importance. In the process of our practice, make sure we lay a good foundation of this. Otherwise, how can we claim ourselves a monastic if you simply wear a monastic robe and have your head shaved, but have no respect for and joy in the Three Jewels? It is truly laughable and disgraceful, if one cannot even fulfil the basic requirements for taking refuge and claims oneself a monastic.

Therefore, as Buddhists who have entered the path to liberation, from this moment onward, we must never give up our refuge in the Three Jewels along with its precepts, even at the cost of our own life. This commitment must be put into practice through our actions. As a sutra puts it:

Those who take refuge in the Buddha
Are true lay practitioners;
They should never, at any time,
Take refuge in any other deity.
Those who take refuge in the authentic Dharma
Should abandon all harmful thoughts.
Those who take refuge in the noble Sangha
Should avoid associating with tirthikas.

This scriptural evidence conveys the same meaning as the verse from *The Mahayana Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra* I quoted earlier; the translations simply vary. Specifically, it states that by taking refuge in the Buddha, you are now a true lay follower and should no longer seek refuge in any other tirthika’s deities, such as Indra, Brahma, and others. Often, a person says, “I only want to take refuge in the Three Jewels. I don’t want to take the precepts for lay followers.” However, once you take refuge, you are already a lay follower.

Having taken refuge in the Dharma, you should not harm any being. Of course, you may hurt living beings directly or indirectly because of your uncontrolled anger, but you must repent at once, and make sure you will never kill any being again.

Having taken refuge in the Sangha, you must not associate with tirthikas, nonbelievers, and anyone who slanders a Dharma teacher and defames the

Dharma. Otherwise, you may gradually be tainted by them, your views and actions may emulate theirs, and eventually you may go against the authentic Dharma.

If we take refuge in the Three Jewels with devotion the Buddha will never deceive us but will always grant us blessings and accomplishments that bring us genuine happiness. The *Lotus Sutra* says:

If a person trusts and takes refuge in the Buddha,
The Tathagata won't deceive him.

The Three Jewels are the oceans of all great qualities. We should take refuge in them with veneration and joy, and always keep them in mind and pray to them. As it also says in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

The Teacher of all beings,
The authentic Dharma, the bodhisattvas
And the noble Sangha are the oceans of great qualities,
Thus we must pay homage to them all.

♦ Respect the representations of the Three Jewels

Some individuals today claim to be followers of the Three Jewels, yet they show little respect for their representations. They regard paintings and statues of the Buddha, along with books containing his teachings, as mere ordinary items that can be bought, sold, or pawned. This attitude is referred to as “living by holding the Three Jewels to ransom,” and it is considered a severe fault.

As recorded in *The Sutra on the Ocean-like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha*, Udayana missed the Buddha, who was teaching dharma to his mother in Trāyastriṃśa heaven. So, he built a gold statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, and prostrated and made offerings to the statue every day.

Later when the Buddha came back from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, Udayana put the statue on an elephant and went to welcome the Buddha. When the gold statue saw Buddha Shakyamuni, it got off the elephant's back and bowed to the Buddha. The Buddha also put his palms together and bowed to the gold statue. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of emanated buddhas in the sky also put palms together and prostrated to the gold statue.

The Buddha told the gold statue, “After my parinirvana, my disciples are

entrusted to you...” From then on, there have been statues of the Buddha in this world. Even though Buddha Shakyamuni manifested parinirvana later, all beings still have the support for their prostrations and offerings.

Regarding the representations of the Three Jewels, it is inappropriate for us to use them as items for sale in order to make a living. According to Jigme Lingpa’s *Treasury of Precious Qualities* and his auto-commentary, the negative deeds one accumulates through selling or destroying representations of the Three Jewels, including Buddha statues, scriptures, and stupas, are referred to as unparalleled faults.

How can these faults be corrected? One should offer double compensation or more and repent in front of the Three Jewels. For example, if you once destroyed a Buddha statue worth 100 yuan, you should build a Buddha statue worth 200 yuan; if you once destroyed Buddhist scriptures worth 100 yuan, you should print scriptures worth 200 yuan. Afterward, you may proceed to repentance. By doing so, your faults may be purified.

You may reflect whether you’ve destroyed a Buddha statue or a stupa in the past. If the answer is yes, you must repent before your death. Otherwise, the faults will not only impact your rebirth, but also your retribution in this life.

Here is a story from *The Complete Works of Anshi*:

In the early years of Kangxi’s reign in the Qing dynasty, the price of sandalwood was rising rapidly. An incense store owner, at one point, spent three pieces of gold to buy a sandalwood statue of Avalokiteshvara, which was worth sixteen pieces of gold if sold as sandalwood sticks. Thus, the owner wanted to break up the statue to sell it as sandalwood sticks.

Knowing this would be a severe fault, his servant tried his best to dissuade the owner but was unsuccessful. Soon, the owner had the statue destroyed. On that day, the incense store caught fire, leading to the deaths of the store owner and his family. The servant survived because he happened to be elsewhere when the fire started.

Therefore, it is a very severe fault to commit wrongdoings to representations of the Three Jewels. In my life I have witnessed horrible ripening effects on some individuals, resulting from their deliberate actions of burning down shrine halls and destroying Buddha statues.

In the scripture called *Maudgalyayana Asking about Five Hundred Minor and Major Faults in the Vinaya*, someone asks the question, “What’s the fault of selling

Buddha's statues?" The answer is, "It's the same as the fault of selling one's parents." Therefore, we must pay attention to this issue.

Furthermore, unless it is necessary to take measurements for painting or sculpting an image of the Buddha, one should refrain from casually critiquing or commenting on the Buddha's form, such as the size of the head or the height of the body. Careless remarks about the Buddha statue or drawing, highlighting perceived flaws or a lack of beauty in certain features, can result in significant negative karma.

As it is said in *The Great Commentary on the Aspiration to Take Rebirth in the Pure Land of Bliss*, once a person pointed to a Buddha statue that had a broken finger and called it, "The Buddha with a broken finger." Almost immediately, his own finger was broken.

Some people don't know this, and they often say, "This Buddha is chubby, that Buddha is skinny, and that one is tall..." This is not right. We can't be so disrespectful of an ordinary person, let alone representations of the Three Jewels, including statues of the Buddha.

Very often a person will make a comment like, "This Padmasambhava is so ugly!", or "This Buddha Shakyamuni doesn't look solemn!" How can he say something like this? All the buddhas and bodhisattvas, including Buddha Shakyamuni and Padmasambhava, have perfect appearances. We must not accumulate negative karma by saying foolish words about such sublime beings.

If you are not satisfied with how a statue is made, you shouldn't say the Buddha doesn't look solemn. Instead, you should say the statue maker was not skillful. You shouldn't say something like, "Ah! What an ugly Avalokiteshvara!" Please pay attention to this; otherwise, you can easily commit a severe fault.

In addition, placing scriptures directly on the floor, stepping over them, wetting our fingers with saliva to turn their pages, or engaging in any other disrespectful actions toward them are also serious mistakes.

During his trip to America, the great Jigme Phuntsok once bestowed the empowerment of the Peaceful Manjushri on his audience. While the empowerment was ongoing, some people put the scripture books under their cushions and went up to receive the sacred objects of the empowerment. Seeing this we were very concerned and reminded them not to put cushions on top of the Dharma books. But a few of them didn't care at all, telling us, "It's fine! It's fine!"

Which behaviors are inappropriate? The Buddha says:

In the final five hundred years of the age of decline,
 I will appear in the form of scriptures.
 Regard them as identical to me,
 And at that time, treat them with respect.

The Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra also says:

The Dharma is the body of the Buddha;
 Offering to the Dharma is to offer to the Buddha.

Sutra of the Buddha's Skillful Means in Repaying Kindness says:

The Buddha regards the Dharma as the teacher,
 The Buddha is born from the Dharma,
 The Dharma is the mother of the Buddha.

Records of the Three Treasures Throughout the Successive Dynasties says:

The Dharma is the mother of the Buddha,
 The Buddha is born from the Dharma,
 All the Tathagatas of the three times make offerings to the
 Dharma.

The book containing Buddhist scriptures is the representation of the Dharma, which gives arisings to all the buddhas of the past, the present, and the future. Therefore, we must venerate them.

The Buddha entered parinirvana more than twenty-five hundred years ago, but the Buddha's teachings, such as the Four Immeasurables, renunciation, bodhicitta and more, still remain intact. Through practicing these teachings, we obtain great qualities in our minds. Thus, Dharma is the source of the great qualities.

Recently during a conversation with a Dharma master, I said, "The biggest contribution one can bring to this world is to write a good book." A bad book may ruin the whole world, whereas a good book may bring great contributions to humanity, with its value far exceeding that of some buildings. It is because of the abundant supreme texts that great masters such as Venerable Longchenpa, Lama Tsongkhapa, and Mipham Rinpoche left to this world, that we are able to enjoy these great teachings.

Since the scriptures carry supreme significance, there is a common saying: “One should not place the Buddha statue on top of scriptures.” When arranging a shrine, we should place the scriptures above and the Buddha statue below. Among all representations of the Buddha—statues, scriptures, and stupas—the scriptures are crucial in teaching us what to do and what not to do, as well as in ensuring the continuity of the Buddha’s teachings. They are no different from the Buddha himself in any way and are particularly sacred. Thus, from this perspective, the scriptures are even more important than the Buddha statue.

The *Kshitigarbha Ten Wheels Mahayana Sutra* also says:

If a person gets a wish-fulfilling vase,
He will dispel poverty and obtain wealth and happiness;
Likewise, if a person encounters the Dharma,
He will eradicate confusion and obtain bodhi.

If a poor person encounters a wish-fulfilling vase, he can dispel his poverty and obtain wealth and happiness. Likewise, after we encounter the Dharma, we can become spiritually rich and live a happy life, even if we don’t have much wealth.

Therefore, the Dharma is especially important. Having taken refuge in the Dharma, we must respect even a fragment of paper bearing a single syllable of the scriptures.

Furthermore, many Tibetan practitioners know that a vajra and bell are indispensable for performing Buddhist rituals, yet they don’t view them as representations of the Three Jewels but ordinary objects.

The vajra represents the Buddha’s mind, embodying the five wisdoms. The bell features an image of a face, which, according to the outer tantras,⁵⁵ is that of Vairocana, and in the higher tantras,⁵⁶ is that of Vajradhatvishvari—essentially



⁵⁵ The outer tantras consist of the kriya tantra, the charya tantra, and the yoga tantra.

⁵⁶ The higher tantras consist of mahayoga, anuyoga and atiyoga.

symbolizing the Buddha's body. The inscriptions on the bell consist of the eight seed syllables of the eight consorts, and the bell itself represents the Buddha's speech, the sound of the Dharma. Together, the vajra and bell encompass all representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind. Specifically, these two objects contain the entirety of the Vajrayana mandalas, making them extraordinary and sacred samaya objects.

A tantric practitioner who has received empowerment must uphold the samaya vow of never breaking the continuity of mantra and mudra; they should always keep the vajra and bell with them. If the two objects are too big to carry around, we may attach a tiny vajra and bell to our mala beads as a symbolic presentation, to not break the vow. If we treat the vajra and bell with disrespect, it will result in a grave fault. Therefore, we should always venerate them.

2.2.1.5. The Benefits of Taking Refuge

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the foundation of all genuine Dharma practices. By simply taking refuge, we plant the seed of liberation within ourselves, distance ourselves from negative actions, and cultivate more positive actions. Thus, taking refuge is the source of all good qualities. Without taking refuge, merely performing outwardly virtuous deeds yields limited merit. Moreover, taking refuge is the support for all vows; without it, none of the other vows can be received.

Those who take refuge in the Three Jewels gain the protection of benevolent Dharma protectors. They will see their wishes fulfilled, encounter qualified teachers, and remain free from the influence of negative forces. They will never part from the precious Three Jewels and will remember them across lifetimes. They will experience peace and happiness in both this life and the next, and ultimately attain Buddhahood. The merits and benefits of taking refuge are immeasurable.

In the *Seventy Stanzas on Refuge*, it is said:

Although everyone can take the vows,
One cannot receive them without having taken refuge.

Taking refuge is the fundamental basis for all the vows of individual liberation (pratimoksha), a lay practitioner, a novice, a monk, and so on. Without taking refuge, not only are monastic vows unattainable, but even lay precepts cannot be received. Before generating bodhicitta, receiving empowerments, and engaging in

all other practices, it is crucial to take a complete and authentic refuge vow. In the presence of those who have not taken refuge, one should not teach the profound Mahayana teachings, let alone the Vajrayana teachings. It is impossible to begin even a one-day practice of purification and reparation without first taking refuge. Taking refuge serves as the foundation for all other vows and for the cultivation of all good qualities.

♦ Teach refuge to more people

Many Buddhists in the Han areas of China often mention “three refuges and five precepts,” but many of them, including veteran Buddhists, don’t really know the true meaning and benefits of taking refuge. Therefore, in the future you should particularly propagate the corresponding teachings. Even if you are not able to give profound teachings on the Middle Way or the Great Perfection, it should not be too challenging for you to make others generate faith in the Three Jewels and eventually take refuge.

Monastics and lay practitioners visiting Larung Gar this time can share your insights about refuge with others when you return. Many worldly people lead pitiful lives. They were born into this world but only know how to engage in negative actions such as killing, sexual misconduct, or stealing. They spend their short lifespans focused merely on making a living and are adept at committing harmful deeds, yet they hardly understand how to perform good deeds.

Many schoolteachers often emphasize the pursuit of happiness in this life, doubting the existence of future lives. This approach is akin to a blind person leading another blind individual down a path, ultimately leading everyone into the abyss of suffering.

This deluded world never lacks misguided instructions and teachings. What is the goal of individuals who embrace such teachings? Primarily, they seek hedonistic pleasures and material possessions. As stated in *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita’s Treasury of Good Advice*, an individual who only pursues indulgence is no different from a hairless pig. Those who know nothing about taking refuge are truly unfortunate: they work so hard in their lives, but it’s all just for the benefit of a few decades of this existence.

Therefore, we should share the vast wisdom of Buddhism with more fortunate individuals, which is more meaningful than giving them money or status. If one gives them one or two million dollars, they may soon spend the money and receive

only temporary pleasures. In contrast, if one plants the seed of liberation in their minds, it will bring incredible benefits to this life, and to many lives yet to come. Therefore, since we've vowed to generate bodhicitta, we should share the benefits of taking refuge with people around us.

As Buddhists, if you are asked to bestow empowerments, you may not have the capacity; but if you are asked to teach refuge, it is much easier for you to do so. Sometimes when people request empowerments from me, I carefully examine myself: Have I perfected the recitation of the deity's mantra? Have I obtained the blessings of the deity in my dreams or my meditative state?

Someone said that I gave him empowerment twenty years ago, but this is not true. What I did was just touching his crown with a deity picture. A true empowerment is not this easy. The *Guhyagarbha Tantra* lists two causes and four conditions for empowerment, which were not present twenty years ago.

But if you ask me to teach about refuge, I can do so. Meanwhile, I have developed a conviction that taking refuge is very important among all things in this world. Therefore, if someone requests the teaching of refuge, I will be very happy and say to them, "Come here! I'll teach you right away!"

♦ **Even a slight connection with the Three Jewels can lead to liberation**

Taking refuge with genuine faith that fully acknowledges the qualities of the Three Jewels undoubtedly brings immense benefits. However, even simply hearing the word "Buddha" or establishing the slightest connection—no matter how small—with any representation of the Buddha's body, speech, or mind can plant the seed of liberation, ultimately leading to a state free from suffering.

In *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*, Longchenpa quoted a verse from the *Sutra of the Buddha's Deeds* that says:

Virtues directed toward the Teacher Buddha,
However tenuous they may be,
Can bring rebirth in a higher realm,
And the fruit of bodhi in the end.

Essential Brief Records of Miracles Related to the Three Jewels says:

During the final era of Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings,
 Those who develop even a slight faith upon hearing the name
 of the Three Jewels
 Will have all their negative actions and obscurations
 accumulated across the three times eliminated,
 And will certainly have a direct vision of all sublime beings in
 this life.

In the *Vinaya*, there is a story about a dog that chased a pig around a stupa. This act of “circumambulation” planted the seed of enlightenment in both animals. The pig unintentionally circumambulated the stupa once, and because of this it was reborn as Shrijata during the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. At the age of one hundred Shrijata wanted to take ordination, but none of the arhats agreed to take him, because through their clairvoyance they couldn't identify any root of merit in him. Shrijata was upset, so he went to see the Buddha.

[People often ask me, “Do I have the opportunity to take ordination? Do I have the opportunity to get liberated?” Well, if arhats could not tell, how can I?]

The Buddha gave him permission to become a monk, and soon Shrijata attained Arhathood.

Where was his root of merit? When he was a pig in a previous life, he was chased by a dog and circumambulated a stupa. Such a tenuous positive act could bring great merit. Unlike the pig, we can circumambulate a stupa with a virtuous intention. By so doing, the corresponding merit is immeasurable!

Tibet's first seven monks⁵⁷ were seven bugs on a leaf in a previous life. The leaf was blown into a river, and the bugs drifted with the current and circumambulated a stupa in the river seven times, which became their cause of liberation.

These positive acts are not only tenuous but also unintentional. If such acts can bring great merit, then imagine the merit we can accumulate through deliberately circumambulating a stupa, a statue of the Buddha, and a monastery with wholesome motivation. Now that we have rebirth in Jambudvīpa, any action we take here will ripen soon. Therefore, even if we simply turn a prayer wheel once

⁵⁷ They are also referred as “seven men to be tested” (Tib. སང་མི་མི་བདུན་, Wyl. sad mi mi bdun). They are Ba Trizik (ཐལ་ཁྱི་གཞིགས་, sba khri gzigs), ordained as Shrighosha (Skt. Śrighoṣa; Tib. Palyang), Ba Salnang, Ba Trisher (ཐལ་ཁྱི་བཞེར་གཞིགས་ or ཐལ་ཁྱི་བཞེར་གཞིགས་, sba khri bzher or sba khri bzher gzher), Pagor Vairotsana, Ma Rinchen Chok, Gyalwa Chokyang, Khön Nagendrarak-shita. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

or prostrate once to a Buddha statue, the merit is immense. Of course, it may be a different case if you do not believe this. Now that we have obtained a precious human life and encountered the Dharma, we are truly very fortunate.

According to another story, three people attained Buddhahood because of a single clay tsa-tsa.

Long ago, a person made a small clay tsa-tsa statue and placed it by the roadside. One day, another person noticed the tsa-tsa statue lying on the ground by the road and thought, “If it stays here, the rain will soon ruin it. I should do something to protect it.”

So, he covered it with an old leather shoe sole that was nearby.

Later, a third person came by and thought, “It’s improper to have an old shoe sole covering the tsa-tsa,” so he removed it.

As a result of their good intentions, both the one who covered the tsa-tsa and the one who removed the covering were reborn as kings in their next lives. As it said in a sutra:

With pure intention, one placed a shoe sole
On the head of the Buddha’s statue,
And another later removed it—
Both were reborn as kings.

[Thus, it may not be hard to become a state leader. The person may have just done a tiny positive thing to the Three Jewels in the past.]

Three individuals—the one who crafted the tsa-tsa, the one who covered it with a shoe sole, and the one who later uncovered it—all obtained the happiness of higher realms, such as being reborn as kings. At the same time, they sowed the seeds of ultimate liberation within themselves, progressing toward Buddhahood.

A supreme support of veneration can actually bring liberation to innumerable beings. For example, one builds a statue of the Buddha, one puts ornaments on the statue, one circumambulates the statue, one offers a flower to the statue, one offers incense, and the like. Just one statue of the Buddha can create a link with many beings.

When I visit temples of Chinese Buddhism, I rejoice when seeing the majestic statues of the Buddha and the shrine halls. Those who build statues and shrine halls

accumulate great merit. Meanwhile, those who form positive connections with these completed works also gain merit.

♦ **Taking refuge with sincere and intense faith can exhaust evil actions**

By taking refuge, we distance ourselves from all negative actions. When we take refuge in the Three Jewels with sincere and profound faith, it diminishes or even eradicates the negative karma we have accumulated in the past. Here is the story from *The Magnificent Account About a Sow* (Skt: *Sūkarikāvadāna*):

There was a god who had only seven days left to live. Through his clairvoyance, he found he would be reborn in the city of Rajagriha as a pig living in a filthy place. Full of sadness he asked Indra for help, and the latter asked him to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. So, the god did take refuge wholeheartedly.

After the god died, Indra used his clairvoyance but couldn't determine where the god was reborn, so Indra went to ask the Buddha. The Buddha said that due to the merit of taking refuge in the Three Jewels the god was reborn in the Tushita Heaven, which was above Indra's realm, thus invisible to him.

As you see, taking refuge in the Three Jewels brings great merit, so please do take it seriously. *The Sutra of Sakka's Questions* says:

Only the Buddha, the World Honored One,
Is the great Teacher in this world,
Who can skillfully subdue the army of demons,
And liberate all sentient beings.

From the moment you take refuge onward, the compassionate blessings of the Three Jewels transform all our thoughts into positive ones, ensuring that we no longer engage in harmful actions.

Here is the story about King Ajatashatru from the sutras:

When Ajatashatru was still in his mother's womb, a fortune teller predicted that he would one day kill his father. Feeling horrified, his father threw him off a tall building when he was just born. However, since his karma of living in this world hadn't exhausted, he was not killed and only got a finger broken. When Ajatashatru grew up, he indeed killed his father which is a crime with immediate retribution,

but later he took refuge in the Three Jewels. As a result, he suffered in the hells for only seven days and was then freed.

It is said in other sutras that Ajatashatru was supposed to fall into the Hell of Ultimate Torment due to his killing of his father, but because of his merit of taking refuge, he was reborn in the Black-Line Hell and was soon freed.

After the Buddha's parinirvana, Ajatashatru became a primary protector of the Dharma. When Mahakasyapa was collecting the Buddha's teachings in the Saptaparni Cave, Ajatashatru was the great patron who provided all the material support.

Here is the story about Devadatta:

Devadatta committed three of the crimes that bring immediate retribution: causing a schism within the Sangha, shedding the blood of the Buddha, and killing an arhat. In addition, he drove drunk elephants to attack the Buddha and intended to harm the Buddha with poison hidden in his ten nails when making prostration to the Buddha.

Due to these actions, he immediately descended into hell after his death, where he experienced the torment of being consumed by intense flames. It is at that moment that he had faith in the Buddha's teaching, and cried out, "I am determined from the depths of my bones to take refuge in the Buddha!" The Buddha told him, "Merely taking refuge in the Buddha is not enough; you must also take refuge in the Dharma and the Sangha." Following this, Devadatta sincerely took refuge in the Three Jewels."

The Buddha foretold that because of these words Devadatta would become a pratyekabuddha, called Utterly Determined.

Scriptures of the Basic Vehicle depict Devadatta as an evil man, but in the Chapter of Devadatta in the *Lotus Sutra*, a Mahayana scripture, it is said that the Buddha attained enlightenment because he received the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* from Devadatta in a previous life. The Buddha also stated that whoever hears the Chapter of Devadatta will not fall into the lower realms and will obtain many great qualities.

In the Mahayana scriptures that convey ultimate meaning, Devadatta is portrayed as a manifestation of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. In this text, Patrul Rinpoche discusses how Devadatta committed three crimes with immediate

retribution, but because he took refuge wholeheartedly in the Three Jewels, he was eventually freed.

You may not have committed crimes with immediate retribution, but more or less you've conducted negative actions. If you can repent wholeheartedly in front of representations of the Three Jewels, and recite, "*From now on I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha*," your negative actions can be easily purified.

When engaging in the refuge practice, you may sometimes visualize or concentrate on the field of merit and think, "I have committed so many negative actions in the past. It is so precious to have this human life. I must wholeheartedly take refuge in the Three Jewels." Then, you may proceed to recite the refuge prayer:

*I and all beings of the six classes respectfully take refuge
In the gurus, yidam deities, and hosts of ḍākinīs,
And the Buddha, Dharma, and noble Sangha,
Who fill the expanse of space at the level of the sky.*

By doing so, you are not just reciting with your voice, but also with your heart. If you can repeat the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times in this manner, you will definitely generate solid faith in the Three Jewels. As a result, no matter how grave the negative actions you have committed, you won't fall into the lower realms. Even if you experience a bad rebirth, its duration will be very short. This is stated by the Buddha, as in the verse quoted below:

If a person trusts and takes refuge in the Buddha,
The Tathagata won't deceive him.

Therefore, everyone should have trust and confidence in the great qualities of the Three Jewels!



Lesson 90

“Now, therefore, through the kindness of a teacher ...
That our faith may be firm and irreversible.” [page 189–192]

Let’s continue to study “taking refuge”:

♦ Taking refuge can dispel obscurations

Now, therefore, through the kindness and blessing of a qualified teacher, we have already received the authentic teachings and may have developed a slight intention to do good and refrain from wrongdoing, such as: “I want to practice preliminaries,” “I want to take ordination,” “I want to benefit beings.”

If we strive to practice taking refuge in the Three Jewels, our minds will be blessed, and we will increasingly cultivate all the good qualities of the path, such as faith, pure perception, renunciation, bodhicitta, and belief in the principle of cause and effect.

Faith is very important for both worldly and transcendental matters. Volunteers for Dharma activities should especially have faith and motivation; otherwise, if one is like a rock that feels nothing about everything, that is not good. Faith is important when committing good deeds. Ashvaghosha’s *Sutralankara* says:

Faith is like a swift arrow, moving rapidly like a river.

It enables the mind to quickly reach the virtuous deeds.

When filled with faith, we will act very rapidly and become efficient at

everything we do. Likewise, we should have faith in the Three Jewels as well. Knowing the incredible qualities and powers of the Three Jewels, we will develop more faith and obtain more positive qualities.

On the other hand, if we set aside our commitment to taking refuge in the Three Jewels and praying to them, we may appear to have strong renunciation of samsara and be outwardly aligned with virtuous practices, but we can still be easily swayed by external distractions. Modern media, including television and the internet, often contains content that promotes negative behaviors. Given our limited wisdom and lack of strong resolve—unlike the great masters of the past, whose minds remained steadfast despite worldly temptations—we are often influenced by changes in our environment. Our minds frequently shift with external circumstances, leading us astray. As a result, even if we are currently dedicated to studying and practicing the Dharma, there is a genuine risk of abandoning these efforts and succumbing to harmful influences over time. [This is so important! Each sentence in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, from beginning to end, is very precious, like a priceless wish-fulfilling jewel.]

Therefore, it is crucial to understand that there is nothing better than taking refuge for cutting the stream of negative actions for the future.

It is difficult for ordinary people to remain free from external influences if they rely entirely on themselves. When some parents send their children to study elsewhere, they tell their children, “You’re going out on your own, so make sure not to pick up any bad habits from others!” Their children may remind themselves of this as well, but some external temptations are so strong that they cannot resist.

Some Dharma fellows here visit their parents during a break, and they find it hard to act in perfect accordance with the Dharma at their parents’ home. Anyone in such cases should be mindful and vigilant and try to control themselves. Meanwhile, one should take refuge in the Three Jewels and pray to them, which is the most crucial point.

Especially, in the darkness of this degenerate era, praying to Tara and Padmasambhava is the supreme practice that can dispel unfavorable circumstances for our practice. This is also based on my own experience. If you are not familiar with the prayer of the *Praises to the Twenty-one Taras*, you may chant the Tara mantra—*Om Tare Tuttare Ture Svaha*. If you don’t know how to recite the prayers

of Padmasambhava from the liturgies or termas, you may chant the mantra of Padmasambhava. They are the best ways to dispel unfavorable circumstances.

Many people wish to carry out good deeds and Dharma practices consistently from start to finish. Many monastics also aspire to observe pure precept, study, and practice the Dharma throughout their lives. However, at times, demonic forces can be so prevalent. Even though one may not want to engage in unwholesome actions, the lure of external circumstances can gradually intensify inner afflictions, ultimately making it difficult to resist being swept away by the currents of negative karma. In such cases, one must pray.

As I said before, Khenpo Legshed, an old practitioner from my home monastery, often says:

It is indeed very important to antidote afflictions with mindfulness and vigilance, but the most important thing is to always pray to the Three Jewels.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said:

Wherever we are, be it outside or at home, we must always think of praying to the Three Jewels. By doing so, no matter where we go and live, our state of practice and our kind-heartedness will always be present.

This is a very important instruction. Please remember this and reflect on these vajra words repeatedly.

Moreover, as the saying goes:

Demons particularly detest those who strive diligently in their practice.

In *The Chariot of Excellence: A Commentary on Finding Rest in Illusion*, Longchenpa quoted the Buddha's teaching in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*, and gave the following instruction:

Demons don't bother to harm those who don't hear, contemplate, and meditate with diligence, so those practitioners are strong and healthy and rarely encounter any unfavorable circumstances. The

more diligent a practitioner is, the more likely that demons will bring harm to him.

Even if a diligent practitioner hasn't experienced severe illness or demonic forces, they may cough a lot. Haha, those who cough often in the Dharma hall now must have practiced diligently.

As the saying also goes:

The more intense the practice, the more intense the demons.

and

As the path rises an inch, obstacles rise a foot.

In this degenerate age, where the five degenerations are increasingly rampant, practitioners who engage in profound Dharma practices and virtuous deeds often face temptations related to worldly fame and status or encounter numerous obstacles from friends and family.

It is not easy for some sangha members here at Larung Gar to pursue the Dharma. I truly rejoice in their determination. It is also challenging for some laypeople to study the Dharma. To attend group studies, they sometimes have to lie to their families, claiming they are going out for a career bootcamp. Since this excuse is so frequently used, family members become suspicious, asking, "Why do you have to go every Sunday?"

In addition, as the teachings become more profound and one's practice becomes increasingly grounded, layers of obstacles such as illness and demonic forces may emerge. One's mind is invaded by thoughts and hesitations. In many such guises, obstacles to Dharma practice arise and destroy all merit. But if we can sincerely take refuge in the Three Jewels and always pray to them, we will be less likely to deviate from the right path. All obstacles in our Dharma practice will transform into favorable circumstances, and our merit will continue to grow and flourish. As said in the *Treatise of Abhidharma [Preached] by Sariputra* (Skt. *Śāriputrābhidharma-sāstra*):

If one takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha,
This refuge is the safest,
This refuge is the most sublime.

To take refuge in these,
One is free from all sufferings.

In the course of our pursuit of the Dharma, when we encounter unfavorable circumstances such as family opposition, illness, and the like, if we persevere, then demons won't have the chance to harm us, and our practice of the authentic Dharma won't be interrupted. It will be a different story if we give up easily, if for example when we have a cold we complain, "I'm done. I don't want to read the Dharma book anymore. I no longer want to recite the refuge prayer."

That said, we must persevere in our practice, which is indispensable.

♦ Not everyone can do "liberation" practice

In the past, Tibetan householders would invite lamas and their disciples to perform rituals in order to protect themselves and their livestock from disease for the year. However, none of these lamas had received the necessary empowerment or oral transmission, nor had they perfected the basic recitation. They would attempt to open the mandala of a wrathful deity without going through the appropriate generation and completion stages. With eyes open as wide as saucers, they would whip themselves into an overwhelming fury directed at an effigy made of dough. Their rituals included "red offerings" of meat and blood, and their shouts of "Bring them! Kill them! Just you wait... Hit them!" stirred feelings of violent aggression in everyone who heard them. A closer examination of these ceremonies reveals that, as Milarepa states:

Inviting wisdom deities to serve worldly interests is like dragging
a king from his throne and ordering him to sweep the floor.

Before his parinirvana, Milarepa told his disciples, "The 'liberation' practices should be guided by compassion, instead of hatred. Otherwise, it is not a true tantric practice, and those who perform the practices will fall into the hell realm." As it is said in the *Sutra on Prophecies on Mahasatya Nirgranthaputra by the Buddha*:

If one doesn't practice with compassion,
And does it with hatred and harmful intention,
Then even if he engages in good deeds,
He will be reborn in the hell realm.

Padampa Sangye says:

Setting up a Vajrayana mandala in a village goat pen—how could that possibly be an antidote? It’s utterly absurd!

That is, when lamas and disciples who haven’t obtained required realization are performing “liberation” practices with ordinary anger, it is like they build a tantric mandala in a filthy village goat-pen. So, how is it even possible to have any sublime deity come and grant blessings? Therefore, such sort of practices will inevitably be tainted by the faults of Bönpo traditions and will simply deceive others.

Nowadays, there are a few “teachers” who visit the Han region of China and promote their so-called tantric practices of subjugation and union. Under the guise of tantric practices, they are actually engaging in wrongdoings which mislead followers onto a wrong path, which must be forbidden.

When Venerable Atisha first came to Tibet, he noticed inappropriate behaviors in a few monasteries and among some sangha members, so he rectified those actions that were not in accordance with the doctrines.

Are these the faults of Vajrayana? Of course not. It is the fault of certain individuals, not of the tantric teachings. You must be clear about this. Tantric teachings can withstand any examinations. They cannot be refuted even by the doctrines of Sutrayana. A tantric practitioner may engage in wrongdoings due to his own greed for wealth, lust, or fame; but one shouldn’t blame Tantrayana because of this tantric practitioner’s personal mistakes.

In the text we just studied, both Milarepa and Padampa Sangye criticized certain wrong behaviors among Tibetan practitioners. Notably, these two great masters lived during the same period and even met in person.

Here is the account from *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*:

One night in his dream, Milarepa had a clear vision of a Dakini with a lion’s face who said, “Milarepa, Padampa Sangye from India is coming to Tong Lha, Tibet. Are you not going to see him?” At the same time, Padampa Sangye was also urged in a dream by a Dakini with a lion’s face to go and meet Milarepa.

On the next day when Milarepa saw Padampa Sangye, he thought, “People say he has transcendental miraculous power. I shall now test him.” Milarepa then transformed himself into a clump of flowers growing beside the road. Padampa Sangye passed by the flowers with his eyes wide open, as if he didn’t see them at all.

Milarepa thought, “It seems he does not have perfect miraculous power!” But just then Padampa Sangye turned back and was about to kick the flowers, but he changed his mind, thinking, “Milarepa is an accomplished being, so I’d better not kick him. Let it be.”

Then Milarepa arose from this transformation and discussed the states of realization with Padampa Sangye. Milarepa invited him to make a tsok, or feast offering, together. Padampa Sangye said, “Well, since you are a Tibetan, you should play the part of host. You should be the first to prepare the feast.”

Milarepa then removed his skull, leaving the brain inside, and cut off his forearms and neck to construct a hearth. He placed the skull on this hearth and generated tummo fire from his navel to heat it.

Meanwhile, Padampa Sangye transformed himself into seven bodies, each standing on a separate stalk of grass. Milarepa also transformed into seven bodies, positioned atop the tips of seven stalks of grass. The two masters then began the tsok and obtained six wondrous enjoyments.

The grasses upon which Milarepa’s transformed bodies stood were slightly bent. He asked Padampa Sangye, “In terms of proficiency in the vase-breathing practice, there is no difference between you and me. Why then, are my grass stalks slightly bent?”

Padampa Sangye replied, “There is no difference between your realization and mine. The slight bending is simply because you were born a Tibetan. Your views and actions mirror my own, so the disciples in both our lineages will share the same practices and understandings.”

The two great masters share the same opinions and both observed faults in the behaviors of certain Tibetan practitioners, which led them to offer criticism.

Those who perform “liberation” practices must be free from self-centered interests. Only those acting on a vast scale for the benefit of all beings and the teachings have the right to subjugate enemies and obstacle-makers who commit the ten pernicious acts. In fact, if a yogi has the ability to subjugate these beings but chooses not to, they are violating their samaya vows. However, if such practices are carried out with ordinary anger and partiality, they will not only lack the power to liberate the targeted beings but will also result in rebirth in hell for those who perform them.

Once a person came to Larung Gar, requesting teaching of the “liberation”

practices. I asked him why he needed it, and he told me in great anger, “Because so-and-so has treated me so badly, I want to destroy him and his family!” I told him, “Given your intention, you definitely won’t accomplish the liberation practice!”

As it is said in the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*:

Nothing can protect
A person consumed by anger and hatred;
In this life and future lives,
They commit actions that lead to dark consequences.

Those who hold intense hatred toward others cannot obtain protection from the Three Jewels and will only get negative consequences in this life and many lives to come. Therefore, tantric practitioners must not engage in liberation practice for the sake of harming others.

However, if one’s practice is based on compassion, then even if one just follows a formality, the practice still renders incredible qualities, as said in Mipham Rinpoche’s *Luminous Essence: A Guide to the Guhyagarbha Tantra*. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche received the same instruction in a dream, from his root lama Thubga Rinpoche.

Therefore, one shouldn’t think that no one can engage in liberation practice or union practice, nor hold negative judgments against those who do. It is unwise to have an overall aversion to these practices. Regarding the many extraordinary practices, even in the absence of trust and appreciation, one should still maintain a pure perception, as they are beyond the understanding of an ordinary person.

♦ The refuge practice offers far better protection

For someone who has not mastered the generation and perfection stages and fails to uphold the samayas, making “red offerings” of meat and blood will not attract the protection of wisdom deities or Dharma protectors. Instead, the offerings and tormas draw in malevolent gods and demons. While these beings might seem to offer some immediate benefits, the long-term outcome will be a cascade of negative effects. Therefore, a far better protection is to place your trust entirely in the Three Jewels.

Here is another story from *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*:

When Milarepa was dwelling at the Belly Cave of Nya Non, a very rich man

born in a Bön family had great faith in Buddhism, and always made offerings to Milarepa and his disciples.

One day, the rich man fell gravely ill, nearing the end of his life. He gathered all his family members and delivered his last will and testament: “Please offer all my properties and possessions to Milarepa and his disciples and invite them to perform the ritual of deliverance for me. Do not perform any Bön ritual for me.”

After a moment, he began to doubt whether his family would honor his wishes. In desperation, he threatened, “If you do not follow my instructions, I will take my own life, and you will be condemned by all!” Upon hearing this, his family promised to fulfill his wishes, and shortly thereafter, the man passed away.

In accordance with the deceased’s wish, Milarepa and his disciples were invited to the house. They all stayed on the second floor, while the Bön monks, who were also invited for the occasion, remained on the lower floor to perform their rituals.

During these rituals, the form of the deceased man suddenly appeared on the base of the Bön Mandala. He appeared greenish, had long hair, and was drinking beer. Milarepa’s sister happened to be passing by and saw it.

The Bön monks said to her, “Milarepa and his followers are always fighting against us. But look, everyone here can witness that it is we Bön monks who have actually brought the deceased back. Can Milarepa do this?”

Milarepa’s sister then reported this incident to her brother, who replied, “That is not the apparition of the dead man! It is only a trick the Bönists have played to deceive people.” Milarepa then told one of his disciples, “Now go and grasp the apparition’s ring finger, and ask him for the name I gave him in the Belly Cave during his empowerment.”

After a while, the disciple returned and said, “The apparition could not withstand your radiant light of compassion. After a long talk, it said, ‘I am leaving now.’ Then it dashed away.”

The Bön monks challenged Milarepa, saying, “If what we got is not the deceased man, are you able to find him?” Milarepa replied, “Yes, I see him. Because of some slight bad karma in his former lives, he was unable to complete his meritorious deeds, and he has now been born as an insect. Under a lump of brownish yak dung, you will find a long, slender insect—that is he. I am now going to send him to the Land of Liberation.”

To convince everyone, Milarepa brought them to the valley where the insect was. When they came to a lump of brownish, dry dung, Milarepa called the man by his secret names a few times, and then said, “I am your guru, Milarepa. Now come out and come here!”

From somewhere under the dung a small insect appeared, flew directly toward Milarepa, and alighted on him. Milarepa then preached the Dharma and performed the transformation yoga and the ritual of deliverance for the insect. At once the insect died and its corpse began to give out a thin, bright light, which entered and dissolved into Milarepa’s heart.

Milarepa meditated for a short while, and then from his heart the dead man’s consciousness emerged, embodied in a white “Ah” word glowing with brilliant light; and it ascended higher and higher into the sky. Meanwhile the people all heard its voice saying, “The precious Milarepa has now delivered me to the joy of Liberation. Oh great is his blessing! Great is his bounty!”

Having witnessed these things all the spectators were convinced and confirmed with great faith.⁵⁸

As you see, Buddhism consists of extraordinary blessings, which is beyond many people’s understandings.

In fact, to achieve safety and family harmony, it’s not necessary to request someone to perform a large-scale liberation practice or rituals. Instead, one may seek help from teachers and monastics who have pacified and controlled their own minds and uphold pure precepts. By having them recite the refuge prayer a hundred thousand times, one aligns themselves with the care of the Three Jewels. This practice ensures that nothing unfavorable occurs in this life and that all wishes are fulfilled spontaneously. Beneficent gods will provide protection, ensuring that those who seek to cause harm—demons and obstacle-makers—will be unable to come near.

Thus, you should be joyful about reciting the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times. You shouldn’t complain, “Ah! It is troublesome to recite the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times. But if I don’t comply, I won’t be eligible to

⁵⁸ 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), and *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, translated by Garma C.C. Chang, Shambhala Publications, 1999.

receive the tantric teaching. What should I do? Maybe just make up a number?" You'd better not do this.

It is very fortunate that you recite the refuge prayer so many times in this life. When I first received the teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I was so thrilled, like a withered tree being finally watered. I remained in such a state every day when practicing the preliminaries. In fact, if you can recite the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times, it not only brings peace to all living beings, but also perfection of your own practice.

Some Tibetan schoolteachers I know have recently vowed to complete the full cycle of preliminaries in this life, something they had never considered before. Not long ago, I told them it would be a pity to come to this world in this life but fail to complete the preliminaries even once. If one can recite the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times, it offers eternal protection. Individuals who lack merit certainly don't have the opportunity to engage in this practice.

There are individuals who are reluctant to practice preliminaries and instead make excuses by saying, "I am going to practice a higher teaching." Whenever I see such a practitioner, I feel very sorry for them. However, there is little I can do. I truly hope we can all recite the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times. In doing so, beneficent gods will protect us, and demons and obstacle makers will not be able to approach us.

♦ Those who take refuge won't be harmed by demons

A man once caught a thief and gave him a beating, delivering each hard blow of the stick alongside a line from the refuge prayer:

"I go for refuge to the Buddha," whack! "I go for refuge to the Dharma," whack! And so on.

After firmly instilling those lines in the thief's mind, the man let him go. The thief reflected, "Great is the kindness of Buddha Shakyamuni! Fortunately, the refuge prayer only has three lines. If it had four, I might have been beaten to death!"

That night, the thief slept under a bridge, his mind occupied with the words of the refuge prayer, along with the memory of the painful thrashing he had received. While he was lying there, a whole troop of demons approached over the bridge. But then they exclaimed, "There is someone here who takes refuge in the Three Jewels!" and all fled, screaming.

This story also appears in Asvaghosa's *Sutralankara*:

There was once a monk whose house was often visited by a thief. One day when the monk was at home, the thief came again and tried to break into the door. The monk told him, "I will be so scared if I see you. You don't have to enter. Simply put your hand in and I will give you whatever you need." The thief believed his words and put his hands in through the door crack.

The monk immediately tied the thief's hands with a rope and struck him with a stick, accompanying each blow with a line from the refuge prayer.

Scared, the thief started to repeat what the monk had just recited: "I take refuge in the Buddha!" "I take refuge in the Dharma!" and "I take refuge in the Sangha!"

Then monk set the thief free, after beating him like this three times. Later, the thief took ordination.

As described in the stories, even if someone is compelled by others to recite or contemplate the refuge prayer, it still brings great merit. The blessing of the Three Jewels is truly remarkable.

Here I want to clarify something. Some followers of Chinese Buddhism now use this story to refute the fourfold refuge in Tibetan Buddhism, saying, "The fourfold refuge is harmful." Their argument is that the thief took ordination because he thought, "Great is the kindness of Buddha Shakyamuni! Fortunately, the refuge prayer only has three lines. If it had four lines, I might have been beaten dead!" Because of this, they argue, the fourfold refuge doesn't make sense.

How absurd! The thief's statement aligns with the plot of the story and should not be taken out of context to undermine the fourfold refuge. In fact, there is nothing wrong with the fourfold refuge. It is not a negative addition that great masters of Tibetan Buddhism included "I take refuge in the guru" to the threefold refuge. If the guru is a demon, then it makes sense not to take refuge in them. However, in both Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, the guru serves as a worthy support for one's refuge. So why shouldn't we take refuge in the guru?

For example, the *Susiddhikara Sutra*, a scripture from the Chinese Buddhist Canon, says: A disciple's guiding principle is to regard the acharya as the Three Jewels.

A Great Debate on the Right and Wrong Sutra also says:

To make the unknown know, have them take refuge in a true qualified teacher;

To make the unaware be aware, have them take refuge in a true qualified teacher;

To make the unrealized realize, have them take refuge in a true qualified teacher;

To make the unlearned learn, have them take refuge in a true qualified teacher.

Although taking refuge in the Three Jewels is very important, who transmits the essential teachings to us? It is the spiritual teacher. Without a spiritual teacher, it would be impossible for us to truly grasp the essence of Buddhism.

The *Flower Ornament Sutra* also states:

Respect and venerate all qualified teachers... because they grant beings' wishes, like a wish-fulfilling jewel.

As mentioned in this Sutra, the teacher is a "jewel." From this perspective, both the threefold refuge and the fourfold refuge are valid.

King of the Ritual of the Victory of Non-dual Equality says:

This acharya is the same as the Buddha.

The Great Tantra of the Net of Illusion also says:

This vajra acharya is equal to all Tathagatas.

Since the teacher is the same as the Buddha, how can taking refuge in the teacher harm you after you have already taken refuge in the Buddha?

Some people are so unwise that they dare to talk gibberish while knowing very little. If a demon or a rock were to be placed among the Three Jewels, it would make sense if they didn't want to take refuge. However, the teacher is such an extraordinary support for our refuge; how is it possible that taking refuge in the teacher would harm them? The liturgies for daily morning and evening recitations in Chinese Buddhism are not entirely spoken by the Buddha; many of them come from the works of great teachers. Many Buddhists have been reciting these works

every day and have gained great benefit, so how can the teacher be of harm to them, and why is taking refuge in the teacher considered wrong?

When I give refuge to people, sometimes I will recite the threefold refuge prayer in *The Sutra of Great Liberation*:

Namo Buddhaya,

Namo Dharmaya,

Namo Sanghaya.

Sometimes I will recite the fourfold refuge prayer according to the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism:

Take refuge in the guru,

Take refuge in the Buddha,

Take refuge in the Dharma,

Take refuge in the Sangha.

These two refuge prayers are essentially the same. It's like you bring a gold ring from India, and then you crown it with a Tibetan diamond. What's wrong with that?

Nowadays, some individuals neglect to pay proper attention to their speech. They take phrases or sentences from Buddhist scripture out of context and start to slander them, which is quite foolish. If they do not understand the basic principle of the Three Modes of Logic, yet attempt to challenge the profound wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism, they are truly deluding themselves. How absurd! In doing so, it is not the fourfold refuge that harms them, but their own words that bring harm to them and leave them forever in the torments of hell. Therefore, we must be mindful and careful with our words.

There is no better way to dispel the obstacles and challenges of this life than to wholeheartedly take refuge in the Three Jewels. In future lives, this refuge will lead us to liberation and omniscience. The benefits of taking refuge are truly beyond imagination. *The Immaculate Sutra* says:

If the merit of taking refuge
Were to take on a physical form,

It would fill the entire expanse of space
And surpass even the vastness of the sky.

The merit of taking refuge is beyond measurement and verbal description. Therefore, we must not give up refuge under any circumstance. When possible, we should also find ways to persuade others to take refuge.

Here is a story from the *Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra*:

There was once a venerable elder who had two daughters. One daughter devoutly believed in the Three Jewels and attained Arhathood after her ordination. The other daughter didn't believe in the Three Jewels and had many wrong thoughts.

Later, the father told this non-Buddhist daughter, "If you take refuge in the Buddha, I will give you one thousand pieces of gold. If you also take refuge in the Dharma and the Sangha, and receive the five precepts, I will give you eight thousand pieces of gold."

The daughter then took refuge out of her greed for money. After her death, she was reborn in the god realm. Through her clairvoyance, she discovered the cause of her good rebirth and developed faith in the Three Jewels. Then she came back to the human realm and requested teachings from the Buddha. Eventually, she attained the fruition of stream-enterer.

So, if your parents or friends really have no faith in Buddhism, and you are affluent enough, you may tell them, "If you take refuge, I will give you one hundred dollars a month." (*The audience laughs.*)

As you know, taking refuge brings great merit. It is said in the *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*:

If the merit of taking refuge were to take on a form,
The three worlds would be too small to contain it.
Could the immense waters of all the great oceans
Ever be measured with a quarter-pint scoop?

It is also said in the *Sutra of the Heart of the Sun*:

Any sentient being who takes refuge in the Buddha
Will not be harmed by ten million demonic forces.
Even if they transgress precepts or have distracted mind,

They will surely attain Nirvana in the end.

The Sutra of the Great Assembly also says:

He who has taken refuge in the Buddha,
 Cannot be terrified by billions of demons,
 Let alone being swept away by the cycles of birth and death,
 And will reach the shore of unconditional nirvana.

Therefore, we must never give up the Three Jewels, even at the cost of our lives. Take the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche for example. During the Cultural Revolution, a government official named Tsultrim Gyale was always trying to find a way to entrap him.

Once he visited the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, and tried to force him to renounce his refuge in the Three Jewels and to claim Buddhism is superstition. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche replied with great dignity, “Making me do this is even harder than making me climb to the heavens. Buddhism consists of the right beliefs. I’d rather die than give up the Three Jewels.”

Tsultrim Gayle was furious and yelled, “You dare go against my order and insist on doing your own way! Fine, let’s wait and see whether you will be sitting here or in jail in three days!”

At that time the great Jigme Phuntsok was living in a valley near Sertar. When Tsultrim Gayle was on his way home, he suddenly really wanted to drink some alcohol. He took one drink after another and ended up vomiting blood and died.

Here is another example. During the Cultural Revolution, a person who was seen doing Buddhist recitations would get punished, so no one dared hold mala beads and chant the mani mantra. However, Gen Lamrimpa Ngawang Phuntsok (1922–1997) still performed Buddhist practices and recited prayers with his drums and gongs in his monastic residence. Meanwhile, he openly propagated the great qualities of the Three Jewels.

When people tried to dissuade him, saying it was too dangerous, he said, “A lamp is for lighting up the darkness of night, so what’s the use of having a lamp in the day? At this crucial moment when the Dharma might be destroyed, I must try my very best to hold onto Buddhism. When it is resurrected one day, I may take it easy.” The stories of these great eminent masters are truly inspiring.

In a word, taking refuge brings infinite merit. *The Sutra of Great Liberation* says that even animals who hear the refuge prayer won't fall into the lower realms. So, when we see yaks to be slaughtered or fish in a marketplace, if we are unable to release them, we should at least recite to them the refuge prayer, Buddha Amitabha's name, and Buddha Shakyamuni's name.

The Omniscient Light Sage not Eating Meat out of Compassion Sutra says:

Animals who have heard the names of the buddhas
Will forever be freed from the three lower realms,
And will never have rebirth in the eight difficult places.

We must believe the merit of taking refuge is enormous, because this is said by the Buddha. As is said in a sutra:

The ocean's water may dry up,
The palace of Asuras may collapse,
The sun and moon may fall,
But the words of the World-Honored One are infallible.

Therefore, we should firmly believe in the words of the Buddha and wholeheartedly recite the prayer of taking refuge—the basis of all Dharma practices—since its benefits are immeasurable.

It's better off if you can practice refuge in distinct sessions. If this is hard for you, at least you should recite the refuge prayer one hundred thousand times. As I said a few days ago, Lama Tendro recited *The King of Aspiration Prayers* one million times, and the mani mantra six hundred million times. Compared to him, if you can't even manage to recite the four-line verse one hundred thousand times, then that is really inexcusable.

The closing verse of this chapter:

*Though I have taken refuge, my faith remains weak;
Though I have received the threefold training, I still neglect
my vows.
Bless me and all beings like me who are faint-hearted
That we may attain steadfast and irreversible faith.*

Here Patrul Rinpoche concludes the chapter with great humility. Great eminent masters, such as Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, would use this closing verse to dedicate merit when the session of the refuge practice was over.

Faith is the prerequisite of all practices. Once you have faith, you can easily engage in any practice, such as praying, prostrating, or practicing preliminaries. You will have the drive to do so. Otherwise, if you have no trust in your Dharma practice, and instead you only get excited about something delicious, then you are not a true practitioner.

[This concludes *Taking Refuge, the Foundation Stone of All Paths*.]

We are done with the chapter on taking refuge in this semester.

Recently in my New Year's speech to members of the Bodhi Association, I said the following:

As of August 2006, in the past five years I have taught a few long texts such as *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, *Treasury of Valid Reasoning*, *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*, and more to people outside Larung Gar, through the means of the internet and DVDs.

Such a teaching opportunity doesn't come easily. If no special unfavorable circumstances arise in the future, I do hope I'll continue my teachings, and you'll continue your study. In any case, do not give up your hearing, contemplating, and meditating. No matter where you are, make sure you hoist the victory banner of the Dharma!



Lesson 91

How to Practice Bodhicitta

Today I will introduce you to the practice of bodhicitta. Why do I have to give you the practice instruction before I start the chapter?

Regarding this practice, I gave a brief explanation in my teaching of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. The detailed practice instruction will be covered later in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Many of you have finished the refuge practice and will then proceed to the bodhicitta practice, so you need to know how to engage in bodhicitta practice in advance.

Generally speaking, it's better to first train your mind well in the four boundless qualities, also known as the Four Immeasurables, before proceeding to the practice of bodhicitta. Since many of you have already learned how to practice the four boundless qualities and have received teachings on relative and ultimate bodhicitta in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, I believe it is appropriate to teach you the bodhicitta practice before we start this chapter.

Of course, I will still teach you this again when we reach the corresponding part in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It is best to first train your mind in the four boundless qualities before proceeding to the bodhicitta practice. It is also acceptable to study the Four Immeasurables while practicing bodhicitta.

♦ The difference between a tenet and a pith instruction

The four boundless qualities are listed following the sequential order of love, compassion, sympathetic joy and impartiality in Buddhist scriptures. However, according to the pith instruction of lineage masters, such as Longchenpa and Patrul Rinpoche, we should start by developing impartiality. Only when we reach such a state of boundless impartiality can we come to regard every living being with boundless love, compassion, and sympathetic joy.

Regarding the practice of bodhicitta, there are two approaches. According to Buddhist tenets, to practice bodhicitta, we should first become familiar with the basic tenets of relative bodhicitta and ultimate bodhicitta. However, according to the pith instructions of lineage masters, extensive study of these topics is not mandatory; the most important aspect is to deeply generate the thought in one's heart: "All beings used to be my mothers, who are no different from my mother in this life." The practice guidance that helps you achieve this goal is called a "pith instruction."

Pith instructions are very different from the teachings of tenets, and the former doesn't require abundant scriptural evidence and logical reasoning. Nowadays a lot of intellectuals put special emphasis on theoretical studies, and often analyze things through the reasonings in Buddhist Logic and the Middle Way. Such conceptual thoughts may not be suitable when engaging in actual practices.

Therefore, when we are practicing, we should temporarily put aside those theoretical inferences, and instead engage in sequential practices by following lineage masters' instructions. By so doing, we can internalize the practice content and merge it with our minds. This is the purpose of our practice.

Whether it is the practice of bodhicitta or others, putting the teachings into real practice is the most important aspect. Otherwise, however learned and eloquent you are, those teachings are very far from merging with your mind. Therefore, lineage masters place great importance on real practice.

In particular, the stages of practice are exceptionally complete in Tibetan Buddhism, which is rare in other traditions of Buddhism. Now that we are fortunate enough to encounter such teachings, we must follow the instructions of the lineage masters. Otherwise, many people who claim to be Mahayanists exhibit neither great compassion nor even sympathy for others, making them worse than worldly people. How shameful!

I once heard that a government official visited the families of eleven orphans and couldn't stop crying from his compassion for these children during a later meeting, which touched many people. We should reflect on ourselves; we think of ourselves as Mahayanists and tantric practitioners, but do we feel broken-hearted when witnessing something similar to what the official saw?

Here are some other examples: People of other religions go to areas plagued by an epidemic and offer their help wholeheartedly without any concern for their own safety. During a shipwreck, passengers give up their places in the lifeboats and the chance to survive to the elderly, weak, sick, and disabled. Do we Mahayanists cultivate the same altruistic spirit under similar circumstances? There are Buddhists who truly lack the compassion needed to benefit others. Knowing this, no matter how much we are praised, we should have a clear understanding of ourselves.

As you should know, the basis of bodhicitta is compassion, and the basis of compassion is kind-heartedness. If you are not even kind and you hate others, then you are not a Mahayanist, which you should clearly know. Without the Mahayana disposition, it's hard to be a true Mahayanist even if you claim to be one.

Then, who has the Mahayana disposition? There are two scenarios. According to the *Introduction to the Middle Way*, if when you listen to teachings of emptiness you are so happy your hair stands up and your tears run down, this is a sign your Mahayana disposition has awakened. In addition, according to *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, when you shed tears of compassion at others' sufferings, this is also a sign your Mahayana disposition has awakened.

Both scenarios are related to merit accumulated from previous lives. Those who heard teachings on emptiness or practiced bodhicitta in a previous life, in this life would have the experiences mentioned previously, when causes and conditions ripen.

In contrast, some people remain indifferent no matter how many Mahayana teachings they've received, or how many times they've heard about the merit of bodhicitta. Even if they are inspired a bit occasionally, the inspiration, which is like a ray of sunshine between clouds, is quickly obscured by the dark clouds of conceptual thoughts. Such a person is not qualified as a "tantric master," or even a "Mahayanist."

♦ The importance of practicing bodhicitta

In this world, a wise person who wants to benefit others through the Dharma needs to develop bodhicitta. *The Noble Mahayana Sutra on The Four Factors* says:

The wise in this world
Shall generate bodhicitta.

There are many ways to benefit others, such as establishing charity organizations and helping others with one's wealth or social status, but the happiness these bring is only temporary. The only thing that can uproot ignorance and bring eternal happiness to sentient beings is bodhicitta, as said in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

He who wants to achieve peace,
And liberate innumerable beings,
Should generate bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is extremely important in all Mahayana practices. Without Bodhicitta, no matter how profound the teachings you are practicing—whether they are the Great Perfection, Mahamudra, practices from the Chan school, or Pure Land—these advanced practices will ultimately yield results similar to those of practicing worldly dharma or the teachings of the Basic Vehicle.

This is not the fault of the teaching, but the practitioner. As said in *The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*:

Water that is cool, delicious, soft,
and light when it falls from the clouds
acquires on earth very many tastes
by touching salty and other grounds.
When the waters of the noble eightfold [path]
rain from the heart of the vast cloud of love,
they will also acquire many kinds of tastes
by the different grounds of beings' makeup.⁵⁹

For example, the teaching of the Great Perfection is very profound, and its state of realization is beyond imagination. However, if you practice it for the sake

⁵⁹ Arya Maitreya, *Buddha Nature: The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*, written down by Arya Asanga, translated by Rosemarie Fuchs, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 2000.

of obtaining benefits for this life, such as recovery from illness, then when you practice this high teaching, it functions merely as a worldly dharma rather than the cause of liberation. It's like when the king's wish-fulfilling jewel is in a beggar's hands; the beggar simply throws it into a garbage bin because he doesn't recognize its supreme qualities.

Therefore, when the same teaching is offered to various beings, the benefits they get also vary greatly. As said in *The Vimalakirti Sutra* and the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

Although the Buddha teaches the Dharma with but one voice,
All beings perceive that same voice differently according to their
capacities.

For example, today I am teaching Mahayana Buddhism. However, given the diverse faculties of my audience, some may perceive it as a teaching of the basic vehicle, while some others view it as evil dharma. Consequently, what they take away from the same teaching can be very different.

Consider sharing medicinal juice with people, for instance. Some have poison in their bowls, so when the juice is poured in, it becomes harmful instead of beneficial to the body. Similarly, the teaching given by a teacher is entirely impeccable from the Dharma perspective, yet its impact can vary greatly when it enters the minds of different listeners due to their varying capacities. Therefore, to become suitable vessels for the Dharma, we must practice bodhicitta. We should not only understand bodhicitta in theory but also apply it in our daily lives.

♦ How to practice bodhicitta

I've introduced you to the *Essential Points of Daily Meditation* in Lesson Two of my commentary on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. I hope you can practice according to this instruction. If possible, you should at least have formal sitting meditation sessions four or six times a day; and if that's not possible, you should strive to maintain at least one session in the morning or evening.

Before you start the preliminary practice of bodhicitta, make sure you go through at least once the chapter on "Arousing Bodhicitta," in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. When you are doing the practice, make sure you place all beings in the primary place in your visualization and meditation.

1) Early morning practice

When you wake up each morning, first recite “Lama chenno” and practice Guru Yoga, or chant the hundred-syllable mantra twenty-one times. Then reflect upon your dreams from the night before: were they virtuous or non-virtuous? If you had non-virtuous dreams, you should repent; if you had virtuous ones, rejoice and dedicate the merit.

After getting up from bed, prostrate in front of the representations of the Three Jewels at least three times before your morning routines such as washing your face, brushing your teeth, going to the washroom, cleaning up the shrine room, and so on. Then you should start the first meditation session, because at this time your mind is relatively clear.

2) Formal sessions during daytime

These include three parts: preparation, main practice, and conclusion.

i. Preparation

The preparation part has three essential points:

First, the essential point for the body: no matter which practice you are engaging in, be it the preciousness of human life or bodhicitta, you should sit in the seven-point posture of Vairochana. This posture can help you swiftly attain the state of your practice.

Second, the essential point for the speech: after expelling stale breath three or nine times, you start the recitation of Sanskrit vowels,⁶⁰ Sanskrit consonants,⁶¹ and the mantra of Dependent Arising.⁶² If you don’t know how to do the recitations, you may chant “*Om Ah Hum*” instead. In so doing, your speech is purified.

Some people rinse their mouths to purify speech. In fact, such an action can only purify the body, not speech.

Third, the essential point for the mind, which includes right attitude and praying to the guru.

⁶⁰ Sanskrit vowels: a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, ṛ, ṝ, ̄, e, ai, o, au, am, aḥ [om a a i i u u ri ri li li e ai o au am aḥ]

⁶¹ k, kh, g, gh, ṅ, c, ch, j, jh, ṇ, t, th, d, dh, n, t, th, d, dh, n, p, ph, b, bh, m, y, r, l, v, ś, ṣ, s, h [ka kha ga gha nga/ cha chha ja jha nya/ tra thra dra dhra nra/ ta tha da dha na/ pa pha ba bha ma/ ya ra la wa/ sha shha sa ha ksha soha]

⁶² Mantra of Dependent Arising: om ye dharma haytu prabhava haytunte shan tatagato hyawadat teshan tsayo nirodha ewam wadi maha shramanaye soha

Your attitude or motivation for doing Dharma practice has three possibilities: a virtuous attitude, a non-virtuous attitude, and a neutral one. Make sure you have a virtuous attitude during your sitting meditation and try your best to avoid a non-virtuous or neutral attitude.

The virtuous attitude can be further categorized into that to be abandoned and that to be kept. The attitude to be abandoned can also be divided into two kinds: the worldly one and the transcendent one.

The worldly attitude to be abandoned consists of seeking protection from fear, including fear of getting sick or fear of encountering unfavorable circumstances; and that of attaining worldly goals such as fame, health, and the like. Both kinds of attitude are going after this life's benefits, so we should abandon them during our practice.

The transcendent attitude to be abandoned refers to that of Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, who are in pursuit of personal liberation. You must pay special attention to this kind of attitude! For example, during your practice of bodhicitta, it is not good if you only pursue rebirth in the Land of Great Bliss or the state of realization for yourself. Instead, you should think over and over again, "I practice this for all living beings." This is definitely hard to do at the very beginning, but as you keep practicing in this way, you can often remember to practice in order to benefit sentient beings, even if you are not completely in accord with it.

What is the attitude to be kept? The answer is bodhicitta: Wishing to attain perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of the innumerable sentient beings who have been our mothers.

Before you begin to practice bodhicitta, sit in the seven-point posture of Vairochana. You may recite "*Om Ah Hum*," generating the attitude of benefiting living beings in this life and in many lives to come, rather than adopting a selfish and worldly mindset.

Then, you should pray.

According to Khenpo Nagwang Pelzang's pith instruction, to achieve the goal of aspiration, we must pray.

The support of our prayer is the field of merit, as described previously in the refuge practice, with Padmasambhava and his consort in the center, buddhas of the three times in the front, the Jewel of the Dharma in the rear, and the noble sanghas of Bodhisattvas and Shravakas on the right and left respectively. Lineage masters

are at the top, surrounded by all the glorious Dharma protectors. Visualize all these figures of refuge in front of you.

When praying, it's better if you have the Buddha statue, the scripture, and the stupa in your shrine room. These representations of the Three Jewels are indispensable. As Khenpo Nagwang Pelzang states in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, before praying you should put five kinds of offering in front of the representations of the Three Jewels, then perform the seven-limb practice. This is followed by the practice of the four boundless qualities. Then you should offer your body, provisions, and the source of merit to which you are most attached. By doing so, you can accumulate merit and purify obscurations.

Or you may first practice Guru Yoga, visualizing the field of merit dissolving into the teacher at the center, who then dissolves into you. Your mind becomes indivisible from the wisdom of the teacher. Rest for as long as you can in this state. Then visualize the field of merit again and start to recite the bodhicitta prayer in front of the refuge deities.

You may choose the way of praying that best suits you. It doesn't necessarily need to be the same one for every practitioner.

ii. The main practice

When you proceed to the main practice, I suggest you recite three times the following text, from Longchenpa's *The Meaning Instructions on Three Virtues of Relaxation in the Natural State of The Mind*. This text summarizes the instructions of many lineage masters, and it's very good to start your main practice with it.

Here is the text:

*I, name (your Dharma name or worldly name), from now
until I reach the heart of enlightenment, go for refuge to
the great vajradhara gurus.*

*I go for refuge to the Buddha Bhagavats,⁶³ the most exalted
one among all men and women.*

*I go for refuge to the authentic Dharma, the supreme
teaching of peace free from attachment.*

I go for refuge to the Sangha, the supreme assembly of noble

⁶³ The One Beyond Samsara and Nirvana

ones who dwell in the stage of non-decline. Please accept me as a bodhisattva.

O master, vajra-holder gurus, Buddha Bhagavats, and supreme bodhisattvas on the high levels, heed me!

Just as the former Buddha Bhagavats and great bodhisattvas on the high levels initially aroused the supreme bodhicitta for the benefit of all sentient beings, so I, name (your name), too, from now until I reach the heart of enlightenment, arouse the supreme bodhicitta for the benefit of all sentient beings.

I will take across, those sentient beings who have not crossed over.

I will liberate all living beings who are not yet liberated.

I will relieve those sentient beings who are without relief.

I will cause to reach nirvana, those who have not reached it.

Recite this text three times, then move on to the bodhicitta prayer.

Or you may start to recite Mipham Rinpoche's *Illuminating the Path to Liberation: A Preliminary Practice*. When you proceed to the section on generating bodhicitta, you may repeat the following prayer:

Ho! Just as the victorious buddhas and their heirs throughout past, present and future

Generate the intention to attain supreme awakening,

Now I too set my mind upon supreme and unsurpassed enlightenment,

So that I may liberate all beings who extend throughout the whole of space.⁶⁴

You may also recite the bodhicitta prayer of the Longchen Nyingtik ngöndro, noted in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

⁶⁴ Translated by Adam Pearcey, 2019.

*Ho! Led astray by myriad appearances like reflections of the
moon in water,
Beings wander in the endless chain of samsara;
To bring them rest in the radiant space of awareness,
With the four boundless qualities I arouse bodhicitta.*

It's better if you recite the prayer in Tibetan. English version also works if you find Tibetan challenging.

Some people think one should wait and do these practices in old age and focus on hearing and contemplating when young. In fact, when you first study the Dharma it's best to put the instructions in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* into practice. By doing so, your practice will be steady throughout your life.

I was twenty-three years old when I first practiced preliminaries. Because my lama placed great importance on bodhicitta, though I dare not say I've generated true bodhicitta, I have been trying hard with this practice and always regard bodhicitta as something extremely important. Throughout my own practice experience, I always see everyone young or old as my parent, and I vow to take those beings across who have not crossed over, and to liberate those who are not yet liberated. I vow to bring them ultimate happiness. It is vital to practice in this way.

Having generated such an aspiration, you may start to recite the bodhicitta prayer as many times as possible and mark the number at the end of each meditation session.

iii. Conclusion

When the time comes to conclude the session, visualize that all the deities melt into light from the outside in, and then dissolve into Padmasambhava and his consort at the center, who then dissolves into you. Your mind becomes indivisible from the wisdom of Padmasambhava. Rest for as long as you can in this state.

If you've practiced the Great Perfection or Chan Buddhism and attained certain state, you may rest in the corresponding state. If you haven't attained a state of realization, you may first use the logical reasoning of the Middle Way to establish the discernment that all phenomena are empty by nature, then rest in that state.

As you arise from this meditation, recite once the following text:

*May bodhicitta, precious and sublime,
 Arise where it has not yet come to be;
 And where it has arisen may it never fail,
 But grow and flourish ever more and more.*

When time permits, you should finish reciting the rest of the recitation following the bodhicitta prayer. Then you may dedicate the merit by reciting this verse from *The King of Aspiration Prayers*:

*Just as the bodhisattva Manjushri attained omniscience,
 and Samantabhadra too,
 all these merits now I dedicate,
 to train and follow in their footsteps.
 As all the victorious buddhas of past, present and future
 praise dedication as supreme,
 So now I dedicate all these source of merit
 for all beings to perfect good actions.*

If you are using Mipham Rinpoche's *Illuminating the Path to Liberation* as the liturgy of your preliminary practice, then after the session is over, you may continue reciting the rest of the liturgy, followed by dedicating the merit. This is the sequence of a complete session of the bodhicitta practice. If you can finish all your preliminaries by having such sequence in each meditation session, the result of your practice will definitely be great. However, when you are doing group practice, you may not have enough time to complete everything.

♦ Put bodhicitta into real practice

When reciting the bodhicitta prayer, you may sometimes reflect on all sentient beings as equal, with no distinction between friends and foes, and recite the prayer while abiding in a state of impartiality. At other times, you may aspire to bring all beings the happiness of nirvana and recite the prayer while abiding in a state of loving-kindness. You may also wish for all beings to be free from suffering and recite the prayer while abiding in a state of compassion. Additionally, you may rejoice sincerely upon witnessing beings freed from suffering and attaining happiness and

recite the prayer while abiding in a state of sympathetic joy. In this way, you can practice bodhicitta by training your mind in the four boundless qualities. The key is to always keep sentient beings in your mind.

Otherwise, as said in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, if the teacher only pays lip service by saying, “To benefit infinite living beings,” and disciples only pretentiously contemplate this and talk the talk, saying, “Oh! Poor them!”, such lip service has no meaning whatsoever. These words are just like clouds floating in the sky, which cannot water crops on the ground.

Therefore, when practicing bodhicitta, it’s better if you can first train your mind in the four boundless qualities and refer to the chapter on arousing bodhicitta in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Great Tibetan masters all believe this guide contains the most profound and complete quintessential content of the sequential practice. Many Larung Gar sangha members refer to this guide when they practice bodhicitta. So please, do attach great importance to this guide.

The fourfold Han Chinese sangha⁶⁵ at Larung Gar have put aside all other mandates such as text memorization and debate this year, except for study of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, so they can devote themselves to the preliminary practices. During practice, you should read *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* over and over again and try to reduce mundane trivial tasks. Please do not engage in many other things while practicing the preliminaries. Otherwise, your mind will get too distracted, which will impair the results of your practice.

Once I was overseeing a project to build a primary school⁶⁶ in my hometown. During that time, images of the school buildings often arose in my mind during my daily meditation sessions. As many great masters have said, when practicing the transcendent Dharma, engaging in worldly activities simultaneously can be harmful to one’s practice.

However, sometimes we have no choice but to participate in certain worldly activities in lieu of our Dharma practices due to our volunteer work and specific causes and conditions. Nevertheless, I hope you will develop a good practice of bodhicitta, the foundation of the Great Perfection, when your time and energy allow.

⁶⁵ The fourfold sangha refers to monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.

⁶⁶ Khenpo Sodargye founded a non-profit school for Tibetan children who otherwise cannot receive decent educations.

As previously mentioned, it is not enough to merely pay lip service by saying, “I vow to liberate all sentient beings” when thinking of sentient beings; yet, when faced with an enemy who harbors resentment, one becomes afflicted and powerless to counteract those afflictions. Jigme Lingpa states in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities* that one must put bodhicitta into real practice. During the bodhicitta practice, you should first visualize your worst enemy gathering in front of you as part of those upon whom you cultivate your mind in the four boundless qualities. Once you have finished visualizing the enemy, you may add more beings one by one to your visualization. If you can practice in this way, no matter who you meet in the future, you will genuinely care for and love this being from the bottom of your heart. Even if it’s just a little bug, your compassion will naturally arise.

It is very hard for us to truly practice bodhicitta. Why is that? It is because we cannot easily apply bodhicitta in real-life situations. One may have recited the bodhicitta prayer one hundred thousand times, but without training the mind with the four boundless qualities as the basis, it is very challenging to apply bodhicitta.

As stated in many guidebooks, the bodhicitta you’ve tried to cultivate during a retreat or a distinct meditation session must be applied in daily life. When reciting the bodhicitta prayer, always remind yourself, “Just as the buddhas of the three times initially arouse supreme bodhicitta for the benefit of all sentient beings, I also vow to arouse the same supreme bodhicitta in front of the Three Jewels in the ten directions.” Then gradually, this sustained practice will instill in you a genuine desire to benefit any being you encounter, as your mind becomes familiar with this thought.

Those who have cultivated bodhicitta in previous lives can easily arouse bodhicitta after a little practice in this life. From that point on, they become completely different individuals. As stated in a saying from Chan Buddhism, you are an ordinary person when you enter, and a buddha when you depart. Although we dare not self-claim as a buddha, we can acknowledge that we are ordinary people when first encountering this teaching, and eventually, as we actualize this teaching, we can eradicate our selfishness entirely.

Before realizing emptiness, an ordinary person cannot uproot their clinging to inherent existence, but they have no problem cutting off their selfishness. For example, when first arriving at Larung Gar, some monastics or laypeople may lack altruistic motivation. However, after studying Mahayana Buddhism, they gradually stop taking themselves too seriously and begin to devote themselves completely

to benefiting living beings, just as the Buddha did before his attainment of perfect enlightenment in his causal stage. Such a person is a true Mahayana bodhisattva, who is greatly needed in every monastery or Dharma center.

During my visits to some Dharma centers in the Tibetan and Han areas of China, I witnessed some monastics' great acts, which touched me deeply. I regard them as living bodhisattvas who dedicate their lives solely to benefiting beings and have no concern or agenda for themselves.

In comparison, some other monastics are quite renowned, yet they have never practiced bodhicitta or considered how to benefit sentient beings, which is unfortunate. However, it is challenging for an ordinary person to assess the quality of another individual's mindstream and to discern whether they are a bodhisattva or a worldly being, so we should refrain from making careless comments about others.

In short, the most-needed practice is bodhicitta. Even if bodhicitta only arises for a split second, the description of its merits will not be exhausted for billions of kalpas. As is said in *Protection of the Ruler of the State Dharani Sutra*:

If we were to praise bodhicitta, even after billions of kalpas,
We still would not finish listing all its merits.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often told us, "In your everyday Dharma class, when the Dharma master remind you to generate bodhicitta before the class, you should abide in this state for a short while, knowing that your hearing of the teaching is for the benefit of all beings. When it's time to dedicate the merit, you should also generate the same aspiration. If you can do so, its merit you accumulate is beyond verbal description."

If simply thinking like this can already bring great merit, then imagine how much merit you can accumulate through meditating on bodhicitta in a distinct session. So please, make sure you practice bodhicitta diligently.

Lineage masters all place great importance on bodhicitta. With this foundation, the practice on the Great Perfection is indeed the great perfection. Why is that? It is because the Great Perfection is not a practice of the basic vehicle, which mainly focuses on one's own liberation. Instead, Great Perfection is essentially about benefiting others. Therefore, bodhicitta can reflect its values, and activate its blessings.

In fact, if you practice for the benefit of all beings, even though you don't seek self-benefit, your practice will effortlessly benefit yourself. As the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said, in his *Song of Victory*:

In order to benefit yourselves in the long term,
The pith instruction is to benefit others at the present moment.

Therefore, to attain Buddhahood, it is essential to prioritize the benefit of all living beings. By cultivating a motivation similar to bodhicitta, we ordinary beings, though unable to generate authentic bodhicitta, can also eliminate the causes of samsaric cycles and unfavorable rebirths.

Once in the Great Dharma Hall at Larung Gar, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche proposed a debate, saying, "A person who has both the intention and application aspects of bodhicitta won't be reborn in the lower realms." He then asked khenpos and other Dharma teachers to refute this statement.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche used scriptural evidence and logical reasoning from Sutrayana and Vajrayana to defeat all their refutations. This debate also created a supreme dependent origination.

When teaching the first chapter of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, I mentioned this debate. Later when I read Mahayana scriptures such as the *Flower Ornament Sutra* and the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*, I felt deeply that what Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said was completely true.

Generally speaking, a person who has aroused genuine bodhicitta won't fall into a lower realm. Even if he experiences a bad rebirth, the suffering he endures will be very mild and brief, allowing him to be freed from suffering as quickly as a bouncing ball.

Therefore, in this life, it is best for each of us to complete the one hundred thousand recitations of bodhicitta with both quality and quantity. Even if the quality of the practice cannot be guaranteed, we must finish the quantity. In fact, it is not very difficult to recite the prayer one hundred thousand times, but it is not always easy to properly visualize during recitation.

Some people who are extremely busy with their work recite the bodhicitta prayer on the way to work or while walking, which can also be considered a completion of the practice requirements. Is there any merit from such recitation? Of course there is.

Because the bodhicitta prayers consist of vajra words from great masters such as Longchenpa and Mipham Rinpoche, if you recite such a prayer one hundred thousand times, it creates great benefit. This is the case even if you don't visualize while chanting, or if you accompany the recitation with selfish thoughts.

Strictly speaking, it's better if you recite it with an altruistic motivation. But even if you don't have such a motivation, reciting the prayer is better than nothing.

Nowadays many people don't see the value of bodhicitta; in their view, what's really important is to eat well, sleep well, and rest well. Therefore, they live a life of indolence and ease, and recite no prayers whatsoever. Compared to such people, you have accumulated incredible merit by reciting the prayer one hundred thousand times.

I truly hope that you can complete the recitation of the bodhicitta prayer one hundred thousand times within the assigned timeframe, in accordance with the tradition and requirements of the lineage masters. At the end of your practice, please dedicate the merit to all sentient beings.



Lesson 92

“Through your great wisdom, you have realized nirvana
... impartiality.” [page 195–198]

2.2.2. AROUSING BODHICITTA, THE ROOT OF THE GREAT VEHICLE

Now we proceed to the chapter on bodhicitta, the second practice of the uncommon preliminaries. This chapter has three sections: training the mind in the four boundless qualities, arousing the supreme bodhicitta, and training in the precepts of bodhicitta in aspiration and bodhicitta in application.

Bodhicitta is very important to us. Its power and merits are beyond verbal description. Those of you who are receiving this teaching must have accumulated great merit; otherwise, you could not easily receive the teaching. Therefore, each of you should feel joyful.

Bodhicitta is indeed the most supreme among all thoughts and practices. *The Great Men Shastra* (Skt. *Mahāpuruṣa*) says:

Those who want to make offerings to all buddhas
Should arouse bodhicitta;
Those who wish to repay the buddhas' kindness,
Should generate firm bodhicitta.

The happiness we experience today comes from the blessings of the buddhas, who created it for us during tens of thousands of kalpas. Therefore, we must feel

grateful. The best way to repay the kindness of buddhas, teachers, and living beings, is to practice bodhicitta.

The essence of Mahayana Buddhism is bodhicitta, without which even the practice of the highest tantra is no longer extraordinary. As a lineage master said, without bodhicitta, even if you have been practicing nine years in a retreat cabin sealed with mud, you won't attain liberation. Therefore, bodhicitta is crucial in Mahayana Buddhism.

Here is a story in the *Older Sutra of Parables*:

Once the Buddha sat under a tree and gave teachings to innumerable people. Among the audience, some then attained the fruition of Sotāpanna (stream-enterer), some Anāgāmin (never-returner), some Sakadāgāmin (once-returner), and some Arhathood. Countless people attained certain fruitions.

At that time, the Buddha's face looked unprecedentedly dull and worried. Ananda asked why, and the Buddha answered, "Imagine a merchant traveler carrying valuable jewels who has everything robbed by bandits and is left naked on the road. Would he be worried or not?"

Ananda answered, "He would be so worried."

The Buddha told Ananda, "Since infinite kalpas ago, I have been undergoing great hardships and practicing the authentic Dharma, aiming to attain Buddhahood for the sake of benefiting all beings. Now I have attained Buddhahood, but it isn't of real use. Do you think I will be happy?"

Ananda asked, "Isn't it true that many people have attained the fruition of Shravakas?"

The Buddha said, "A family that has a dozen daughters but no son won't maintain family succession. Likewise, though I have innumerable arhats, they are not my sons. These arhats won't attain Buddhahood, so they cannot pass on the Dharma."

Then the Buddha shed three teardrops, which set the three-thousand-fold universe quaking. In response, innumerable gods, nagas, spirits, and humans then generated supreme bodhicitta.

At that moment the Buddha's expression became calm and radiant, and his body emanated countless rays of lights that brightened the four directions. The Buddha said joyfully, "My teachings have successors now..."

It can be seen from this story that without bodhicitta, no root of virtue can be considered remarkable, even that of those who have attained liberation from samsara, such as an arhat.

Many Tibetans and Han Chinese often engage in virtuous activities such as meditation, prostrations to the Buddha, incense offerings, recitations, rituals, and the like, but most of them do so only for their own benefit. Very few practice for the sake of attaining Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.

If your practice isn't intended to lead to Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings, then whatever you do holds little meaning. Therefore, throughout your practice, make sure you clearly understand the importance of bodhicitta and apply it accordingly.

Before proceeding to the main text, Patrul Rinpoche first praised his root guru:

With your great wisdom, you have realized supreme nirvana.

With your great compassion, you remain in samsara.

With your skillful means, you have realized the non-duality of samsara and nirvana.

My peerless teacher, I bow at your feet with all my heart.

Patrul Rinpoche's root guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, attained perfect enlightenment through his great wisdom. But he still appeared as a human in samsara through his great compassion, so he could liberate innumerable beings. Through his skillful means he offered teachings to beings according to their dispositions and intentions, which helped them attain realization of the indivisibility of nirvana and samsara. At the feet of such a peerless and extraordinary guru, Patrul Rinpoche bows with great veneration.

At the beginning of our study or whenever we engage in the bodhicitta practice, we should, circumstances permitting, recite this prayer three times, pray three times, and prostrate three times to Patrul Rinpoche and other lineage masters, as well as to the buddhas and bodhisattvas of infinite kindness. Since lineage masters have cultivated extraordinary bodhicitta, regularly praying to them will surely help tame our minds.

Although a wish-fulfilling jewel possesses infinite qualities, it cannot grant the

desires of a fortunate person who does not pray to it. Therefore, it is essential to pray frequently and with devotion to the guru and the Three Jewels.

During your practice, you shouldn't only venerate intellectual knowledge. You must know that in addition to what you can understand intellectually, there are also many other incredibly profound and vast fields that are beyond our conceptual understanding. Some people only explore the world with conceptual thoughts, and don't accept the existence of any blessings beyond their ordinary perception. Such an extremist view is not recommended.

2.2.2.1. Training the Mind in the Four Boundless Qualities

The four boundless qualities are boundless love, compassion, sympathetic joy and impartiality. Usually, one begins with the practice of boundless love. But Patrul Rinpoche refers to the instruction in Longchenpa's *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*, and proposes a different sequential order that starts by developing impartiality.

From the perspective of mind training, we should start with impartiality. Otherwise, if one hasn't developed an impartial attitude that regards oneself and others as equal, love, compassion, and sympathetic joy will become biased and not completely pure. Therefore, we should begin with meditation on impartiality.

This is very important. If we haven't developed impartiality, we may feel close to one person, but indifference or even aversion toward other beings. In this case, it will be hard for us to be motivated to make all of them happy and free from suffering. Therefore, we have to start from training the mind in impartiality.

2.2.2.1.1. Meditation on Impartiality

Impartiality means letting go of our hatred for enemies and attachment to friends, and having an impartial attitude toward all sentient beings, free from clinging to those who are close to us and aversion to those who are distant.

However, we are not like this at present—we are deeply attached to our loved ones while harboring strong aversion toward our enemies and anyone connected to them.

To develop impartiality, we must relinquish our hatred for enemies and infatuation with friends and treat all beings equally. We should emulate what the

Buddha did in his causal stage—neither becoming attached to those who praised him nor hating those who harmed him; the Buddha maintained an even-minded attitude toward all beings.

It is very difficult for us to treat everyone impartially at the very beginning of our practice. However, we should train our minds continuously in this way, and gradually we can arouse genuine bodhicitta. *The Bodhisattva-gocaropāya-visaya-vikurvana-nirdeśa Sutra* also says:

Those who arouse impartial compassion
Toward enemies and friends
Are bodhisattvas
Who have aroused bodhicitta.

The biggest obstacle against us arousing bodhicitta is our attachment to those close to us, and aversion for those who are distant. We are very attached to our parents and friends, and full of hatred toward our enemies, as said in *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*:

Our attachment to loved ones overwhelms us like scalding water,
While our hostility toward enemies flares within us like raging
fire.

This mistake, in fact, results from a lack of investigation.

Sutra of the Buddha's Skillful Means in Repaying Kindness says:

Teachers, parents, and all sentient beings,
Whether friends or foes,
Should be treated with an impartial mind,
For their kindness to us is no different.

In previous lifetimes, those we now regard as enemies have been our close family and friends, treating us with respect and affection, living in harmony with us, and offering us immeasurable kindness and support. Likewise, those we now consider friends have been our enemies and have caused us harm.

Unfortunately, many people don't know about this, and they always think that "This is my parent," "This is my child," or "This is my family." They have no idea that the family and friends in this life may have harmed them multiple times

since beginningless time. In contrast, enemies they hate in this life might be kind to them in previous lives. Therefore, ordinary peoples' attachment to friends and enemies may be totally wrong. We should all contemplate this.

♦ **Stories on impartiality between friends and enemies**

The sublime Katyayana once said:

He eats his father's flesh, he beats his mother,
He dandles on his lap his own unfortunate enemy;
The wife is gnawing at her husband's bones.
I laugh to see what happens in samsara's show!⁶⁷

The corresponding story was mentioned earlier in lesson 35, so I'll skip it here.

There is a similar story in the *Dhammapada*:

When the Buddha was living in the city of Shravasti, there was a wealthy brahmin who was very stingy. Once the brahmin killed a chicken and made a delicious meal out of it. Then he closed all the doors of his house and enjoyed the meal together with his wife and son.

Knowing the time to tame this brahmin had arrived, the Buddha transformed into an ordinary shramana⁶⁸ and suddenly appeared in front of the brahmin, asking for offerings. The brahmin and his family were happily taking their meal when the shramana appeared and begged for alms, so they were upset. The brahmin scolded him, "How shameless you are! We are eating while you show up uninvited!"

The shramana said, "You killed your father and married your mother. You are raising your enemy. You are not ashamed of these but blame a beggar instead. Aren't you ashamed?" That is, the chicken the brahmin killed was the reincarnation of his father, his wife was the reincarnation of his mother, and his son was his enemy in a previous life.

Upon hearing this, the brahmin was greatly startled. The Buddha used his clairvoyance and brought back the brahmin's memory about his past lives. The

⁶⁷ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 196.

⁶⁸ Shramana (Skt. śramaṇa; Tib. རྟེན་ལྷན་, gejong, Wyl. dge sbyong) — a wandering ascetic or mendicant. The shramana culture was already in existence at the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. There were both Jain and Buddhist shramanas. It also became an epithet of the Buddha, who was referred to as 'the Great Shramana' (Skt. Mahāśramaṇa).

Buddha then taught the brahmin the Dharma, which made him attain the fruition of stream-entrant on the spot.

Our friends in this life might not have been our friends in previous lives, and the same rationale applies as well to our enemies. Therefore, we don't need to cry at the passing of our friends or family and laugh when our enemies die. This is a particular ignorant attachment to friends and enemies.

I was told that tomorrow was "April Fool's Day," and that many people would have fun by fooling others. From a Buddhist perspective, such deception is also a negative action. We ordinary people are ignorant enough, so we don't need a Fool's Day to intensify it. April Fool's Day originated from the West, but many Chinese have adopted it. I am afraid one day Tibetans will follow as well.

Here is another story about Princess Pema Sal, the daughter of King Trisong Detsen. The Princess was beautiful, intelligent, and deeply cherished by her father. When she had just turned seventeen, she suddenly fell seriously ill with a condition similar to what is now known as a gastric hemorrhage. The King immediately had the princess sent to Padmasambhava's hermitage, while he himself followed on horseback.

At that time Padmasambhava was practicing in a retreat cave at Samye Chimpu,⁶⁹ and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal was in another retreat cave. In her meditative state she received Padmasambhava's call, so she quickly went to see him.

When Yeshe Tsogyal arrived at Padmasambhava's cave, she saw two horses tied at the entrance. In the cave she saw the princess's corpse lying in front of Padmasambhava, and nearby the king, who had fainted out of sadness. Very surprised, Yeshe Tsogyal asked Padmasambhava what had happened. He said, "Don't ask this question yet. Let's first bring the king up." With a white silk scarf, Yeshe Tsogyal lifted the king's head and slowly brought his consciousness back.

When the king woke up, he wept bitterly over the death of the princess. Padmasambhava told him, "All phenomena are impermanent. When there is birth,

⁶⁹ Chimpu (Wyl. mchims phu) - the mountain above the monastery of Samye where there are many retreat caves and huts. Even to this day, there are practitioners in long-term retreat there. At the time of the founding of the monastery of Samye, at King Trisong Detsen's request, Padmasambhava opened the mandala of the Vajrayana teachings in the caves of Chimpu to the twenty-five disciples, headed by King Trisong Detsen, Yeshe Tsogyal, and Vairotsana. Nine of the twenty-five attained siddhis through practicing the sadhanas he transmitted to them. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

there must be death. Not only will your princess die, but also you, the king, will die in due time. Whoever a person is, only the Dharma matters at the end of his life...”

Upon hearing this, the king’s mood eased, and he asked Padmasambhava, “I now understand the principle of impermanence, but my daughter, Princess Pema Sal, must have been someone with pure past actions, as she was born to me, King Trisong Detsen. She had the great fortune to meet all of you great translators and panditas, who are like real Buddhas. But why is her life so short?”

Padmasambhava said, “This is caused by her actions of a past life. She once was born in an eastern Indian city, and later became the great queen of a king. However, she was not able to conceive a child, while the junior queen gave birth to a son. Out of jealousy, she murdered the young boy. The great queen is Princess Pema Sal in this life. Because the result of taking life is to have a short lifespan, she died early in this life due to her action in the previous life.”

Once, I, Padmasambhava, you, the Great Dharma King, and the great Bodhisattva Abbot Shantarakshita were born as three low-caste boys. We worked on the construction of the Great Stupa of Jarung Khashor. During this time, the princess was born as an insect that stung your neck. When you brushed it off, you accidentally killed it. As a result of the karmic debt incurred by taking its life, the insect was reborn as your daughter.

If even the children of King Trisong Detsen, who was Manjushri in person, could be born to him due to his past actions, what can we say about other beings? If the accidental killing of a bug could result in such a terrible karmic effect, consider the result of a deliberate killing. I heard the other day about a Buddhist who often talked about the Great Perfection, and boasted about his state of realization, while enjoying killing mosquitos in his daily life. When he saw a mosquito while driving, he would stop the car and kill the bug on the spot, and then continue to drive. If this is true, it is easy to know what kind of karmic debt he will have to repay, and how terrible he will have to suffer in the future.

Padmasambhava then used a tantric method and brought Princess Pema Sal’s consciousness back to her body. He wrote the syllable NRI on her heart, summoned her consciousness, and restored her to life. As soon as the Princess could again open her eyes and speak, Padmasambhava gave her the whole cycle of the Khandro Nyingtik by means of the power he had to transfer blessings directly. Meanwhile, he

concealed Khandro Nyingtik as a terma⁷⁰ in her mind and entrusted her to reveal this teaching in a future birth. Princess Pema Sal passed away soon after.

Venerable Longchenpa was the reincarnation of Princess Pema Sal. Whenever Longchenpa remembered his past life, he would be very grateful to Padmasambhava, so he often referred to “Padmasambhava of the Great Kindness” in his works. Princess Pema Sal’s immediate reincarnation, Pema Ledreltsal, revealed the terma of Khandro Nyingtik, and transmitted the teaching to his main disciple Gyalse Lekden, who later gave the whole cycle of Khandro Nyingtik to Longchenpa, the immediate reincarnation of Pema Ledreltsal and indirect reincarnation of Princess Pema Sal.

[The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche previously gave teachings on Khandro Nyingtik at Larung Gar. We studied and practiced part of those teachings at that time.]

When Longchenpa was about to pass into parinirvana, he told his disciples, “I, Princess Pema Sal, will no longer stay in this Sahā world. I am going to the deathless Land of Eternal Bliss. My lifespan, Dharma activities, and wishes have all been fulfilled...”

You may find this in my translation *The Brief Biography of the Omniscient Longchenpa*. As you can see, both sublime and ordinary beings have a lot of experiences in the long cycles of samsara. Some of the experiences are joyful, and some others are remorseful.

I do have more to say about Princess Pema Sal, but let’s skip here since it is not very necessary.

Such historical accounts can be found not only in the Tibet region, but also in the Han area of China. Here is a story from *The Biographies of the Five Patriarchs of the Huayan School*:

Once Master Dushun of the Tang dynasty, the First Patriarch in the Huayan School of Chinese Buddhism, was on his alms round when a patron asked Dushun to remove obstacles and prolong longevity for his son. Dushun stared at the son

⁷⁰ Terma (Tib. ཁཏེན་མ་, Wyl. gter ma) — spiritual treasures hidden by Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal in the earth and in the minds of disciples to be revealed at the appropriate time by ‘treasure revealers’ or tertöns. Many of these ཁཏེན་མ་, ter were collected by Jamgön Kongtrul and Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo into more than sixty volumes, the Rinchen Terdzö, or Treasury of Precious Termas. The Terma lineage, together with the Nyingma Kama, are the two modes of transmission of the teachings of the Nyingma School. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

for a while and then said, “This boy used to be your enemy. We should help him repent instead.”

After the meal offering was over, Dushun asked the patron to carry his son to the riverbank, and Dushun then threw the child into the river. Seeing this, the patron and his wife beat their chests and wailed. Dushun said, “Your son is still here,” and pointed to the water.

Immediately the child transformed into a tall man standing above the water, who glared angrily at the patron and scolded him, “In a previous life, you took my gold, killed me, and pushed my corpse into a river. Had not the bodhisattva this grievance, I would have never forgiven you!” Then, the man disappeared.

As you see, some children that their parents particularly love are not necessarily the real “beloved ones.” Here is another story:

In ancient China, there was a wealthy man who had two sons. The big brother was very filial and fully devoted himself to any family affair, big or small; the younger one was delinquent and always indulged himself in food, alcohol, gambling, and women. Then on the same day, both sons died unexpectedly. The wealthy man was so devastated that he fainted to the ground.

His consciousness left the body and went to see the Lord of Death in the hell realm, crying for help. The Lord of Death then had the two sons sent over to see the wealthy man. Overjoyed, the father asked the elder son to go back with him. The son, who used to be very filial, said in a cold tone of voice, “I am no longer your son. The reason I became your son is because you helped me for three years in the previous life, so I had to repay your kindness. For the past dozen years I have been working day and night to help you. Now that I am done paying back your kindness, we two are all set, and I no longer owe you anything. Please go back alone.”

Surprised and disappointed, the wealthy man then asked his younger son to go back with him. His son said, “I am no longer your son, either. The reason I became your son is because you borrowed five hundred taels of silver from me in the previous life and didn’t pay me back, so I came to your life to collect my debt. Now that you’ve done paying me back, I don’t have to go back with you anymore.”

Therefore, after learning the truth about our family and friends, we don’t have to become too attached to them. Some people may have just finished studying the text on impartiality, yet they still cried out upon hearing the news of a family member’s or friend’s death or illness. This suggests that you haven’t studied the

text thoroughly; otherwise, you wouldn't feel such a strong attachment to them. Of course, when you act this way, a worldly person may perceive you as heartless. However, anyone who understands the truth of the samsaric cycle of birth and death will recognize that this attachment is meaningless.

♦ Why friends and enemies are impartial

At present we share a blood relationship with our parents, and their care and love for us are immeasurable. When we experience pain or misfortune, they often feel even sadder than if it had happened to themselves. In fact, all of this is due to karmic debts from past lives, where we have mutually harmed each other.

The same applies to those who are now our enemies. In past lives, there was no one who did not serve as our parents. Take the present situation, for example: even though we may view someone as a bitter enemy, they may not necessarily wish to harm us. Even if we regard them as an enemy, they might not see us as one, and even if they do, they may lack the ability to harm us. If they have not harmed us, then what grounds do we have to consider them our enemies?

There are also individuals who seem to be harming us in the present, but in the long run, their actions might bring us recognition and appreciation in this life, inspire us to turn to the Dharma, and even bring about the ultimate benefit and happiness. Longchenpa says in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*:

You may have come to the Dharma because of injuries inflicted on you, but because you thus found the path to liberation, those who harmed you did you a great kindness.⁷¹

Meanwhile, with others, if we can skillfully adapt to their personalities, cater to their preferences, and win them over with kind words, it would not be difficult to turn them into close friends.

On the other hand, there are those we typically perceive as closest to us, such as our children. However, some sons and daughters have betrayed or even killed their parents. At times, children side with those in conflict with their parents, teaming up with them to argue against their own family and steal their wealth.

Even when we have good relationships with those we hold dear, their struggles

⁷¹ Longchenpa, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 222.

and problems often affect us more strongly than our own challenges. In our efforts to help our friends, children, and other family members, we accumulate a significant number of negative actions, which can lead us into the hell realm in our next life. *The Mahayana Sutra of Previous Lives and Contemplation of the Mind-ground* says:

Worldly people commit wrongdoings for their children,
Which brings them long-lasting torments in the three lower
realms.

When we truly wish to practice the Dharma, our attachments to parents, children, and family often hinder us. We struggle to let go of these attachments, constantly postponing our Dharma practice, which means we never seem to find the time for it. As a result, our loved ones frequently become the biggest obstacles to our practice, and we, in turn, may become obstacles to theirs.

Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

My family and friends all change and pass, for whom
The changeless Dharma is cast out.⁷²

Therefore, our attachment to our family and friends who change and pass all the time will destroy the opportunity for us to attain realization and liberation. In short, our family and friends may cause us more harm than our enemies.

Furthermore, there is no guarantee that those we currently view as enemies won't be reborn as our children, nor that our present friends won't become our enemies in future lives. It is only because we treat these fleeting perceptions of "friend" and "enemy" as real that we accumulate negative karma through attachment and hatred. Why do we cling to this millstone, which will only drag us down into lower realms?

Therefore, with a firm determination, we must begin with ourselves and regard all sentient beings as our parents and children, just as the great masters of the past have done, as recorded in their life stories. In this way, we can view both friends and enemies with equal regard.

Of course, it is hard for worldly people, who see a significant difference between

⁷² Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 8, verse 8.

a friend and an enemy, to accept this. Therefore, we sometimes have to adapt their way of thinking. However, as Dharma practitioners, we must contemplate deeply the impartiality of friends and enemies in the course of our practice.

Particularly, the prerequisite of bodhicitta is impartiality, so without having developed impartiality in our minds, we won't be able to arouse bodhicitta toward innumerable living beings in this world.

♦ The practice of impartiality

After carefully contemplating on the above teachings, it's time to formally practice impartiality.

First, toward those we strongly dislike and often feel anger toward, we should train our minds using various methods so that these negative emotions no longer arise. In every possible way, we should train ourselves to view them as someone neutral who neither benefit nor harm us.

Next, consider that these beings, toward whom we feel neutral, have been our father or mother countless times since time without beginning. We should meditate on this repeatedly until we cultivate the same deep love and care for them as we feel for our present parents.

If we really cannot develop boundless impartiality, we should nevertheless strive to reach a state that is similar to impartiality. There are people who claim to be practitioners of the Great Perfection and who always talk about the state of luminosity. However, these people don't even have the state of impartiality and cannot have equal love for all beings. In such cases, their "state of luminosity" is groundless.

Finally, we should meditate until we cultivate the same compassion toward all sentient beings—whether we perceive them as friends, enemies, or neutral—as we naturally feel for our own parents.

Some practitioners often ask me, "How much should I practice? Can you provide a timeline so I'll know how many days I should engage in this practice?"

It doesn't work that way! It takes a lifetime to cultivate bodhicitta. Before genuine bodhicitta arises within us, we must meditate on it over and over again. Whether we've practiced enough or not isn't determined by a teacher's nodding but by the standard set forth by the lineage masters in their instructions.

If one has not reached the state of boundless impartiality described above and merely remains indifferent toward both friends and enemies, feeling neither compassion nor hatred, this is known as “mindless impartiality,” which brings neither harm nor benefit. As Longchenpa repeatedly stressed in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, someone thought he had developed boundless impartiality because he felt nothing when his parents and enemies died. But in fact it was not due to his high state of realization but his bad character, that he remained indifferent to family and enemies, like an emotionless rock.

In *The Way of Living*, Mipham Rinpoche harshly criticized such individuals, stating that they lack conscience. Their mindless impartiality is not true boundless impartiality.

True boundless impartiality should be like the generosity of a great sage. When the sages host a banquet or give alms, they welcome everyone without discrimination—whether noble or humble, strong or weak, good or bad, exceptional or ordinary. In the same way, we must treat all sentient beings—the objects of great compassion—with equal kindness. Until we reach such a state of boundless impartiality, we should train our minds repeatedly, again and again.

Having reached such a state of boundless impartiality, all great qualities will arise naturally. *The Prophecy of Kshemavati Sutra* says:

Always encompassing people liking you and people detesting
you,
Your friends and enemies equally—
With such an attitude of impartiality,
The tree of merit and great qualities will grow.

Therefore, I hope you won’t only talk or write about bodhicitta, but you will also put it into real practice. Without success in this practice, all the other great qualities will be out of reach.

May all buddhas, bodhisattvas, and lineage masters bless us, so we can soon develop true boundless impartiality, but not mindless impartiality.

If you develop boundless impartiality, you will see whatever happens to you and around you in the way that an old man watches a child’s game—neither pain nor joy arises in him. This is because you’ve realized the truth of samsara.



Lesson 93

“Through meditating on boundless impartiality as described ... be kind in thought, word and deed to all beings in the three worlds.” [page 198–201]

Out of the four boundless qualities, we are done studying boundless impartiality. Today, we’ll study boundless love.

Practice on the four boundless qualities or bodhicitta is very important. Many practitioners either didn’t hear the corresponding teaching at all or never integrated the teaching into their minds, so they’ve never put it into real practice. In that case, the Dharma is separated from the practitioner.

As the great masters of Kadampa used to say, there is enough distance between the Dharma and the practitioner to let a horse pass through. As such, although the Dharma can eradicate our afflictions and bring us liberation, without putting it into practice, we cannot align with it. Therefore, practice is essential. Nowadays many Dharma fellows are practicing preliminaries, which is really good. Particularly, you must take practice of bodhicitta seriously. If you miss it, you may not have such a great opportunity in the future.

2.2.2.1.2. Meditation on Love

Before proceeding to meditation on boundless love, it’s best if we’ve developed boundless impartiality. Of course, it is unrealistic for an ordinary person to have completely developed boundless impartiality. Nevertheless, we should strive to treat everyone equally and stop having hatred toward enemies and attachment

toward friends. Otherwise, if we still hold strong hatred and attachment, that in itself will reflect our insufficient state of practice.

When our meditation on boundless impartiality has been established, we move on to the meditation on boundless love, learning to regard all beings in the three worlds with the same great love. This love should resemble that of parents caring for their young children, who overlook their children's ingratitude and the challenges of parenting. Such parents dedicate every thought, word, and action to ensuring their little ones are happy, comfortable, and secure.

Parents have a fervent love for their children. A few years ago, during the Wenchuan Earthquake, there was a mother who protectively cradled her child to shield the infant from the rubble of their collapsed house; the infant was unharmed, but the mother died. In the infant's swaddling clothes, rescue workers found a phone with a message that read, "Dear baby, if you survive, please remember I love you!" Upon seeing this, many rescue workers couldn't help but cry.

In another case outside of China, a three-year-old girl was miraculously found alive and rescued after being buried in the rubble of the earthquake for more than eight days. The reason the girl survived in the wet and cold conditions, without food or water for eight days, is that her mother pricked her own finger so the girl could suck her blood. This remarkable mother sacrificed her own life so her child had a chance to survive. There are also many touching stories about maternal love in the animal world.

Understanding that a mother has wholehearted and unconditional love for her child is essential to our bodhicitta practice. When we encounter a stubborn person who does not appreciate our kindness and even insults us, we must strive to love them as a mother loves her child. We should dedicate ourselves to their happiness in this life and in many lives to come. Similarly, we should extend this dedication to the happiness of all sentient beings in this life and beyond.

As said in *Itivuttaka*, or *Thus Has it Been Said*, the merit of cultivating love to one living being is infinite, let alone boundless love to all beings. Here boundless love is to all living beings, wishing them to attain genuine happiness. You should contemplate this over and over during practice.

♦ The practice of boundless love

All beings seek happiness and comfort. None of them desire unhappiness

or suffering. However, they fail to realize that the cause of true happiness lies in positive actions and instead fall into the ten negative actions. As a result, their wishes and actions are in conflict: in their pursuit of happiness, they only bring suffering upon themselves.

Recognizing this, we should repeatedly meditate on the thought of how wonderful it would be if every being could experience all the happiness and comfort they long for. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says:

If one has no hatred toward one being,
And wishes to bring happiness to this being—
This is called loving-kindness.

Even if we refrain from feeling anger towards just one being and instead try our best to make them happy, that is also called loving-kindness.

As Patrul Rinpoche says, we should meditate on boundless love until our desire for others to be happy is as strong as our own desire for happiness.

These vajra words are indeed quite meaningful. While practicing bodhicitta, we should recite the bodhicitta prayer while meditating accordingly.

♦ Loving actions of body, speech, and mind

The sutras speak of “loving actions of body, loving actions of speech, loving actions of mind.” What this means is that our body, speech, and mind should be governed by loving-kindness. The words we speak, the actions we take, and the thoughts we generate must never harm sentient beings. We should always remain genuinely loving and compassionate, from the beginning to end. Even when we simply look at others, our look should be warm and friendly, rather than aggressive and angry. As it says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

When you look at others think
That it will be through them
That you will come to Buddhahood.
So look on them with frank and loving hearts.⁷³

By doing so, we will become majestic looking, as it is said in the sutra:

⁷³ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 5, verse 80.

Looking at beings with kindness,
You will obtain a great majestic look.

Some people look unattractive due to their actions of harming others in the past. There are stories about this, like the one of a powerful ruler who glared at everyone with a fierce, angry expression. It is said that he was reborn as a preta, living on scraps under a stove in a house. Later, because he had directed such a look at a holy being, he was reborn in hell.

In the *Sutra of Evaluating Whether Progress is Certain or Uncertain*, the Buddha told Manjushri that if a person gives a wrathful look to a bodhisattva, the fault of that action exceeds that of gouging out the eyes of all living beings in the three worlds. Therefore, in our daily life, unless there is a special purpose to benefit others through a wrathful manner, we should speak to and look at others with kindness. This is the basic conduct of a Mahayanist.

Some people can easily generate loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta during meditation, but when they arise from meditation, they often treat others with hatred, which is completely contrary to what they've practiced. This is akin to a situation where a person studies virtue in school but engages in vice at work, rendering their education meaningless. For us Mahayanists, whether we achieve a meditative state or complete a retreat doesn't matter; what truly matters is how we treat sentient beings in our daily lives.

If we can regard another living being as our parent or our only child, it shows that our practice works. In comparison, if we tend to get furious or are easily annoyed by others, and our speech, deeds, and thoughts are vicious, then our state of practice is surely very bad.

Whatever actions we take with our bodies, we should aim to do them gently and pleasantly, striving not to harm others but to help them. Our speech should refrain from expressing contempt, criticism, or jealousy. Let every word we speak be pleasant and true. Regarding our mental attitude, when we help others, we should not expect anything good in return. As said in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

The work of bringing benefit to beings
Will not, then, make me proud and self-admiring.
The happiness of others is itself my satisfaction;

I do not expect another recompense.⁷⁴

[The text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is easy to understand, but it's our meditation and practice on it that enables us to truly apply the contents to our actions.]

Meanwhile, we should avoid being hypocritical by trying to present ourselves as bodhisattvas through our kind words and actions just to gain others' admiration. There was once a novice monk, who appeared to behave in a calm and controlled manner. But this monk felt uncomfortable with some elder practitioners, and always criticized their manners of walking and talking.

In fact, novice monks tend to have a passion for behaving perfectly. If they can still keep impeccable conduct ten or twenty years later, they are considered true practitioners. Similarly, some people passionately and comfortably talk about the state of luminosity right after they receive teaching on the Great Perfection from their gurus, but after a while, their state of luminosity starts to "dim." Therefore, a person's occasional positive deeds and thoughts of renunciation do not represent their true state of realization. To become a true practitioner, we should first genuinely wish for others' happiness from the bottom of our hearts and focus solely on what would be most beneficial for them.

When reciting the bodhicitta prayer, we may sometimes visualize the field of merit, sometimes reflect on boundless love, and sometimes make aspirations in our minds. Since it's impossible for us to generate no thoughts during practice, it's better if we rest in good thoughts.

What good thoughts, exactly? We should pray again and again with these words, "May I never cause harm to even a single hair on any being's body throughout all my lives, and may I always be of help to each one of them." This is very important! Because we may not attain liberation within this life, if we have to be reborn again and again in samsara, we must not harm others. *The Short Sutra on Discerning Karmic Retribution* also says:

The wise should avoid to harm beings
And treat them with love and compassion.

I feel it's already perfect if a person can uphold this vow throughout their life.

⁷⁴ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

However, this is hard to do in today's society, but if one really cannot accomplish this, one should at least purify their negative actions, and vow to never bring harm to anyone in this life and future lives.

In particular, we should genuinely care for those who depend on us, including our family, employees, and animals. We should never strike or overwork any being carelessly, even down to the humblest watchdogs.

Each of us may say, "May I be compassionate toward all beings. May I bring liberation to all beings." However, if we don't even get along with and love those close to us, such as our parents, it becomes extremely difficult for us to develop bodhicitta toward other beings.

Of course, this doesn't imply that we should care only for and love those around us. Rather, it means that we should begin by cultivating genuine love and compassion by caring for and loving them, and always, under all circumstances, be kind to them in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Here is a story from the *Fantastic Tales* by Ji Xiaolan:

Once a nun surnamed Dong bought many food offerings on Avalokiteshvara's festival. After laying out the offerings on the shrine table, the nun felt a bit tired, so she took a nap by the table.

In a trance she dreamed of Avalokiteshvara, who told her, "I won't be hungry if you offer me nothing, but four or five refugees outside the temple are about to starve. I wish you would give these offerings to them. The merit of saving their lives is ten times greater than that of making offerings to me."

The nun woke up and opened the gate of the temple. There were indeed a few hungry people, so she immediately gave them the offerings.

Thus, caring for underprivileged beings can sometimes be more supreme than making offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Nowadays many people in of the Tibetan and Han areas of China like to make offerings to eminent Buddhist masters, but are reluctant to donate money to orphans, patients, and elderly with no families.

Of course, it certainly accumulates great merit if one makes offerings to an eminent master who has genuine bodhicitta and is devoid of desire. However, such a master may not lack money, so the offering is merely icing on the cake. In this case,

it is better to make kind offerings to those in need, as the merit of this far exceeds that of offering to the master.

For those unfortunate beings who were reborn as servants or watchdogs in this life, facing disdain from everyone, this outcome is a consequence of their past actions. It reflects the maturation of the effects of having despised and looked down on others while holding a position of power in a previous life.

Nowadays some heads of state or billionaires may seem to have great merit, but they might have been servants in previous lives whereas their servants in this life might have been heads of state or powerful rulers in previous lives. This revolving transformation is the true nature of samsara, the inherent law of samsara. Whoever knows it will understand how terrifying the samsara is. However, those who don't understand rebirth and samsara continue pursuing things of little meaning.

If someone currently looks down on others because of their own power and wealth, they will eventually repay that debt by being reborn as those very people's servants in some future life. Therefore, we should be especially kind to those in lower positions than ourselves.

Nowadays, many people are respectful and loyal to those in higher positions but remain indifferent to those in need. They don't even bother to offer a smile, a word of comfort, or a little money to those who are struggling. As practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism, many of us claim to be followers of the Buddha. However, when we reflect on how the Buddha wholeheartedly made offerings to those in need in his previous lives, we may feel ashamed of calling ourselves his followers.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche used to say:

While I am still alive, you may not necessarily know my qualities.
Once I leave this world, you may realize that following me is the most
fortunate thing that has happened to you.

Indeed, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche passed into parinirvana, we then realized that everything he did was for the benefit of living beings. How about us? I feel ashamed when reflecting on my own deeds. Anyway, we should love all living beings. Of course, how to apply such love and kindness depends on our own state of practice.

Especially towards our parents, those who have been chronically ill, and any others in need, we must be caring and attentive, making efforts to benefit them

through our body, speech, and mind. The merit from such actions is immeasurable. Atisha says:

Practicing kindness toward guests from afar, patients with chronic illness, and parents in their old age is equivalent to meditating on emptiness of which compassion is the very essence.

For example, a person who comes to the Tibetan Plateau from afar often knows no one, suffers from severe mountain sickness, and is not yet acclimated to the new climate. In such a helpless moment, if he receives a bottle of warm water or a bit of food from you, your kindness may leave a lasting positive impression on him.

Those who have been ill for a long time indeed need our special care. During the Buddha's time, he also treated those afflicted by illness with kindness and compassion, as evidenced by the many stories in the sutras. Also, our parents have shown us immense love and kindness, so to upset them in their old age would be an extremely negative act.

In order to repay his mother's kindness, the Buddha himself went to the Heaven of the Thirty-three to teach her the Dharma. This has been described in *The Mahayana Sutra of Previous Lives and Contemplation of the Mind-ground*.

As stated in the sutras, no matter how much we serve our parents, even if we carry them on our shoulders across the world, we can never fully repay their kindness. However, we can repay them by guiding them to the Buddha's teachings.

The *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* states that even if we were to carry our parents on our shoulders to walk around Jambudvipa and offer them countless jewels, it would still not repay their kindness. The only way to repay their kindness is to inspire them to develop faith in the Three Jewels if they haven't, encourage them to take precepts if they haven't done so, help them become generous if they are stingy, and impart wisdom if they are ignorant. By doing so, we can truly repay their kindness.

As it is said in the *Inconceivable Light Bodhisattva Sutra*:

Food, drink, and jewels
Cannot repay the kindness of parents.
Bringing them to the Dharma,
Is the offering to them.

Therefore, we must strive to find ways to bring our parents to the Dharma.

Moreover, Padmasambhava says:

Never make the elderly feel sorrow; look after them with respect and care.

If we don't take good care of our parents while they are still alive, we will undoubtedly regret it when they leave this world, saying, "I should have called my parents more often so they wouldn't have felt so lonely!" However, it will already be too late. Therefore, in whatever we say and do, let us be kind to our parents and others who are older than us. Let us take care of them and do whatever we can to please them.

A few days ago, a monk asked me, "Can I send some money to my parents?" I said, "Yes, you can." It is said in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma* that even if parents are not sublime beings, the merit of making offerings to them is boundless. Therefore, it is reasonable for a monastic to offer to their parents' money they received from donors.

It is also reasonable for a monastic to share the collected donations with their ill peers. The Buddha granted permission in the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* for sick sangha members to receive the allocation of funds offered to the sangha. For example, if a sangha member cannot participate in a recitation service due to illness, the sangha can give that member part of the monetary donation received from performing the service. However, it's a different story if the sangha member pretends to be sick. Sometimes, caring for a genuinely ill patient creates even more merit than making offerings to a sublime being.

Once Master Mingxu decided to go on a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai for the bodhisattva Manjushri. At Mount Wutai, he encountered a strange-looking monk whom he thought was Manjushri, so he bowed to him. That monk believed Master Mingxu was Manjushri, so he bowed back. After inquiring about each other's names and whereabouts, they realized they had made a mistake. They then decided to accompany each other on the pilgrimage around Mount Wutai.

[When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche took us on a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai in 1987, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro and I explored the peaks surrounding Mount Wutai, visiting all but the southern peak. Along the way, we had some interesting experiences. At the north peak, many herders of sheep and horses asked

us in a strong accent, “Where are you going?” At the central peak, we were tired and took a long nap, so we only reached the eastern peak in the evening. To stay overnight, we had to light a stove. Neither of us knew how to properly burn coal in the stove, so we suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning. We both experienced splitting headaches and almost died. The next day, we were semi-conscious and had difficulty descending from the eastern peak. More than twenty years have passed, and we still have vivid memories of that experience.]

Master Mingxu and the monk had been together for three days when they arrived at the eastern peak. They saw a temple where there were a few monks, who looked ugly and pitiful. Master Mingxu felt arrogant and despised the monks. However it was late, so he had no choice but stay overnight in the temple.

At midnight, the monk who accompanied Master Mingxu suddenly became very ill. He moaned all night, and his body emitted a very strong and repellent smell.

Knowing he was unwell, the monk told Master Mingxu, “Now I am too sick to accompany you on the pilgrimage. You may go alone!” But after spending three days together with the monk, Master Mingxu was reluctant to leave him alone.

The monk insisted, “You may leave me alone. The pilgrimage is more important. You are here to see Manjushri rather than take care of me, aren’t you?”

Master Mingxu answered, “Okay! I will come back and take care of you when I am done with my pilgrimage.” Then he left.

After having walked a few meters, he suddenly heard a sound behind him. Looking back, he saw that the temple, the sangha members, and the sick monk had all vanished. He then realized that he was being tested by Manjushri.

Deeply remorseful, Master Mingxu told an old monk his experience. The monk told him, “You made two mistakes. First, upon seeing monks who looked ugly and pitiful, you became arrogant. Second, you shouldn’t have abandoned your sick friend and prioritized your pilgrimage. Because of your choices Manjushri saw your compassion was weak, so he simply ‘flew away.’”

Taking care of the sick, our parents, and underprivileged beings aligns with the essential teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, which we must remember in our own practice. However, while many people view practicing the Dharma as the most meaningful aspect of their lives, they remain indifferent to actions that benefit living beings. Even when offering help, these individuals see this action as a personal

preference, not understanding that it is actually indispensable for attaining realization. Without benefiting others, the essence of a Mahayana Bodhisattva is lacking. Therefore, we should act in accordance with this verse from the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

When encountering the poor,
The old, the sick, those overwhelmed by suffering,
And those without refuge,
Care for them with great compassion.

♦ It's possible to not harm others

As just said, we should regard every being as our parent or our only child and be kind to each and every living being. *The Sutra on Bodhisattvas' Samadhi* says:

With loving-kindness, one regards living beings
In the same way as a mother sees her only child.

Today, many people believe that it's impossible to succeed in the samsaric world without causing harm to others. However, this is not the case. Even as a householder, it is not difficult to live a life without harming others.

Here is a story in Patrul Rinpoche's text:

Long ago, in Khotan, there are two monks who had been meditating on Manjushri for twelve years.

One day, Manjushri appeared to them and said, "There is no karmic link between you and me. The deity with whom you have had a connection in your past lives is the great Avalokiteshvara. He is now in Tibet, where he rules as king.⁷⁵ You should go there to see him."

When the two monks arrived in Tibet and entered the walls of Lhasa, they saw that many people had been executed or imprisoned. Curious, they inquired about the situation.

"Those are punishments decreed by the king," they were told.

The monks thought to themselves, "This king cannot possibly be Avalokiteshvara." Fearing they might be punished as well, they decided to run away.

⁷⁵ The king was Songtsen Gampo, who is considered to be an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara.

However, the king, using his clairvoyance, was aware that the two monks were leaving and sent a messenger to summon them to his presence.

The king asked why they wanted to run away, and the two monks told him what they had seen. Then the king asked them whether they wanted to see Amitabha, and they said yes. The king brought them to a meadow where he removed the scarf around his head and revealed his ushnisha which appeared in the form of Amitabha. The king said, “This is Amitabha, and I am the king of Tibet. You don’t have to be scared.”

The two monks said, “Amitabha is the protector of great kindness and compassion, but why are you killing innocent people?”

The king explained, “Tibet is a wild land, hard to subjugate. For this reason, I have had to create the illusion of prisoners being executed, dismembered, and so on. However, I have not harmed a single hair on anyone’s head.”

Then, the king asked what kind of accomplishment they wanted to achieve. Still scared, the two monks excused themselves by saying, “We are so exhausted in body and mind; we only want to go home as soon as possible.”

The king gave each of them a bag of sand and asked them to use the bags as pillows and have a good sleep. When they woke up, they were thousands of miles away at their own doors, and the sand in the bags had turned to gold. But because of their wrong thoughts about a bodhisattva, the two monks didn’t attain any accomplishment in their life. This story is elaborated in the book *Avalokiteshvara* in Tibet.

Some people are fortunate enough to encounter a qualified teacher, but due to their past negative karma and present conditions, they develop wrong thoughts about the teacher’s actions, so they fail to receive their Dharma teachings. This occurs quite often. As we all know, when following a qualified teacher, respecting all their words and deeds brings great benefits in this life and future lives. However, if one treats the teacher with disrespect, it creates obstacles to one’s practice.

Songtsen Gampo was the ruler of all Tibet, the Land of Snows, and he successfully united kings from all four directions under his power. He defeated invading armies and maintained peace along the frontiers. Despite the immense responsibility of conquering enemies and defending his subjects over such a vast territory, he achieved this without causing harm to even a single being. Considering this,

how can we not find ways to avoid harming others while caring for our own small dwellings, which are, in comparison, no larger than insects' nests?

Many people may not understand why our dwellings are considered no bigger than insects' nests. But if you saw what happened during the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and how the gigantic ocean waves swept away many buildings in a second, you will entirely agree with this analogy.

It is unreasonable to harm other beings for the sake of protecting our own dwellings. Harming others only leads to harm coming back to oneself, resulting in endless suffering both in this life and the next. There is no benefit from such actions, not even in worldly matters. No one ever becomes wealthy through murder, theft, or similar deeds; instead, they end up facing penalties and losing all their wealth and possessions in the process.

When cultivating boundless love, we should approach it like a mother bird caring for her chicks. She begins by building a soft and cozy nest, then covers them with her wings to keep them warm. She remains gentle and protective until the chicks are ready to fly. Similarly, we should strive to be kind in our thoughts, words, and actions to all beings in the three worlds.

Everyone present here has vowed to arouse bodhicitta. Therefore, even if people around you are complicated and barbaric, you must do your best to protect them and gradually guide them onto the path of liberation. You should continue doing so until they are fully established in the Dharma. Until they are ready, you shouldn't abandon any of them.

What we do with the body should be for the benefit of all beings; what we say with speech should not harm anyone and should be meaningful to listeners; what we think should be kind thoughts toward all beings. Although it is hard to always have virtuous thoughts devoid of desire, anger, and ignorance, you must repent as soon as you have afflictive thoughts and try your very best to generate kind thoughts. You should guide your body, speech, and mind in such a manner.

As said in Longchenpa's *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*, you should start to cultivate kindness toward beings around you, and gradually expand the scope until all living beings in the three worlds are included. This is how you should practice boundless love.

By doing so, we will *definitely* cultivate genuine, boundless love, as Patrul Rinpoche notes in the text. This process is akin to how a person can quench their

thirst by drinking water—it's a certain outcome. However, just as water won't quench our thirst unless we actually drink it, if we don't engage in the necessary practice, nothing will change. The Dharma is inherently empowering, so if we commit to the practice, we'll no doubt make progress.

Therefore, I hope you often practice the four boundless qualities and bodhicitta in your daily life. Please do not stop reading *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* after completing the full cycle of preliminary practices. The necessity of first practicing preliminaries is simply to lay a foundation. It doesn't mean we can completely set the preliminaries aside and never practice them again. Specifically, the bodhicitta practice is meant to be practiced continuously until we attain Buddhahood.

We are not practicing Qigong, which only requires controlling breath and movement for a certain period of time. Many people cannot distinguish Dharma practice from Qigong practice. How sad! I'll stop here.



Lesson 94

“The meditation on compassion is to imagine beings ...
real cannibal.” [page 201–203]

Before today’s teaching starts, I want to remind you of two things:

First, when listening to the teaching, no matter who you are, make sure to keep concentrated. If you are distracted, you may attain little benefit from whatever Dharma class you are attending.

At the very beginning of my commentary on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I introduced you to the right attitude and conduct while listening to teachings. You should already have known this, unless you are a newbie Dharma fellow in this class.

If you are distracted, even when the teaching is just a simple story, you won’t know what it is about, so you won’t be interested in it. The text in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* seems quite simple, but it actually consists of the quintessential wisdom of Patrul Rinpoche. The text can be of incredible benefit if we study it well.

In my teaching, I strive to use plain language, which may make my presentations seem less impressive. However, I have put forth my best effort to convey the teachings based on the instructions of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and great masters of the past, along with my own understanding and practical experience. I hope each of you will listen attentively.

Dharma fellows at Larung Gar have been placing great importance on the

right attitude and conduct when listening to teachings, so they shouldn't have any problem here. But recently some people who receive this teaching via internet streaming don't have the right conduct while listening to the Dharma. For example, they talk, eat, or multitask, while receiving the Dharma teaching. In such a case, they'd be better off not attend the class at all.

If you do want to attend the class, you need to spare at least one hour or two and concentrate on the teaching. In fact, studying the vajra words of great masters in a group can bring us unexpected inner experiences.

If you are reluctant to listen in this way, I won't impose. After all, people attend this class on their own free will. But if you truly want to hear the teaching, you must remain concentrated. By so doing, you can establish a good habit for listening to Dharma teachings.

After listening to the Dharma for a long time some people become impervious, which is reflected in their facial expressions. However, it's impossible for you to still remain impervious when listening to *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, because it consists of the vajra words of great masters of the past. If you feel nothing about this teaching, it simply means you are distracted.

If you are concentrated, each sentence in the text can bring you incredible benefits. Therefore, I hope you can listen carefully, so you will either learn something new in each class or will sustain and further advance what you already know.

Second, as I often mention, in the process of hearing the teaching it's best to not discontinue the transmission, except for a special circumstance. In any case these days it's easier to receive teachings than before, so if by any chance you must skip a class, you need to catch it up by watching the recording online.

In addition, the before-class prayers recitation lasts about twenty minutes, and the after-class recitation lasts about ten minutes. During the recitations you should use a prayer wheel, which can bring incredible merit. You may not yet have formed the habit of using it all the time, but you should use it before and after the Dharma class. No matter who you are, be you Larung Gar sangha members who are present for my teaching, or Dharma fellows who will receive this teaching later via DVD or internet videos, use a prayer wheel if you have one. Do not just keep it in a box. It won't be broken if you use it a bit.

Many people are experienced and resourceful in dealing with worldly matters

but feel inadequate when it comes to transcendent matters. In fact, many of you only spend one or two hours a week studying the Dharma. Therefore, you should complete your chores before class and ensure that your mind is settled during the class.

The time you spend on the Dharma per week is about as long as it takes you to have a meal. Sometimes, it takes more than two hours for urban dwellers to finish a meal. They drink a bit, eat a bit, and then drink a bit again during the meal, so sometimes it takes them three or four hours in a restaurant. Moreover, it takes them one hour or two to go to the restaurant, and it may be even longer in the case of traffic jams.

Therefore, some people may spend six to seven hours just to have a meal. In comparison, it takes you a significantly shorter time to attend one Dharma class. Therefore, you'd better sort out your ordinary undertakings in advance, so you can listen to the teachings with the right attitude and conduct. Do remember, you are not supposed to use the prayer wheel while listening to the teaching.

Now let's proceed to the text:

2.2.2.1.3. Meditation on Compassion

The meditation on boundless compassion involves visualizing beings tormented by cruel suffering and wishing for their liberation from it.

We must understand the difference between compassion and loving-kindness. According to *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, loving-kindness is to wish beings to be happy, whereas compassion is to wish beings to be free from suffering.

Great compassion is very important in Buddhism. Without it, one cannot even begin to discuss the Mahayana path. As said in *The Sutra of the Deliberation on the Dharma*, practitioners of the bodhisattva path don't have to engage in many different practices, and one specific practice is sufficient. What is this specific practice? It is meditation on great compassion.

Great compassion is like the sun that illuminates the world. With it, any practice can easily be of success. Without it, even the most advanced practices, such as Dzogchen or those from Chan Buddhism and the Pure Land school, will ultimately be ineffective. Why is this the case? It is because all these practices are intrinsically linked to the Buddha's profound wisdom, which must be anchored in great compassion. As said in the *Extensive Commentary on Bodhicitta*:

All the utmost, supreme Dharma
Is based on compassion.

When great compassion has been developed, bodhicitta is then a low-hanging fruit, as said in the *Mahavaipulya Sutra of the Tathagata's Inconceivable State*:

Those who diligently cultivate merit and virtue, constantly remember to repay kindness, and show compassion for all sentient beings will have bodhi in their hands.

♦ How to meditate on compassion

As it is said in the sutras:

Think of someone in great suffering—like a person imprisoned in the darkest dungeon, awaiting execution, or an animal standing before the butcher, moments away from being slaughtered. Feel deep compassion for that being, as if they were your own mother or child.

To meditate on compassion, it's best to start with one specific being. Otherwise, if we begin by thinking, "May all living beings have happiness and be free from suffering," the phrase "all beings" remains a generic and vague concept, as mentioned in Buddhist Logic. It is merely an abstract concept without a specific object to refer to.

Take human beings for example, when we think like this, to whom are we specifically referring? Are they Han Chinese, Tibetans, or Mongolians? Actually, we don't refer to anyone specific, and thus our practice is vague, generic, and impractical. Therefore, our practice should start with meditating on one specific being who is suffering.

Specifically, imagine a prisoner condemned to death by the ruler and being escorted to the execution site, or a sheep being caught and tied up by the butcher.

1) Thinking of a condemned prisoner

When we think of the prisoner condemned to death by the ruler, instead of viewing that suffering person as someone else, imagine that it is ourselves. Reflect on what we would do if we were in that situation. What would we do now?

Some prisoners, after being sentenced to death, are sent to the place of execution in a prison van with armed police officers and bailiffs. With face expressionless and

cheeks pale the prisoners tremble with fear, and some even collapse and become immobile.

During my schooldays I once saw such a condemned prisoner. He became dull-eyed due to extreme fear, and the last hour or two before his execution was already a hell to him. His look of despair and sorrow still lingers in my mind.

Recently I saw scenes from the Japan Earthquake and Tsunami on TV. When a ten-meter wave from the tsunami was about to crash over people they were horrified. Those with a religious belief started to pray in silence, whereas those without any belief appeared very helpless. We are all well aware of the horror and pain caused by such a disaster. Animals in the slaughterhouse feel the same, especially at the moment of being slaughtered. We should meditate on a specific case like this and imagine we are the one who is suffering from it, then our compassion will arise spontaneously.

In fact, our compassion and wisdom are innate. If they were not part of our nature, no matter how hard we meditated on them, they wouldn't arise. With this understanding, in our pursuit of the Dharma, we will recognize that great compassion is indeed indispensable to the attainment of Buddhahood, and our attitude toward any living being in distress will change significantly. For example, when we see someone severely ill in the hospital, we naturally shed tears. We will have great empathy for what is happening around us.

Hsu Chih (1898–2011) was a 113-year-old Singaporean layperson who embraced Buddhism later in life. Her life philosophy is: “The world is my home, all living beings are my brothers and sisters, selfless service is my religion.”

Many people have praised Hsu Chih's high moral standards. In fact, as long as you've studied Mahayana Buddhism, even if you initially feel strong anger and resentment toward someone, under the influence of the Bodhisattva path, you will gradually develop deep and irreversible compassion for all living beings.

In fact, we can meditate on compassion at any time in our lives. For example, when you encounter someone in misery, you might put yourself in their shoes and think, “What would I do in that situation?” When I saw the scenes from the Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, I wondered, “What would I have done if I were there? Would I have remembered to pray to the Buddha?”

Some Buddhists preach altruism during ordinary times, but they only care

about themselves and turn a blind eye to the suffering of others. They are not good practitioners.

This is how we should meditate on compassion: When we think of a condemned prisoner, rather than viewing that suffering individual as someone else, let's imagine ourselves in their position. What would we do in such a situation? There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and no refuge or protector. We have no means of escape; we cannot fly away. We lack strength and an army to defend us. In this very moment, all the perceptions of our current life are about to end. We must even leave behind our bodies, which we have cared for so meticulously, and embark on the journey to the next life. What anguish this brings! Let us train our minds by embracing the suffering of that condemned prisoner as our own.

At the very beginning we may not get used to this meditation, because we rarely did it in the past. But gradually, compassion can easily arise. Many Buddhists who have never meditated on compassion often brag about having realized emptiness and the nature of mind. They constantly say, "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form," but when they witness beings being slaughtered, they remain indifferent. In such cases, their self-claimed realization is contrary to Mahayana values.

Mahayanists should behave according to this verse in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

We do not seek for our own happiness,
But for the benefit of all living beings.
Arousing great compassion in such a way
Will swiftly bring us to the unimpeded ground.

Those who entirely devote themselves to benefiting living beings will soon attain the unimpeded fruition of the Buddha or the bodhisattva. A person without compassion is like a wall without a foundation, so how can a decorative pattern be put on that wall? Therefore, it is very important for a Mahayanist to cultivate great compassion. With compassion you will be altruistic life after life and will obtain worldly happiness in this life.

Here is a legendary story that happened in 1920:

A family living near the mountains just had a wedding. On the sixth day after the wedding, the whole family was making offerings to their ancestors, when a startled deer chased by a hunter appeared, and went under the offering table.

The kind bride immediately hid the deer. The hunter came and insisted that the bride give back the deer. Unwilling to see the deer slaughtered, the bride promised to buy it. The hunter demanded twenty silver coins, and eventually settled at fifteen after a negotiation.

When the deal was set, the bride's parents-in-law were embarrassed because they had paid fifteen silver coins to the bride's family, so they were short of money. The bride promised to spend all her dowry—the fifteen silver coins—to buy that deer. The family agreed, though they thought she made a stupid choice. The hunter left after getting the money. The bride called the deer out from under the table, comforted the animal, and let it go back into the mountains.

A few years later, the bride gave birth to a son. One day when the son was one year old, the family was busy working, and they put the baby in a chair in the courtyard. The deer reappeared, with its antlers took the chair with the baby in it, turned around the yard twice, and ran away with the baby. Seeing this, all the family members went outside and chased the deer. When they were running far away from the house, a blasting noise broke out from behind. It turned out the mountain near their village had collapsed, and the whole village was instantly razed to the ground.

Then the family realized the deer had saved them by “stealing the baby,” and it was his way to repay the bride's kindness. Seeing everyone in the family was safe, the deer gently put the baby down and ran back into the mountains.

Sadly, many people today focus solely on money and worldly pursuits, often unaware of the power of kindness. In fact, aside from what we can perceive through our senses, there are many mysterious things beyond our reach. However, many individuals show little interest in these matters and do not explore the principle of cause and effect. As a result, they often engage in negative actions. How pitiful!

When meditating on compassion, you can imagine you are the being in misery. Here is another way to practice compassion.

2) Thinking of a sheep to be slaughtered

When we think of a sheep about to be slaughtered, we should not simply view it as a sheep. Instead, we should deeply feel that it is our own elderly mother. We should ask ourselves, “What should I do now that my mother is about to be killed, even though she has done no harm?”

If you don't share the same lifestyle as Tibetans, you may not feel strongly when

imagining a sheep about to be slaughtered. Instead, you may imagine an animal on a factory farm that is poorly reared and will soon be killed for food. Ask yourself, “What will I do if this poor animal is my mother?” Don’t simply think it is just a sheep, a chicken, a cow, a pig, or a salmon fish. Instead, feel sincerely that it is your own mother.

Then, let us deeply feel the suffering that our mother must be experiencing. When our hearts ache with the intense desire to prevent her from being harmed or killed, we should remind ourselves that, while this being may not be our parent in this lifetime, it is certain that in a past life, it was our parent and cared for us with great kindness. Therefore, there is no true difference between this being and our parents now. Our dear parents are enduring immense pain! If only they could be freed from their suffering, right here and now! Reflecting on this, let our compassion flow so deeply that tears fill our eyes.

The most challenging part of this meditation is to have conviction in the view that “This suffering creature has been my parent at some time in my past lives, and has brought me up with great kindness, in just the same way as my parents have in this present life.” The absence of such a conviction is due to our lack of practice. But with continuous training, we can develop such a conviction and have compassion arisen naturally in us.

Some laymen and monastics have good Mahayana dispositions. When they encounter a being of misery, they arouse strong compassion, which is reflected in their expressions and actions. Having such compassion is the essence of being a buddha or a bodhisattva. As said in the sutras:⁷⁶

Great compassion is the essence of all Tathagatas.

Unlike us ordinary beings who are full of greed, hatred, and ignorance, the buddhas have intense compassion for all beings, which is their only “expertise.” Therefore, in this world a person who has strong compassion for everyone can be considered a manifestation of a buddha or a bodhisattva. On the other hand, if a person harms or even kills a living being in their daily life, they are definitely not a true practitioner.

We should continue meditating until strong compassion arises within us and our eyes fill with tears. Of course, it may not be possible to achieve this state

⁷⁶ For example, it is said in *The Vow Concerning the Course of Conduct of Samantabhadra and the Entry into the Range of Inconceivable Liberation*.

immediately, but as long as we keep meditating on compassion, we will gradually find ourselves shedding tears upon seeing a suffering being. Some Dharma practitioners have already developed compassion. Whenever they see a being in distress, they feel so saddened that they can't even eat their meals. This indicates that compassion has truly arisen in them.

When our compassion is aroused, we continue to think, "All this suffering is the effect of their harmful actions committed in the past. Those who are currently engaging in harmful actions will inevitably experience similar suffering in the future. They have undoubtedly caused harm to other sentient beings in the past, and now they are paying for it with their lives." With this understanding, we meditate with compassion for all beings who, through killing and other harmful deeds, are creating the causes of their own future suffering.

In fact, the butchers of today are even more pitiable. This is because the animals they slaughter have already paid off part of their karmic debt with their lives, but these butchers are accumulating more karmic debt through their actions. They are, in fact, even more deserving of compassion, and we should extend our compassion to them as well. Thus, when releasing lives, we should know that not only animals such as yaks are in misery, but also the butchers who slaughter yaks. Therefore, each time I organize a life-releasing activity in a Tibetan region, I request butchers to vow to not take life for a whole day. It is unrealistic to ask all the butchers to stop slaughtering animals, but if they can avoid killing for just a day, it still does good to them, as shown in Śroṇa's story. This might be the only viable means to benefit them at this time.

As just said, we should first meditate on an individual who commits the act of killing and cultivate great compassion toward them. Gradually, we may expand our scope to visualize more sentient beings who are experiencing the karmic consequences of negative actions, including hell beings tormented by extreme heat and cold, pretas enduring unbearable hunger and thirst, and countless animals suffering from enslavement and being preyed upon by one another. We should identify with them as if they were ourselves or our own parents and cultivate compassion for these beings, sincerely wishing for them to be free from all suffering soon.

Lastly, we should contemplate: "Wherever space extends, there are sentient beings. Wherever sentient beings exist, there is an abundance of negative actions

and the resulting suffering. How pitiable are these beings who create nothing but negative actions and endure nothing but suffering!”

[Many people seem to live a happy life. But constrained tightly by karmas and afflictions, sentient beings don’t have any genuine happiness. That’s why many great Kadampa masters rarely smiled, and often cried under their shawls.]

How wonderful it would be if every sentient being in the six realms could be free from the perceptions brought about by past actions, all kinds of suffering, and habitual tendencies, and attain the everlasting happiness of perfect Buddhahood.

We should meditate on our family and friends, enemies, and someone neutral in the same manner, wishing all of them to be free of suffering. In so doing, you are really training your mind in compassion. The *Yogacarabhumi-sastra* says:

The impartial wish to free friends, enemies, and someone neutral from suffering is known as compassion.

Everyone has different karma, so the suffering we experience also differs. Each of us, including my class audience, has our own afflictions and pains, which are caused by our ignorance. Just reflect on your own experience: How much pain have you suffered physically and mentally, within this month alone?

Take the suffering of sickness for example. We can see tens of thousands of patients come and go in the hospital, which makes us feel as if everyone in the world is sick. However, the hospital may only offer treatments for bodily diseases and is less effective in curing mental diseases.

Even now, effective treatments for mental torments are still lacking. Psychologists and psychiatrists can indeed offer help, but some of these specialists also struggle with their own mental problems.

With that said, I propose that spirituality, Buddhism in particular, should be engaged in treating mental diseases. There are great and skillful mind-training means in Buddhism. For example, if a person can fully grasp the content in the seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, many of his mental problems can be uprooted.

Why are so many people fond of Buddhism? It is because they do get benefit from the Dharma. I’ve met so many people who feel so grateful to the Dharma. Their mental problems, which could not be removed by wealth and status, are gone after they integrate the Dharma into their minds. As ordinary beings, they still have

worries and distress, but broadly speaking they've identified the right direction for life. Therefore, it's such a happy thing to pursue the Dharma. However, many people around us remain bound by their afflictions and have not been able to find true happiness, and for them, we should feel compassion.

A person lacking merit may not arouse compassion. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says:

If one has compassion for all beings, one is said to possess a noble disposition. Such a person will gain endless merit. Therefore, only those whose Mahayana disposition has awakened can arouse great compassion. Even if such compassion lasts only a split second, its merits and benefits are already incredible and boundless.

Therefore, during your preliminary practices, you should take a moment each day to calm your mind and visualize the suffering of others. You may do this in the morning when you wake up, at night before you go to bed, or at any time during the day. Your goal is to cultivate compassion, even if just for a second. If you can always think of others rather than yourself in everything you do, you are already a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas are those who benefit sentient beings. They do not need to manifest supernatural powers such as flying in the sky or swimming in the ocean. If that were the criterion for a bodhisattva, then all beings capable of flying or swimming would become bodhisattvas.

In summary, when meditating on compassion, we should first focus on a single being as the object of our meditation and cultivate compassion solely for this individual. Gradually, the scope should be expanded until, ultimately, compassion is extended to all sentient beings as a whole. If this step-by-step approach is not followed and the meditation is practiced carelessly and superficially, our compassion may remain abstract and intellectual rather than genuine and heartfelt.

Longchenpa has given clear instructions on this in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*. We should start by focusing on a specific suffering being, such as a refugee or an orphan, in our meditation. Someone may cry over a tragedy reported on TV news or in a newspaper, but very soon, his tears dry up and so does his compassion.

In fact, a true Mahayana practitioner should always cultivate compassion in the same way the Buddha did, before he finally attained perfect enlightenment. In his past lives, the Buddha always cultivated and enhanced his compassion. This is indeed very important.

Some Buddhists claim to have attained a high level of realization, but they don't care about living beings at all. In such a case, where is the connection they have with Mahayana Buddhism?

♦ Cultivating compassion in everyday life

Like loving-kindness, compassion should also be cultivated in our everyday lives. You may claim yourself as a great bodhisattva and have experienced great compassion, but when you are in contact with others, you regard them all as enemies or adversaries and constantly have conflicts with them. Are you sure you are a bodhisattva? There is nothing in the life stories of Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara that says they couldn't get along with others, and that they were always in fights. Therefore, someone's daily conduct can reflect whether they are a bodhisattva or not.

We don't live alone on the planet. We are surrounded by many humans, animals, and non-humans in our lives. What should a person with great compassion do when interacting with them? Regardless of their counterpart—whether that person is superior, at the same level, or inferior—they can always use this interaction to reflect on compassion.

For example, we can focus on an executive, a chief, or even a spiritual teacher in the meditation on compassion, thinking, "Alas! My boss always commits negative actions..." "My guru is so pitiful! He is loaded with negative karmas and afflictions. I have to dedicate my merit to him!" (*The audience laughs.*)

In addition to human beings, there are also many animals around us. Many non-Buddhists regard animals as not different from a stone or a flower, which is not true. Animals' lives are as precious as humans'. Therefore, the act of putting a small bug off the road to avoid it being trampled by others is also a reflection of your compassion.

Next, Patrul Rinpoche elaborates on this issue through examples related to the lifestyle of Tibetans.

Someone asked me, "Is it necessary to teach non-Tibetans *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*? Patrul Rinpoche uses examples of yak riding, horse riding, castration, nose piercing, and the like, which may be unfamiliar to them." In fact, it is essential to offer them the teaching. All writers tend to draw inspiration for their works from the context of their lives. Shakespeare's works have many of his own

personal elements, which doesn't stop people of later generations from appreciating his masterpieces. Likewise, through studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you can also learn the lives and traditions of Tibetans.

Regardless of nationality and ethnicity, we are all living beings in this world. The great compassion and wisdom in Buddhism are not subject to geographic boundaries, countries, regions, worldly matters, or transcendent issues. What compassion and wisdom were 2,500 years ago are still the same today and will remain the same in the future. They are unlike other ideologies, which were proposed a few hundred years ago but got overturned later. Many ideas and views people talked about when I was young had long since changed, but the view of the Buddha's great compassion has always been the same.

Here is what Patrul Rinpoche says in the text:

Reflect particularly on the suffering and hardships endured by your own livestock—cattle, sheep, packhorses, and other domestic animals. They endure brutal treatment, akin to the torments of hell. We pierce their noses, castrate them, pull out their hair, and even bleed them while they are still alive. Yet, we never consider that they might be suffering, not even for a moment. If we reflect on it carefully, we realize that this indifference stems from our failure to cultivate true compassion.

This indeed happens in the Tibetan region. Some Tibetans heat an iron drill until it's very hot, then put it directly through a yak's nose and finish the piercing with a knot of thick and rough rope. They also castrate yaks, pull out their hair, and bleed them alive. After being bled heavily, many yaks and sheep are close to death. I was told that Chinese also bleed cows, sheep, and pigs, alive. Actually, compared by the number of lives they've taken, Tibetans are not the worst in taking life.

Recently I read some news about a mother bear that was kept in captivity to harvest her bile, a digestive fluid produced by the liver. The mother bear suffered tremendously from the bile extraction experience. One day, when she noticed her baby bear was about to be put up for bile harvesting as well, she couldn't bear to see her child suffering. So, the mother bear strangled her child in tears, and then committed suicide.

Some animal experiments bring excruciating suffering to those innocent creatures. I heard that people in Gansu Province invented a new way to kill a lamb. To ensure that its fur looks great, people inject the poor animal with a specific

hormone, so it won't die right away. The lamb will tremble for twenty-four hours, and then will slowly stop breathing. Nowadays people apply cruel methods to slaughtering animals, including the killings that happen in restaurants. I've elaborated on these in my book *The Miserable World*.

Here is Patrul Rinpoche's description of how some Tibetans treat their animals:

Consider this carefully: if someone were to pluck a single strand of your hair, you would likely scream in pain and barely tolerate it. Yet, when you yank out all the long hairs from a yak's belly, leaving behind raw, red flesh and causing blood to seep from each follicle, you remain indifferent. The animal groans in agony, but the thought that it might be suffering never crosses your mind.

Similarly, you cannot bear the discomfort of a blister on your hand. If riding a horse leaves your backside sore, you switch to a sidesaddle position to ease the pain. Yet, it never occurs to you that the horse itself might be exhausted or in distress. When the horse stumbles, struggling to breathe and unable to continue, you dismiss its condition as mere stubbornness. Without a shred of sympathy, you lash out in anger, punishing it mercilessly.⁷⁷

Think of an individual animal, such as a sheep, being led to slaughter. As it is forcibly separated from the flock, the animal is overwhelmed by terror. The handler's grip leaves a painful blood blister on its body. The creature is then pinned down, its legs tightly bound with leather straps and its muzzle tied shut, causing it to struggle for breath. If the animal, writhing in pain, takes too long to die, the butcher—a man hardened by cruelty—becomes impatient and frustrated.

"This one just doesn't want to die!" He exclaims, as he strikes the poor animal.

Almost immediately after the sheep dies, it is skinned and gutted. Meanwhile, another animal is being bled until it staggers. The blood from the dead animal is mixed with that of the still-living one, and the mixture is cooked into sausages

⁷⁷ Upon considering such cruelty, Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche commented:

A person who lacks compassion is bad-tempered and violent. Their hatred will definitely result in being reborn in the hell realm. *The Sutra of the Great Assembly* says:

Those who have no compassion
Are hot-tempered, violent, and frightening
Will be reborn in the Avichi Hell
Because of their hatred.

using the intestines of the dead one. Anyone who can eat such a dish must be a true cannibal.

[I heard that Japanese especially love to eat fish. Once a person told me, “The earthquake and tsunami of 2011 should be a warning from nature. Many Japanese constantly consume seafood like fish and shrimp, and especially like to eat it fresh or even alive. They consider it a sensory pleasure, when the fish or shrimp is still moving at the moment of consumption. Given the number of lives they’ve eaten, maybe this time nature wanted them to reflect on the preciousness of life.”]

There were indeed many unethical killings of animals in the Tibetan region, which Patrul Rinpoche described. This is nothing to be hidden. In fact, it is not only in the Tibetan Plateau, but also in many other places, that animal cruelty exists. We should have compassion toward animals and also toward those who slaughter them.

In the course of our preliminary practices, we should repeatedly meditate on the sufferings of living beings and vow to develop the capacity to liberate them, completely freeing them from all suffering and bringing them happiness. With pure motivation and the blessings of all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and lineage masters, when the right conditions come together, we can all cultivate genuine great compassion.



Lesson 95

“Think carefully about the suffering of these animals ... and rolling their eyes, the atsaras disappeared.” [page 204–206]

The teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* hasn’t taken very long, since fewer than one hundred classes have been done so far. But compared to other teachings that last only two or three months, this teaching hasn’t been too short either. In any case, it’s a rare opportunity to listen to the Dharma, so you should feel a yearning for the teachings. From my side, giving you the complete teaching on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is the utmost project of my life. I hope each of you will receive the teaching from its beginning until the end.

Currently, we are studying the boundless compassion of the four boundless qualities. You must put the instructions into real practice. Many people can talk about bodhicitta, but in fact, cultivating bodhicitta requires both intellectual understanding and practical meditation, both of which are indispensable. Why is that? It is because if you don’t understand the basic doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, your practice may be directionless and futile; whereas if you are learned but don’t engage in real practice, you will become an impervious practitioner who only pays lip service.

Many Buddhists often recite and study the Mahayana scriptures and even the supreme tantras, but they haven’t aroused genuine bodhicitta. In this case, for them, all the Mahayana teachings they have received hold no distinction from those of the basic vehicle or worldly dharmas and have nothing to do with ultimate liberation.

Our pursuit of Mahayana Buddhism should not be driven by a desire for fame, wealth, or other worldly concerns. Instead, through our Dharma studies, we should first train our minds in the four boundless qualities and then cultivate bodhicitta. When we encounter a suffering being or hear their cries, we should consciously remind ourselves to arouse bodhicitta. While this may feel forced at first, with continued practice, genuine bodhicitta will gradually arise spontaneously.

Now let's continue to study how to meditate on compassion:

As mentioned earlier, when seeing a sheep being slaughtered or tormented, you should imagine the suffering animal is you. Or when you witness a chicken being butchered by neck-cutting and being boiled in hot water, or an eel being cut open and gutted, you should think, "If I were this being in misery, what would I feel?"

Animals are no different from us humans. We seek happiness and avoid pain, and so do they. Some people can easily feel great sympathy for earthquake victims who were killed and for survivors who wept in the ruins, but why not extend the same compassion toward an animal being slaughtered? Of course, this is related to education and circumstances. As Buddhists, we should treat animals and humans equally, and even regard animals as our own parents. Those who think and act this way can be considered true Mahayanists.

♦ Experience the suffering of animals yourself

Last class we learned that sheep and yaks are suffocated to death. We should put ourselves in their position and truly feel their suffering. We may hold our breath by covering our mouth with our hands and stay like that for a while. This will allow us to experience the pain and the panic of the animals.

I often did this when I was a kid, although nobody taught me to do so. Perhaps it is innate. Whenever I saw a yak being butchered, I would cover my mouth with my hands until I could no longer hold my breath. I would think, "If I can't hold my breath any longer, I can release my hands. But that yak has no choice but to endure the suffering." While holding my breath, I deeply empathized with the immense suffering that an animal experiences when being killed in this way.

Likewise, when we see a pig or a chicken being butchered, we should imagine that it is us who is undergoing the suffering of being slaughtered or boiled and see what it is like. Then, we should think: "How sad it is that all these beings are

constantly tormented by such terrible sufferings! If only I had the power to free them from all these sufferings!”

Every day, in slaughterhouses and our own kitchens, countless animals lose their precious lives due to our excessive craving for food. In particular, modern technologies enable the large-scale killing of these animals in various ways. In this context, their lives are under constant threat, and the cruelty they face can sometimes seem as severe as that in the hell realm. However, it's important to recognize that their deaths can often result from their own acts of killing in previous lives. When the consequences of their karma ripen, even the Buddha himself cannot save them, much less great masters like Shantideva and Atisha, let alone us. Nevertheless, we should still hold the intention: “Although I may not have the power to save all of them, I will do my very best to prevent even one animal from being butchered.” Meditate on this repeatedly.

We can meditate on compassion anytime and anywhere: in a secluded place, in the city, on a bus, while walking, sitting, and lying, and more. A true practitioner lives with the Dharma. He doesn't always have to meditate in the vajra posture and keep his eyes closed, which is only part of Dharma practice. To an experienced practitioner, every place is a place of practice. Unlike novice practitioners who must meditate in a quiet room with the door closed, a practitioner with mindfulness and vigilance can practice the Dharma anywhere.

When meditating on compassion, we should observe and reflect more on the suffering of others. Engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds will help us understand their suffering. Only then can we truly internalize the different forms of suffering that sentient beings endure. If we confine ourselves to a retreat cave or room, we risk remaining unaware of the torment that exists beyond our serene surroundings.

♦ **Monastics who have no compassion**

Monastics wear robes, shave their heads, and renounce worldly attachments to pursue a solitary and sublime path. What they do is a noble endeavor. They are supposed to embody great compassion for all beings, following the example set by the Buddha, and serve as paragons of kindness. Unfortunately, some teachers and monastics today show little to no compassion and may cause more harm to sentient beings than laypeople do. This indicates that the Buddha's teachings is

nearing its end, marking an era in which flesh-eating demons and ogres are given all the honors.

The primary quality of a teacher is great compassion. If a teacher has compassion, you may follow him, even if he doesn't have other qualifications. If a teacher lacks compassion, he is not a qualified teacher of Mahayana Buddhism, even if he possesses many other qualifications.

Many teachers of Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism have impressed and benefited Buddhists and non-Buddhists at home and abroad through their incredible Dharma activities, in which I truly rejoice. However, there are also a few charlatan teachers who, in the name of Buddhism, damage its image and ethical values. Such charlatans lack the compassion of bodhicitta, making them no different from compassionless demons. They are not afraid of committing any wrongdoing for the sake of money or fame. Sometimes, they are worse than householders.

Some householders, especially Buddhist laymen, refrain from drinking, smoking, going to the movies, and doing other meaningless things. Apart from working and taking care of family, they devote all their time to Buddhism. In contrast, some so-called teachers are so awful that they bring tremendous pain to others. Sadly, there are many such charlatans.

But those charlatans don't represent Buddhism. They are just Buddhists in name rather than in essence, which we should understand well. Otherwise, after witnessing the wrongdoings of a specific teacher or monk, a person may think, "All sangha members in Tibetan Buddhism are like this!" or "All sangha members in Chinese Buddhism are like this!" This person doesn't know that it is that teacher or monk's personal error, which has nothing to do with Buddhism as a whole.

In Buddhism, our teacher, Buddha Shakyamuni, earnestly taught his disciples to cultivate compassion for all sentient beings. In his past lifetimes, the Buddha himself renounced the throne of a universal monarch as though it were mere spit in the dust, and chose the path of a renunciant. Through dedicated practice, he attained the completely perfect enlightenment. Later, alongside his Arhat followers, he traveled on foot, carrying bowls and staffs to seek alms. Not only did the Buddha's followers refrain from riding horses or mules, but the Buddha himself never mounted any animal. This choice was rooted in the principle that causing

suffering to sentient beings is contrary to the Buddhist teachings. If the Buddha had wished for a horse, he could have easily acquired one; however, he chose not to.

[During a talk I gave at a university in Beijing, a student asked me, “So-and-so from Peking University took ordination, and it went viral. What do you think about it?” I replied, “It’s nothing out of the ordinary. Buddha Shakyamuni was once a prince, as were Shantideva, Atisha, Padmasambhava, and many other great masters. They all relinquished their thrones to become renunciates. If a national president or prime minister were to take ordination, it would be understandable for you to be surprised. However, there is no need to be surprised when a bright university student chooses to become a monk.”]

The Buddha did not find himself a mount to ride for two reasons. On the one hand, he was reminding us to live a simple lifestyle. For example, we don’t need to indulge in excessive clothing and food. However, many people do not understand this, which is why suffering continues to increase.

On the other hand, if the Buddha had begged for alms while riding an animal, it would have caused suffering to that creature. To prevent inflicting pain on animals, the Buddha chose to go on foot. Riding an animal during his alms round would have contradicted the principles of Buddhist teachings. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

Buddhas are made happy by the joy of beings.
 They sorrow, they lament when beings suffer.
 By bringing joy to beings, then, I please the Buddhas also;
 By wounding them, I wound the Buddhas too.⁷⁸

All the acts carried out by the Buddha, from the moment he aroused bodhicitta until he attained enlightenment, are solely for the purpose of bringing happiness and alleviating the suffering of all living beings. Here is a story from *The Sutra on Going Forth* (Skt: *Abhinīṣkramaṇasūtra*):

When Buddha Shakyamuni was still Prince Siddhartha, one day he was playing a shooting game with five hundred Sakya children. A flock of wild geese happened to fly by, and Devadatta shot one with his bow and arrow. Wounded by the arrow, the goose fell into prince Siddhartha’s garden. With compassion, the prince removed the arrow and applied medicine on the goose’s wound.

⁷⁸ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

Devadatta sent someone to get the goose, and the prince said, “I’ll give it to you if the goose is dead. As long as it is still alive, I will keep it with me.”

Later Devadatta sent another servant with a message to the prince: “Dead or alive, give me the goose, because it’s I who shot it down.” The prince said, “I’ve taken this goose under my care. Ever since I aroused bodhicitta, I have vowed to take all living beings under my care with altruistic compassion. This goose is no exception.”

From this story we can tell that the Buddha had intense compassion for every living being. As his followers, sometimes we should feel ashamed. Compared to what the Buddha has done for all beings, what is our stand? Our lineage masters had also dedicated their entire lives to the benefit of sentient beings, which can be known by reading the scriptures they composed, learning their teachings, or finding out their Dharma activities. Compared to them, what have we done so far?

During Patrul Rinpoche’s time, some monks were invited to laypeople’s homes to perform a village ceremony—a specific Buddhist ritual. They typically traveled by yak. First, they threaded a coarse rope made from tail hair through the ring-hole gouged in the yak’s muzzle. Then, they rode on the yak’s back and pulled the rope forcefully with both hands. Initially, the yak walked forward, but with each pull, it turned its head in pain from the discomfort in its nose, halting in its tracks. The monk would then muster all his strength to whip the yak hard on its rear. Driven by pain, the yak would dash forward. Fearing he might fall off, the monk would tug on the rope again, causing the yak to stop due to the pain. The monk would resume whipping it, and this cycle repeated over and over. In the end, the yak was utterly exhausted, suffering immensely, with sweat dripping from every pore. Its long tongue hung out like a draped cloth as it panted heavily, making huffing sounds, completely unable to move.

[They probably don’t know how to ride a yak. It’s like an inexperienced driver: a new driver steps on the gas pedal too hard and the car rushes down the street, so the driver immediately steps on the brake pedal too hard, and the car stops abruptly.]

People growing up in cities may not resonate with the yak example. I used to herd yaks when I was a kid. I often rode a yak myself and also saw monks ride yaks. Therefore, Patrul Rinpoche’s description seems vivid to me. However, you may examine yourself accordingly, to see whether you’d behave in a similar manner toward animals.

In the course of writing my book *The Miserable World*, I learned the past of

many Dharma fellows. Some of them have had intense compassion for living beings since a young age, whereas some others couldn't wait to harm an animal or butcher it for food. You may reflect on your attitude toward animals.]

At this point, the monk riding the yak believed the old creature was refusing to walk properly, which fueled his anger. In a fit of rage, he struck the yak's rear forcefully with the whip handle until it broke in two. He tucked the broken pieces into his belt, bent down to pick up a sharp stone, turned around in the saddle, and continued to beat the yak's back. This brutality arose from a complete lack of compassion in his mind. [This rider was reluctant to throw away the broken whip handle; perhaps it was because there were not many trees in Sershul. When I visited, I noticed that the beams and pillars of a house were as slender as the chimney of a metal stove.]

The monk didn't consider the yak as a living being; he rode it, slammed it with a rock, beat it with a whip, and pull it hard with a rope. He showed no sign of compassion to the yak, which is worthy of condemnation. It is said in *The Great Men Shashtra* (Skt. *Mahāpuruṣa*):

He who is intelligent and learned,
But has no compassion,
Will be criticized and scolded by others.

The monk's lack of compassion for animals is found not only in Tibetan Buddhism but also in Chinese Buddhism.

During the Tang dynasty, the eminent India Buddhist monk Subhakarasiṃha followed his teacher Dharmagupta's order and came to China to propagate the Dharma. One day, at the lunch hour, he arrived at a temple in a border city of China. Subhakarasiṃha walked into the temple but no meal was left. With his clairvoyance he stretched his hand out, grabbing a bucket of rotten food leftovers from the kitchen. He then devoured everything in the bucket. The sangha members were startled, and the cook rushed to tell the abbot.

The abbot observed Subhakarasiṃha and felt the Indian monk's mind was pure, but his behaviors were too maverick and out of tune with the sangha. So the abbot ordered, "As a warning, don't let him in at night." This didn't bother Subhakarasiṃha at all; he just sat outside the door to meditate.

One night the abbot was about to meditate, when he felt itchy. He took off

his clothes and found a big fat louse. The abbot opened the window and threw the louse out. Suddenly, Subhakarasingha said out loud, “The heir of the Buddha got injured!”

Shocked, the abbot sent his attendant to look outside for the louse with a candle. Subhakarasingha said, “The third leg on the right side is crippled.” The attendant, who was young and had good vision, indeed found the louse on a stone step with a crippled leg. He immediately picked up the louse with his nails and showed it to the abbot.

The abbot was terrified upon seeing the injured louse, so he rushed downstairs and apologized to Subhakarasingha with a bow. He then asked, “It is so dark, and the moon isn’t out, so how did you know where exactly the louse is injured?”

Subhakarasingha replied, “The Buddha says, ‘All living beings are future buddhas because they equally possess buddha-nature.’ Out of ignorance ordinary people kill beings at will, but they don’t know that suffering beings’ wails for help are heard by all the buddhas of the ten directions. Their wails are as loud as a crash of thunder. So, when the louse fell on the ground and injured its leg, its cry for help was not only heard by me, but also by buddhas who are as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges in the ten directions.”

There are some Buddhists who, for their own enjoyment, never treat animals as precious lives and abuse them without any concern. No matter how hard they recite mantras or practice meditation, they are not true practitioners.

Let’s return to Patrul Rinpoche’s text. After learning how certain monks showed no compassion toward yaks, let us now imagine ourselves as an old yak. Our backs are burdened with an excessively heavy load, a rope pulls at our nostrils, our flanks are whipped, and our ribs are bruised by the stirrups. All around us, we feel only burning pain. Without a moment’s rest, we ascend long slopes and descend steep hills, crossing wide rivers and vast plains. With empty stomachs, we are driven on against our will from early dawn until late evening, when the last rays of the setting sun disappear. Consider how difficult and exhausting this would be—the pain, hunger, and thirst we would endure—and then take that suffering upon ourselves. It is impossible not to feel an intense and unbearable compassion.

As it is said in the *Analects of Confucius*:

What you do not wish upon yourself, extend not to others.

The Way of the Bodhisattva also says:

Strive at first to meditate
 Upon the sameness of yourself and others.
 In joy and sorrow all are equal;
 Thus be guardian of all, as of yourself.⁷⁹

Though well said, very often this only exists as lip service, and is hard to be put into real practice. Only by taking the suffering of others upon ourselves can we have in-depth understanding of their experience. By doing so, even if initially we have little compassion and are hot-tempered, the young shoot of our bodhicitta will thrive under the influence and nourishment of Mahayana Buddhism.

In addition to taking the suffering of beings upon ourselves, we may also think of all the beings having been our parents.

In the Tang dynasty, a man named Li Xin traveled on a horse, with a pony by its side, on a freezing and snowy winter day. After a few miles, the horse was too exhausted to walk. Under great time pressure, Li Xin whipped the horse dozens of times, hoping it would keep walking.

Then the horse started to talk, saying, “I was your deceased mother. When I was alive, I sent a few liters of rice to your younger sister without telling your father. Because of this, I was reborn as a horse. That pony was your sister. We are working hard to repay the karmic debt. Why do you insist on making us walk so much when we are already extremely exhausted?”

Upon hearing this, Li Xin was stunned and started to shed tears. He immediately apologized to the horse and took off its saddle, saying, “If you are really my mother, you should know the way home.” The horse then walked ahead with Li Xin following behind with the saddle, and they indeed arrived home with no problem.

Li Xin’s siblings were very sad when they heard about this. The family built a separate stable for the horse and took good care of it, in the same way they would for their mother. In addition, they often made meal offerings to monastics. To accumulate merit for the mother, the whole family practiced the Dharma with great diligence.

⁷⁹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

There were many amazing stories like this in dynasties such as Sui, Tang, and Ming. Many emperors also believed in Buddhism, and poets composed beautiful Buddhist poems that were passed down from generation to generation. In comparison, nowadays people are overwhelmed by materialism and have become spiritually bankrupt. Many rarely experience peace of mind and are devoid of happiness. There are also fewer literary masterpieces composed by authors. Why? Maybe because technology has advanced way too fast!

In the following text, Patrul Rinpoche delivers a strong critique of certain gurus and monks. It is important for the household audience not to conclude that “monastics are bad, and we householders are good.” In fact, if gurus and monastics exhibit poor behavior, householders are often more susceptible to their own afflictions. It’s just that Patrul Rinpoche didn’t mention this in the text.

♦ How to treat pretas and mischievous spirits

Lamas and monks are supposed to be a refuge and a help—impartial protectors and guides for all beings. However, in reality, they often show favoritism toward their patrons—those who provide them with food, drink, and offerings. They pray specifically for these individuals to be sheltered and protected, bestowing empowerments and blessings upon them. Meanwhile, they are ganging up to cast out all the pretas and mischievous spirits, whose rebirth in a lower realm is the result of their negative karma. The lamas engaged in these ceremonies work themselves into a frenzy, making aggressive gestures while chanting, “Kill, kill! Strike, strike!”

It is clear that anyone who views harmful spirits as deserving of death or violence is under the power of attachment and hatred, lacking the capacity for vast, impartial compassion. The *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

He who is adorned by compassion
Is like a god being in the human realm.
He who is devoid of compassion
Is always in poverty.

However fantastic a person may appear to be, without compassion they are actually in a state of poverty.

Upon careful reflection, it becomes clear that these malignant spirits require compassion even more than any benefactors do. Their harmful nature stems from

their negative karma. Reborn as pretas, they inhabit horrific bodies, enduring unimaginable pain and fear. Their existence is marked by relentless hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. They view everything as a threat. Consumed by hate and aggression, many of them descend into hell immediately after death. Who, then, deserves more compassion?

The patrons may be sick and suffering, but this will help them exhaust their negative karma rather than create more. In contrast, evil spirits harm others with their malicious intentions and will be cast into the depths of the lower realms due to their harmful actions. Thus, the Buddha, with skillful means and full of compassion, taught methods for exorcising or intimidating these evil spirits, not out of malice, but out of compassion—similar to a mother spanking a disobedient child. He also allowed the ritual of liberation to be practiced by those who have the power to interrupt the flow of negative deeds committed by those who only cause harm and to help transfer their consciousness to a pure realm. However, was it the Buddha's teaching to take good care of benefactors, monks, and others we consider allies while rejecting demons and wrongdoers as hateful enemies? Protecting some while attacking others out of attachment and hatred is contrary to the Buddha's teachings.

As we must know, there is nothing in the Dharma that says one can benefit beings through hatred and anger. Nagarjuna's *Discourse on the Ten Stages* says:

He who, because of attachment,
Hatred, and fear,
Abandons one being who can be liberated
Has cut off the root of the Buddha's path.

If one wants to conduct the ritual of liberation, one must have the power to interrupt the flow of evil deeds of those beings who only do harm, and to transfer their consciousness to a pure realm. Otherwise, according to the Buddha's instructions, no one is permitted to subjugate a malignant spirit or ghost.

The ritual of liberation exists not only in Vajrayana but also in Sutrayana. For example, *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* mentions a preta living in a vast, desolate wilderness who ate humans every day. When the Buddha noticed that the time had come to tame the preta of the wilderness, he transformed into a powerful preta who shook the palace of the wilderness preta, making him restless. The preta

came outside with his family. Upon seeing the powerful preta, he was so frightened that he fainted to the ground.

The powerful preta brought the preta of the wilderness back to consciousness and restored his Buddha appearance. The Buddha gave teachings to the preta, urging him to take the precept of no killing. After receiving the precept, the wilderness preta said, “My family and I are living on flesh and blood. Now that we’ve taken the precept of no killing, doesn’t it mean we are going to starve to death?”

The Buddha promised, “From now on, I will ask my Shravaka disciples to make meal offerings to you, no matter where they are practicing the Dharma.” What the Buddha did in this sutra is a form of indirect subjugation.

As long as we are motivated by attachment and hatred, our attempts to expel or attack harmful spirits will be futile. They will only do us more harm in return. Thus, attachment and hatred do not have the power to drive away harmful spirits. Furthermore, as long as we believe in their existence while wishing for them to depart, we will never subdue them.

While Milarepa lived in the Garuda Fortress Cave in the Chong Valley, Vinayaka, the king of obstacle-makers, produced a supernatural illusion. Here is what happened.

Once Milarepa was out to collect some wood. When he had gathered a handful of twigs, a sudden storm arose, and the wind was strong enough to blow away the wood and tear his ragged robe. When he tried to hold his robe together, the wood blew away. When he tried to clutch the wood, his robe blew apart. Amid the dilemma, Milarepa suddenly realized he was in a state of attachment. Then he ceased resisting the wind. When the storm was over, he gathered some twigs again and went back to his cave.

In his cave, Milarepa found five demons with eyes the size of saucers. One was sitting on his bed and preaching, two were listening to the teaching, another was preparing and offering food, and the last was studying his books.

Following his initial shock, Milarepa thought, “There must be magical apparitions of the local deities who dislike me.” He then began to sing a song to praise the local deities, which described how auspicious the mountains and water in the Chong valley were, and how the local deities had been in great harmony with him. At the end of the song Milarepa suggested the local deities return to

their abodes with kindness and compassion. However, the five demons did not vanish, and instead stared balefully at Milarepa with fearful grimaces and gestures.

At that time, Milarepa recognized that they were manifested by demons. He then prayed to his teacher and to his deity, but the demons did not go away. He attempted to visualize his deity and recited wrathful mantras, yet they still refused to leave. With great compassion, he even preached the Dharma to them, but they still didn't go away.

Finally, he reflected, "My lama Marpa taught me that everything in the universe is mind, and the nature of mind is both empty and luminous. Believing that these demons and obstacles truly exist, and wishing for them to disappear, renders all efforts futile." With a deep confidence in the view that spirits and demons are merely projections of one's own mind, he sang a song of Mahamudra and strode back into his cave.

Frightened, they recoiled, rolling their eyes in despair and trembling uncontrollably. Then, they swirled together like a whirlpool, merging into one before vanishing completely.

"This was the Demon King, Vinayaka the obstacle maker, who came searching for evil opportunities," thought Milarepa, "The storm, too, was undoubtedly his creation. By the mercy of my lama, he had no chance to harm me."



Lesson 96

“The main subject of the chapter ... it is always essential to give rise to bodhicitta.” [page 206–209]

Today we continue to study the section on boundless compassion. Last class we talked about when Milarepa encountered five demons in his meditation cave and subjugated them by resting in the nature of his mind.

On another occasion, Milarepa stayed in Nyanang for a short period. The people there asked him to settle in the region, but Milarepa refused. In compliance with his guru’s order, he then went to Riwo Palbar, and practiced meditation alone in a cave near the Lingpa Rock Cave.

Late one night, as Milarepa was meditating, he heard a cracking sound coming from a crevice. He rose from his seat and looked around, but seeing nothing, he dismissed it as an illusion and returned to his meditation. Suddenly, a brilliant beam of light burst from the crevice. In the midst of the light, a red man appeared riding a black deer, accompanied by a beautiful woman. The man struck Milarepa with his elbow, unleashing a suffocating wind, and then vanished. The woman then transformed into a red female dog, which immediately caught Milarepa by his left toe.

Milarepa realized that the figure before him was an apparition created by the Ogress of the Rock. In response, he sang a song in which he named four auspicious animals, one for each direction, emphasizing that they should not be harmed. He then explained that, like these auspicious animals, he had renounced worldly life

and was meditating in the Lingpa Rock Cave for the benefit of all beings, so the Ogress shouldn't harm him.

Hearing Milarepa's song, the Ogress also sang a song:

This demon of habitual tendencies arises from your mind;
If you don't recognize the true nature of your mind,
Even if you try to drive me away, I will not leave.
If you don't realize the emptiness of your mind,
There will be countless demons like me.
But once you have recognized the nature of your mind,
All adversities will transform into allies,
And even I, Ogress of the Rock, will serve at your command.

Khenpo Kyiwang, a disciple of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, often quoted a verse that says:

Knowing everything in the universe is the deity,
Gods and demons will be at your bidding.

Therefore, recognizing the nature of the mind is extremely important. If we can do so, no matter what we encounter, happiness or adversity, we'll know its nature is empty and luminous, devoid of any inherent existence. Then both gods and demons are pure manifestations of our deity.

It is very important for a practitioner to transform adversity onto the path to liberation. A few of you have received the empowerment and the supreme instructions of the Great Perfection and have even practiced them for some time. When you encounter obstacles or unfavorable circumstances, allow them to dissolve into your primordial awareness. When observed, they cannot be grasped and are inherently empty; while being empty, they also appear, which is beyond words and expression. This is the union of emptiness and appearance.

Here is the advice of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche to his disciples:

When afflictions arise or unfortunate events occur, rest your mind in its true nature. As you abide in your mind's nature, the churning waves of obstacles will naturally dissolve back into the ocean of your luminous awareness. By doing so, a realized yogi

will gradually strengthen the recognition of the mind's primordial awareness through this training.

A practitioner can practice anytime, anywhere, and while engaged in any activity. We don't have to lock ourselves in a room and meditate in distinct sessions. In fact, listening to teachings is a form of meditation; doing housework is meditation; driving is meditation; talking is meditation; and so on.

However, it is quite challenging for novice practitioners to achieve this. They often express their frustrations and blame others for their bad experiences. They don't realize that they should tame and pacify their afflictive minds instead. If they can become aware of the nature of mind, as pointed out by their vajra guru, and abide in that state, then the external malignant demons and internal afflictive thoughts will dissolve into their primordial awareness, like drops of rain falling into a pool and becoming inseparable from the pool water. This is a wondrous state. If you've done the practice, you may apply it in your everyday situations.

Back to the story: When the Ogress of the Rock sang her song, Milarepa was deeply impressed by her cleverness. He then convinced her to abandon wrongdoings and embrace virtuous actions. The Ogress released Milarepa's left toe and pledged to protect all practitioners in his presence. The following day, she gathered her entire retinue to listen to Milarepa's teachings. They all vowed not to harm any living beings and to support and assist all Buddhists. From that moment on, the Ogress and her retinue followed Milarepa's guidance. They served practitioners, refrained from causing harm, and became their trusted friends.

This story is in *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, which you should take a look at when possible.

Through this story we know that hatred cannot subjugate demons. Rather, it will make them even more rampant. Therefore, when encountering demons, we should practice *tonglen* (giving and taking) and *chöd* (cutting through the ego) with great compassion, or rest in the state of emptiness. If you have attained a higher tantric state, and developed the conviction that demons are the display of your own mind, there won't be any obstacles or unfavorable circumstances for your personal practice and your Dharma activities. This is a very profound pith instruction.

♦ On offerings of flesh and blood

Patrul Rinpoche also noted that when certain lamas visited the homes of their benefactors, the benefactors would often slaughter numerous sheep to feed the lamas. Despite knowing that their visit would put the livestock at risk, the lamas showed no concern whatsoever. Instead, they happily accepted the hospitality, enjoying the meat with smiles on their faces.

I heard that there were a few teachers in the Han area of China who were invited to dine in restaurants that kill animals for food on the spot, which didn't seem to bother them. But in such a case they are not even in compliance with the teachings of the basic vehicle, let alone the Mahayana teachings. As said in the *Verses on the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*:

If one sees, hears, and doubts [the killing],
One must not eat [the meat],
For the sake of being kind to living beings.

Although Theravada practitioners are allowed to eat meat, they can only consume the threefold pure meat: that is, meat from animals that have not been seen killed, not heard being killed, and not suspected of being killed for them. Only such meat can be eaten by them, and no other type of meat. Animals that are slaughtered suffer tremendously, so taking no life is a fundamental precept for Buddhists, including Shravaka practitioners. Thus, it goes against the Buddha's teachings to happily consume the meat of a freshly killed animal.

Some of the aforementioned lamas believed that clean meat was essential for their rituals and offerings to protectors. For them, "clean meat" referred to the still-bleeding flesh and fat of a freshly killed animal, which they used to adorn tormas and other offerings. These practices, however, are not aligned with Buddhist principles.

Some old traditions in the Tibetan region are quite troubling. Nowadays, some people hold negative opinions about Tibetan Buddhism because of these traditions, which is understandable. In such cases, we, as followers of Tibetan Buddhism, shouldn't feel offended. There are also similar traditions in the Han area of China. For example, people in southern China offer meat such as fish and pork to Avalokiteshvara, and worse yet, during festivals they sacrifice chickens and sheep. This resembles the practices of the Bönpo or tirthikas, in which animals are sacrificed to gods on special occasions.

In Buddhism, once we have taken refuge in the Dharma, we must give up harming others. How could having an animal killed wherever we go, and enjoying its flesh and blood, not contravene the precepts of taking refuge? *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says:

He who takes refuge in the Dharma
Turns away from taking life.

So regardless of the reason, if we harm a living being, we have transgressed our refuge vows.

The Sutra of Repaying the Kindness of the Buddha Who Has Great Skill in Means also says:

Bodhisattvas would rather lose their own lives
Than take the lives of others.

As you see, taking life is totally against the tenets of Mahayana Buddhism.

Some laypeople cannot completely give up meat due to work, family, or habitual reasons, which is understandable. However, if someone advocates for meat consumption, remains indifferent to the slaughter of animals, and misleads others into thinking that Tibetan Buddhism permits meat-eating, it is unacceptable.

As I have mentioned before, meat-eating is not permitted in Mahayana Buddhism; however, some practitioners indulge in it, justifying their actions in the name of Buddhism. This behavior is personal and unrelated to the core teachings of Buddhism.

In the Bodhisattva tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, we are expected to be the refuge and protectors of all sentient beings. Yet, for those beings with unfortunate karma that we are meant to safeguard, we often show no compassion whatsoever. Instead, we allow these beings to be killed, their boiled flesh and blood placed before us, while we, who vow to engage in bodhisattva acts, gleefully consume it, smacking our lips. Could anything be more vicious and cruel than this?

Mipham Rinpoche says in *The Just King*:

If your protector is harming you, then who else can help you?
If fire is burning in water, then what else can extinguish the fire?

Bodhisattvas are the refuge and protectors of all living beings, and if they eat meat and harm others without any compassion or bodhicitta, how can they truly protect all beings? The *Lankavatara Sutra* says:

He who eats meat
Severs the seed of great loving-kindness.

I have always appreciated the tradition of vegetarianism in Chinese Buddhism. I rejoice in anyone who has adopted this lifestyle, especially laypeople. Though a vegetarian lifestyle is not always easy to embrace, it can indeed bring a life of peace as well as health-related benefits such as longevity. Take the eminent Chan masters, for example: many of their lifespans exceed one hundred years. Therefore, the vegetarian diet is sufficiently nutritious. In comparison, animal products are laden with bacteria, antibiotics, hormones, dioxins, and a host of other toxins, which can cause serious health problems in humans and result in many food-borne diseases.

I have been promoting vegetarianism, the practice of life-releasing, and the recitation of Mahayana scriptures. Additionally, after performing virtuous deeds, be sure to dedicate the merit for the benefit of all beings. As ordinary practitioners, we can do only so much, but these actions are very meaningful. When you first embark on the Dharma path, avoid being overly passionate and wanting to do everything, as this overreaction may lead you to lose interest later, which is not beneficial.

Additionally, we should make it a daily practice to listen to some Dharma teachings. If we constantly expose ourselves to worldly influences, our minds will inevitably be affected over time. Encountering the Dharma is a rare opportunity, and it would be a great pity not to appreciate it—much like throwing a priceless wish-fulfilling jewel into the toilet.

♦ The meaning of flesh and blood offering according to Vajrayana

It is said in a tantra:

For whatever we have done to upset the simha and tramen⁸⁰
By not gathering offerings of flesh and blood according to the
texts,

⁸⁰ Symbolic deities of the mandala.

We beg the dakinis of the sacred places to forgive us.⁸¹

If the action of offering flesh and blood is not performed in accordance with the tantric texts, it is then against the wisdom mind of the eight dakinis mentioned in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Tib. *Bardo Thodol*). So, we should repent in front of the dakinis, asking for forgiveness.

What exactly is said in the tantric texts regarding the offering of flesh and blood? Here is one of the tantric instructions:

The five types of meat and five ambrosias
Are the food and drink of the outer tsok offering.

According to the tantric texts, offering a feast of flesh and blood involves presenting five specific types of meat considered worthy samaya substances: the flesh of humans, horses, dogs, elephants, and cows. These five kinds of meat are regarded as undefiled by harmful actions, as they are sourced from beings that are not killed for food.

These samaya substances are indeed used in tantric feast offerings, but they are not intended to satisfy one's appetite. It shouldn't be the case that a meat and alcohol lover places a bottle of hard liquor and a few steaks on the shrine table to indulge in them after the feast offering. I have heard that some laypeople make a feast offering every day because they want to eat meat and drink alcohol. If you truly have no attachment to anything, you may emulate Chan Master Ji Gong's eccentric behaviors. There are many such eccentric behaviors of crazy wisdom in Tibetan Buddhism as well, but they are not suitable for everyone.

If one is bound by the distinction between purity and impurity, perceiving human meat, dog meat, and similar substances as impure and inferior, and is unwilling to consume such meats, but instead desires fresh, succulent, fatty meat from an animal that has just been killed for food, believing it to be pure and clean, such attitudes are referred to as:

Seeing the offerings of the five samaya substances
As either pure or impure, or consuming them heedlessly.

⁸¹ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 207.

As said, having this concept of purity and impurity transgresses the samaya vows one has taken.

Many individuals, including Han Chinese and Tibetans, attempt to fulfill their personal desires under the guise of practicing tantra. Even more troubling, some engage in tantric practices solely because they believe that actions forbidden in Sutrayana can be justified through Vajrayana. However, these individuals are not participating in authentic tantric practice. Many of you have been studying Tibetan Buddhism for ten or twenty years, so you likely understand from tantric texts or exemplary practices in monasteries that conduct in Vajrayana is fundamentally grounded in Sutrayana. Eccentric behaviors are only permitted when a practitioner has achieved a very high state of realization, which is also implicitly referenced in Sutrayana.

The reason why some tantric practices have to be kept secret is because they are beyond the capacity and understanding of ordinary people. Were they exposed to the public heedlessly, people can easily misunderstand them and hence generate wrong thoughts towards Vajrayana.

Take the fivefold pure meat,⁸² for example, it may only be consumed if a practitioner possesses the ability to transform the food they eat into ambrosia or if they are striving to achieve specific accomplishments in a solitary place. Eating it casually for mere enjoyment, referred to as “heedless consumption contrary to the samayas,” constitutes a transgression.

Of course, if a practitioner has the extraordinary power to revive a life, then they may do whatever they want. Godhuripa was one of the eighty-four *Mahasiddhas*, or great accomplishees. Having attained the accomplishment of Mahamudra, he left his hermitage and went to cities where he appeared to kill and eat birds, which resulted in condemnations from others. Godhuripa then pointed to the sky with his hand, and all the birds killed by him revived and flew back into the air.

Here is a story from the *Secret Biography of Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje*. Once, a ruler in a Tibetan region made a meal offering to this fully accomplished mahasiddha. Though Yeshe Dorje manifested his clairvoyance in various ways, the local people were too stubborn to develop faith in him.

The ruler had a deer and liked it very much. Yeshe Dorje butchered the deer in

⁸² It refers to the aforementioned threefold pure meat, plus the meat of animals that have died naturally, and the meat left over after being killed by birds or other animals.

public, used its flesh and blood in a feast offering, and ate its meat with the ruler's consorts and retainers. After the meal he put the deer's bones into its skin and whipped it hard. The deer got up and was as lively as before. People who witnessed this were filled with fervent faith.

Throughout history, many mahasiddhas have performed eccentric deeds like this. For mahasiddhas with great accomplishments, meat and vegetables are no different. Therefore, when they use animal flesh as samaya substances or engage in eccentric actions to carry out a specific practice, ordinary people shouldn't slander them.

There may be two reasons why some people lash out at certain tantric acts. First, such people know little about Vajrayana. Second, they slandered the Dharma and the Sangha in a previous life, so when this habitual tendency awakens, they cannot help but do it again.

In either case, we cannot prevent people from bad-mouthing Vajrayana. A true practitioner won't view the actions of all tantric practitioners as wrongdoings. However, they also won't see all of them as righteous and blindly emulate the behavior of a tantric practitioner, knowing that would be irrational.

We must carefully observe the behavior of other tantric practitioners, especially when selecting a Vajrayana teacher. It is crucial to understand the qualities and level of spiritual accomplishment of the tantric teacher before following them. This understanding ensures that our commitment to the guru is solid. Otherwise, following a guru without proper examination can be a reckless act that poses significant risks.

We don't even want to sign a small contract with someone we haven't examined, so it should be the same when we follow a guru. That's why it is stressed in the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* that one has to examine the guru for a long while.

The meat used for Vajrayana tsok or feast offering should be "pure meat," not the meat of an animal slaughtered for food. This means it is meat from an animal that died as a result of its own past actions, such as death from old age, sickness, or other natural causes. The animal's death is solely due to the effects of its own past actions. Unless it's a special occasion, normally we use fruit or other non-meat food to make offerings. Some vegetarian laymen are abhorrent to meat, but they still manage to place meat on the shrine table and offer it to the deities, which

doesn't make sense. As mentioned earlier, when making offerings, we should use something we really like.

[Once a government official offered 100 yuan and said in a low voice, "Bodhisattvas, I am too busy to break this into smaller notes, so you may share the money as you wish. The higher ones get more, and the lower ones get less. It's based on your workload!" This was his "offering prayer."]

Regarding meat offerings, the incomparable Dagpo Rinpoche stated that placing the still-warm flesh and blood of a freshly slaughtered animal in the mandala as offerings would cause all the wisdom deities to faint. It is also said that offering the flesh and blood of a slaughtered animal to the wisdom deities is akin to murdering a child in front of their mother. Imagine inviting a mother to dinner and presenting her with the flesh of her own child—what would her reaction be? Just as a mother loves her only child, the buddhas and bodhisattvas regard all beings in the three worlds with profound love and compassion. Therefore, if beings are killed and their blood and flesh are offered to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, they would undoubtedly be displeased.

The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras says:

A bodhisattva cares for all beings,
Loves them to the marrow of his bones,
And always wants to benefit them,
As if they were his only child.

Bodhisattvas' love and compassion for all beings are deeply rooted within them; it is not mere talk. This love is unconditional, contrasting sharply with worldly love, which often revolves around possession. When betrayed by a loved one, a worldly person may turn their love into hatred and seek revenge through any means. In comparison, all that bodhisattvas want is to benefit sentient beings, just as a mother benefits her only child.

The Sutra on the Dependent Origination of the Two Brahmins White Clad and Golden Banner says:

Everyone in the three worlds is my child.

Therefore, slaughtering any sentient being that has fallen victim to its own

negative actions and then offering its blood and flesh as a sacrifice will not please the buddhas and bodhisattvas. As Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Just as there's no sensual delight
To please the mind of one whose body burns in fire,
There is no way to please the great compassionate ones
While we ourselves are causes of another's pain.⁸³

Here is a story from the *Sumagadhā Sutra*:

During the Buddha's time, the king of the Nanda dynasty⁸⁴ was not in favor of Buddhism, and he only believed in tirthikas. Later, the king's son married Sumagadhā, the daughter of Anathapindika. Sumagadhā was a faithful Buddhist, so she persuaded the king to make a meal offering to the Buddha.

The king wanted to send a messenger to invite the Buddha, but Sumagadhā dissuaded him, saying she could deliver the invitation by burning incense. So Sumagadhā dressed up properly, climbed to a high place, faced the direction of Shravasti, and prayed to the Buddha, hoping he and his sangha would come to tame the dwellers of the kingdom through their miraculous powers. Knowing what Sumagadhā was thinking, the Buddha told his disciples that when attending the meal offering, they were allowed to use their miraculous powers freely.

The next day, Pindola Bharadvaja lost track of time for the meal offering. He was sitting on a mountaintop sewing clothes when he suddenly noticed that the Buddha had taken the seat of honor at the banquet offered by the king. Pindola Bharadvaja hastily poked the needle into the ground, with the thread still attached to his clothes. With his miraculous power of unimpeded bodily function, he flew to the banquet.

But the mountain, connected with him through the thread, was also moving in the sky. A pregnant woman on the ground happened to notice this. Seeing a mountain flying from afar, she was so scared she had a miscarriage.

⁸³ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 6, verse 123.

⁸⁴ The Nanda dynasty ruled in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent during the 4th century BCE, and possibly during the 5th century BCE. The Nandas overthrew the Shaishunaga dynasty in the Magadha region of eastern India and expanded their empire to include a larger part of northern India. Ancient sources differ considerably regarding the names of the Nanda kings, and the duration of their rule, but based on the Buddhist tradition recorded in the Mahavamsa, they appear to have ruled during c. 345–322 BCE, although some theories date the start of their rule to 5th century BCE.

The Buddha immediately knew what had happened, so he sent Maudgalyayana to get Pindola. Maudgalyayana asked, “What is that following you?” Looking back Pindola saw the mountain, so he threw it back where it belonged, and rushed to see the Buddha.

Upon seeing Pindola, the Buddha told him, “I come here to tame living beings so they can get liberated. You are late and even took a life, which is what I don’t like to see. As punishment, you are not allowed to go to any meal offering with me from now on. Also, you are not allowed to enter parinirvana before Buddha Maitreya is born.”

Pindola is one of the sixteen Arhats, who are mentioned in *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*. Because of the Buddha’s order, he is still living in this world.

Of course, an ordinary person, constrained by their own conceptual thoughts, may be skeptical about the miraculous manifestations mentioned in this story. It’s akin to an illiterate farmer listening to a presentation on high technology; he cannot understand it at all. Similarly, the capacity of our conceptual minds is quite limited, so when we hear a story about the great qualities of noble beings, such as Pindola always remaining alive to protect the Dharma, many of us simply treat it as fiction. Nevertheless, this event truly occurred.

As we can see, a being’s life is extremely precious. The Buddha would be extremely unhappy if his disciple took a life unintentionally, let alone a person deliberately killing animals to offer their flesh and blood to the Buddha. *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra* has a story about a man from Rajgir who killed animals and offered them to the Buddha and the sangha, hoping the Buddha would take him as a disciple. The Buddha didn’t accept the offering, and instead told him:

Forgiving myself should serve as the example [for how to treat others].

Do not take life, and do not punish others by beating.

This is also Shantideva’s viewpoint that if we don’t want to experience suffering, neither do other living beings. Our lives are precious, and so are the lives of other beings. We suffer when attacked by others, so do other beings. Therefore, the Buddhist view of compassion is truly unparalleled, hard to find in other religions. Please do contemplate this.

♦ **Can offering flesh and blood really bring you benefit?**

If someone offers the flesh and blood of slain animals to the wisdom deities and Dharma protectors, it is certain that they will never accept such offerings presented like meat on a butcher's counter. They will not approach such offerings at all. Instead, powerful malevolent spirits, drawn to warm flesh and blood and eager to cause harm, will gather around and feast on the offerings.

It is said that in southern China fishermen would make offerings with the flesh and blood of slaughtered animals before they set out to the ocean. By doing so, they would catch a lot of fish. For a brief period after making "red offerings," practitioners may experience some minor benefits. However, because the spirits involved always inflict harm on others, they are likely to bring sudden problems or illness to the practitioners. Once again, the practitioners will resort to offering flesh and blood, which may provide temporary relief.

This dynamic creates an inseparable bond between the malevolent spirits and the practitioners who make "red offerings," as they consistently support each other. Like predatory beasts on the hunt, the spirits are driven solely by their urge to consume flesh, gnaw on bones, and seek more victims. Possessed by these malevolent spirits, the practitioners will lose any prior disillusionment with samsara and their desire for liberation. Their faith, pure perception, and interest in Dharma gradually diminish until they reach a point where even the Buddha himself flying in the sky will inspire no faith, and the sight of an animal with its innards exposed will evoke no compassion.

[Once we were buying captured animals from a person for life-release. When negotiating the price we heard the seller's father say, "You monks, you'd better not bargain with my son. He is great at doing business. Even the Buddha himself flying in the sky before him would arouse no faith in him, and even the sight of an animal with all its innards hanging out would arouse no compassion in him. Therefore, it is useless for you to bargain with him." The father was proud of his son for this reason.]

There are reasons why our renunciation, faith, and purity of perception sometimes fade away. Perhaps our actions are inappropriate, causing the qualities cultivated through our past Dharma practice to gradually diminish. The root of Mahayana Buddhism is compassion; therefore, if we wish to progress in our practice, we must cultivate compassion.

To cultivate compassion, it is the best for us to start by reading the biographies of compassionate eminent masters such as Shantideva, Asanga, and other great practitioners in history. By doing so, we can naturally develop some compassion. Meanwhile we should also study the texts of Mahayana Buddhism, such as *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, *Eight Verses of Training the Mind*, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and more.

I often think that even if you cannot recite *The Way of the Bodhisattva* every day, you will still gradually develop great compassion by keeping the book with you. Also, if you cannot always take the hard copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* with you, you may listen to its audio book over and over again, especially the chapter on “Arousing Bodhicitta,” and gradually your compassion will grow. Once you have developed compassion, other qualities will arise effortlessly, similar to how sunshine spreads once the sun comes out.

Individuals lacking compassion are like vengeful raksasas, always on the lookout for victims. Their faces flush with anger, their bodies tremble with fury, and they exude aggression. They take pride in the power and allure of their words, which comes from their close connection with evil spirits. Upon death, they are sent straight to hell—unless their negative actions are insufficient for that karmic consequence. In that case, they are reborn as part of an evil spirit’s entourage that preys on the life force of others, or as predators such as hawks and wolves. As said in a sutra:

Taking life leads to bad results:
 Having a short lifespan, always getting sick,
 Being reborn in a lower realm,
 And experiencing various torments.

Even if a person who fell into a lower realm due to killing eventually manages to be freed from that unfortunate rebirth, they will still have to endure all kinds of torment in the human realm. This is the residual retribution of the fully ripened result of their past action of killing.

Therefore, we must refrain from killing living beings, and by all means strive to cultivate the great compassion of bodhicitta.



Lesson 97

“During the reign of Dharma King Trisong Detsen, ...
your heart.” [page 209–213]

We are currently studying the section on the four boundless qualities, in the chapter on “Arousing Bodhicitta.”

We must put the four boundless qualities into practice. Otherwise, we won’t be able to develop loving-kindness and compassion, without which bodhicitta cannot arise. Without bodhicitta all our practices, even if they are from Mahayana Buddhism, become the practice of the Basic Vehicle or even just the human and god vehicle, which cannot bring Mahayana results.

Many people are practicing the Dharma in this world, yet most of them are motivated by the goal of obtaining peace, happiness and harmony for themselves in this life. A great number of people who make incense offering in temples, or engage in meditation and recitation practices, aim for their own happiness and a good rebirth. Not many of them prioritize the goal of benefiting all sentient beings.

Now that we are fortunate enough to have encountered the teachings on bodhicitta, let us make sure we train our minds in it over and over again. Meanwhile, let us pray to the guru and the Three Jewels so that through this practice we can dispel the darkness of our selfishness. If each of us carries a lamp, we need not fear the darkness. Even if only a few of us have lamps, others can still find their way by following the lamp light. However, if none of us has a lamp, we will be lost in the dark wilderness, lacking direction.

♦ Great compassion is the root of the Dharma

As mentioned in the previous lesson, compassion is essential. Without it, even the highest tantric practices offer little benefit. In the text, Patrul Rinpoche criticizes some Tibetan practitioners for not prioritizing mind training, a behavior that also mirrors that of certain practitioners in other regions of China.

Many practitioners today seem to merely go through the motions of practicing, with few truly training and refining their minds through the Dharma. Many individuals strive to present themselves well to others, participating in grand ceremonies and adopting a solemn demeanor. However, they fail to realize that the essence of the Dharma lies not in cultivating a positive external image, but in developing an altruistic mindset, which is the true key to practicing Dharma.

During the reign of King Trisong Detsen, the Bönpos made offerings of blood and meat for the king's benefit. This act provoked outrage among Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, Shantarakshita, and other translators and panditas. They protested:

A single teaching should not have two teachers;
 A single religion cannot have two ways of practice.
 The Bönpo tradition does not align with the principles of
 Dharma;
 Its harm surpasses even the ordinary wrongdoings.
 If such practices are permitted, we will return to our homeland.

The panditas unanimously shared this view without needing further discussion. When Trisong Detsen requested them to preach the Dharma, not a single one stepped forward. Even when the king offered them food, they declined to eat.

Slaughtering animals and offering their flesh and blood is not a Buddhist practice. Padmasambhava said:

Without compassion, the root of the Dharma is rotten.

A single teaching cannot have two teachers, with one of them saying yes to killing but the other no. If the Bön tradition claims itself to be Buddhism, which we are not opposed to, but do Bön practitioners really take refuge in the Buddha Shakyamuni, the Dharma, and the Sangha? Do they refrain from killing any living being, which is the refuge vow?

It is refuge in the Three Jewels that makes the difference between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist. So, when Bön practitioners claim they are Buddhists yet still kill animals for offerings of blood and flesh, the three great masters were outraged.

Some individuals consider themselves followers of the buddhas and bodhisattvas but perform the profound tantric sadhanas in the manner of Bönpos and cause harm to other beings. This will undermine the sublimity of Buddhism and dishonor the Three Jewels, leading both themselves and others into the hells.

As it is said in *The Just King*:

The law set up by the king in this life
And the fully ripened effect in future lives
are unavoidable by anyone.
You may try if you don't believe it.

Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom also says:

The power of karma is inconceivable;
It does not follow those who have not created it.
When the karmic effect ripens,
It will neither disappear nor get lost.

Therefore, karma is truly incredible. The results of actions you didn't do won't ripen on you for no reason, whereas the results of actions you did do will ripen on you eventually without any deduction.

Therefore, we should constantly remind ourselves to take the lowest place, wear simple clothes, and wholeheartedly strive to benefit all sentient beings. Practitioners don't need to adorn themselves with elegant garments; however, they also shouldn't deliberately wear ragged robes. Some practitioners seek to appear as yogis in front of others, refusing to wash their clothes or groom themselves, insisting on looking like beggars. In fact, if their self-clinging is not shattered, it is of no use for their clothing to be tattered.

However, please avoid going to the other extreme and becoming overly meticulous about your outfits. Many laypeople change outfits constantly and upgrade their wardrobes very often. For example, a person may dress like a white butterfly today and a black one tomorrow. It is not necessary to constantly change one's style.

The Book of Southern Qi Dynasty has an account about a person named Jiang Mi, who was brought up in a poor family. A studious learner, Jiang Mi worked as a laborer for others during the day and read books by moonlight at night. He was very compassionate. When his clothes were too ragged to wear, he would remove the lice from his old clothes and put them in the new ones, lest the little creatures die of hunger.

If a worldly person can be so compassionate, so can Mahayanists, if not more so. In everything we do, we should strive to develop love and compassion until they become a fundamental part of us.

Some of you often ask me, “When can you give us the tantric teachings? Can you quickly finish the chapter on Bodhicitta? I am so looking forward to the highest teaching of the Great Perfection! I want to meditate on my bindu (essence-drop)! Please point out the nature of mind for me. Can you speed up teaching the preliminaries? I can no longer wait!” As the old saying goes, “Sharpening an axe will not delay the work of cutting firewood.” If you can first practice the preliminaries very well and lay out a solid foundation, it will be easy for you to progress toward practicing the Great Perfection. However, if you haven’t developed Mahayana mindsets such as great compassion, it will be very difficult for you to advance to higher practices.

Therefore, until compassion arises, each of you should practice it with great diligence. In the forward of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche’s autobiography *Brilliant Moon*, a Dharma master says, “He spent nearly a quarter of his life in retreat, and he kept up that pattern to the end of his life.” Upon reading this line, I felt quite ashamed of myself.

In 1990 I met Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche in person in New Delhi. Rinpoche had unfabricated compassion, and treated each living being with great love and compassion. Not to mention his previous lives, just within this life he had spent a quarter of his time in retreat, which is marvelous. As for ourselves, we don’t even spend one tenth of our lives in retreat, let alone a quarter.

As practitioners, if we can diligently meditate on great compassion, we don’t need to engage in outwardly impressive Buddhist activities, such as prayers, virtuous deeds, and acts of altruism. Why? Because the essence of Buddhism lies not in outward formalities but in the inward training of the mind. *The Sutra that Perfectly Encapsulates the Dharma* says:

To attain Buddhahood, one should not train in many dharmas
but focus on just one.

Which one exactly? The practice of great compassion.

Whoever possesses great compassion holds all the Buddha's
teachings as if they were in the palm of their hand.

This verse is similar to one in *The Sutra of the Deliberation on the Dharma*, which illustrates the importance of compassion through an analogy: just as the fourfold army will faithfully follow the universal monarch wherever he goes, the emergence of great qualities will always follow after a practitioner has developed great compassion. The sutra offers another analogy: just as sentient beings can see and engage in activities when the sun shines upon them, practitioners can effortlessly pursue all practices that lead to enlightenment when illuminated by the light of great compassion.

Therefore, eminent practitioners of the past wouldn't first go for the highest teachings. Instead, they would begin by training their minds one-pointedly in boundless compassion. Of course, if a practitioner possesses exceptionally sharp faculties, they may start with the higher teachings.

♦ Stories in the importance of compassion

Once, Dromtönpa was visited by a monk who was a disciple of the Three Brothers⁸⁵ and Khampa Lungpa.⁸⁶

"What is Potowa doing these days?" Dromtönpa asked the monk.

"He is teaching the Dharma to hundreds of sangha members."

"Wonderful! And what about Geshe Puchungwa?"

"He spends all his time creating representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind from materials offered by himself and others."

"Wonderful!" Dromtönpa inquired again, "What about Gönpawa?"

"He does nothing but meditate."

"Wonderful! And what about Khampa Lungpa?"

⁸⁵ The three principal disciples of Drom Tönpa: Potowa, Chengawa and Puchungwa.

⁸⁶ Khampa Lungpa (1025–1115), a Kadampa lama, one of Dromtönpa's principal disciples.

“He remains in solitude, weeping continually near an ant nest, with his face hidden.”

Upon hearing this, Dromtönpa removed his hat, placed his palms together before his heart, and shed many tears, exclaiming, “Oh, that is truly marvelous! That is real Dharma practice. I could tell you much about how great he is, but I know he wouldn’t like it.”

Khampa Lungpa hid his face and cried constantly because he was always thinking about beings, especially ants, suffering in samsara, and he meditated on compassion for them.

As it is said in *Genealogy of the Sakya Clan*, Sariputra and Anathapindika saw many ants when building a monastery. Sariputra said, “Since the time of Buddha Vipasyin those ants have experienced the birth of seven buddhas. Ninety-one kalpas later, they are still ants and haven’t attained liberation.” Therefore, when Khampa Lungpa saw the ants, great compassion arose in him, and he couldn’t help but cry all day long.

What the Three Brothers did also created great merit. Take teaching the Dharma for example, as expressed in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

If the three-thousand-fold universe is filled with jewels,
And one makes offering with these jewels,
The merit he gets is small.
If one teaches one verse of the Dharma,
The merit he gets is great.

During the degenerate era, the merit of teaching a single verse far exceeds that of making offerings with jewels that could fill the three-thousand-fold universe. Therefore, while the merit Potowa accumulated through his constant teaching of the Dharma must have been enormous, Dromtönpa only took off his hat, joined his palms together, and shed many tears upon hearing about Khampa Lungpa’s practice of cultivating compassion. Dromtönpa did not praise Potowa in the same way. From this, we can infer how meritorious the practice of compassion truly is.

Regarding the merit of building Buddha statues, it is said in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

Building a statue of the Tathagata,

Even one as small as four fingers wide,
Can bring immense merit.

Immense merit arises even if the statue one has made is small. Therefore, Geshe Puchungwa has accumulated great merit by building statues.

Regarding meditation, it is said clearly in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* that just a split second of meditation can already accumulate incredible merit.

Nevertheless, of all the Dharma practices, the practice of compassion is the essence of the essence. Thus, among all the virtuous deeds of Dromtönpa's disciples, the practice of compassion, as exemplified by Khampa Lungpa, is the most supreme.

Therefore, in our everyday lives, we should practice compassion by reflecting on the suffering of all beings and wishing for them to be free from suffering and to attain happiness. We should always care about them, even if we are unable to change their current situations. When compassion for sentient beings arises within us, we will no longer be interested in personal indulgence, nor will we strive only for our own benefit.

After all, our actions are driven by our minds. So, if we cultivate great compassion, we will be willing to do anything, no matter how trivial, for the benefit of all beings. That's why Dromtönpa highly praised Khampa Lungpa's practice on compassion.

Here is another relevant story: One day, Chengawa was teaching the many reasons why love and compassion are essential. Upon hearing that, Langri Thangpa prostrated himself before Chengawa and declared that from that moment on, he would meditate solely on love and compassion. Chengawa removed his hat and exclaimed, "How wonderful! How wonderful! How very wonderful!"

Therefore, practice on compassion is particularly supreme. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* says:

Always meditate on love and compassion,
Because bodhi arises from them.

Even if you don't know how to practice other Dharmas, you must try your very best to meditate well on love and compassion. Whether you are an old or a young practitioner, there is nothing difficult for you in doing this practice. Especially, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* has offered many instructions. If you

can engage in frequent practice of love and compassion, enlightenment can surely arise in you.

♦ **Compassion can swiftly purify negative actions and obscurations**

Nothing is more effective than compassion for purifying our negative actions and obscurations.

Long ago in India, the Abhidharma teachings faced challenges on three separate occasions, putting their existence at risk. A brahmin nun named Prakasasila thought to herself, “I have been born a woman. Due to my low status, I cannot make the Buddha’s teachings shine forth on my own. Therefore, I will partner with men to give birth to sons who can spread the teachings of the Abhidharma.”

With a ksatriya as the father, she gave birth to Asanga, and with a brahmin, to Vasubandhu. According to *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, she also had a third son named Buddhasijha.

[Prakasasila must have been an enlightened bodhisattva; otherwise, she could not have made her wishes come to fruition. Eight or nine years ago, a lay woman told me she wanted to emulate Prakasasila, saying, “I aspire to propagate the Dharma. I want to have three sons. One is going to propagate Tibetan Buddhism, one Chinese Buddhism, and the third one Theravada Buddhism. I also want to have a daughter who will take care of me.”

I told her, “It would be great if your wish could come true, but it is not allowed by the one-child policy in China, is it?”

She responded, “I’ve figured it out. After giving birth to my first child, I will divorce, then have another child with a new husband, then divorce again, and so on.”

Later, she was married off to an American. Recently, she called me, expressing her distress and sense of constraint. So, the wishes of ordinary people do not always come true.]

When the two sons of Prakasasila grew up, they asked what their fathers’ work had been. Prakasasila told her sons, “I did not give birth to you so that you would follow in your father’s footsteps. You were born to spread the Dharma. You must study the Buddha’s teachings and become teachers of the Abhidharma.”

After hearing his mother's words, Vasubandhu went off to Kashmir to study Abhidharma with Sanghabhadra. The latter taught him the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* which was authored by five hundred arhats. Eventually Vasubandhu attained all the wisdom in Sanghabhadra's mindstream. Then he broadly taught the Dharma in Kashmir, which benefited many living beings.

Influenced by Sanghabhadra, who was a teacher belonged to the Basic Vehicle, Vasubandhu initially slandered the Great Vehicle. Later, with Asanga's help, he recognized and repented his mistake. Then he devoted his whole life to propagating Mahayana Buddhism.

According to his biography, Vasubandhu used to teach over twenty classes in a day at Nalanda University. Some Dharma masters at Larung Gar only teach two classes per day and start to complain, "Ah! It's too tiring! May I take a break? How nice if we can rest three or four days per week!"

Vasubandhu gave teachings every day. Wherever he went, more than one thousand monks would follow him. His *Treasury of Abhidharma* is one of the five great treatises that greatly contribute to Buddhism. Thus, he was called "the second Buddha."

As for Asanga, after becoming a monk, he first followed Pindola Bharadvaja and received teachings on no-self from the Shravaka tradition. However, these teachings could not satisfy him, as he still had many unresolved confusions. As a result, Asanga went to Kukkutapada Mountain, where he began to focus on the practice of Buddha Maitreya, hoping to have a vision of him and request instructions in Mahayana Buddhism.

Asanga endured many hardships and diligently practiced for six years, yet no sign of progress appeared, not even a single auspicious dream.

[Many practitioners meditate for two or three days, or retreat for two or three months, and achieve no sign of progress in the practice, so they get disappointed. Asanga, whose birth was prophesized in *The Root Manual of the Rites of Manjushri*, had been practicing hard for six years but didn't even have a single auspicious dream. So, we don't have to be hasty.

Once I met a practitioner who complained, "I have great faith in venerable Longchenpa and have been praying to him every day, but I don't have as much as a single auspicious dream. So where is venerable Longchenpa?"

In fact, it is not because of Longchenpa but your own mind veiled by obscura-

tions that you cannot have a vision of him. As mentioned before in the teaching of *The Treasury of Blessings: A Practice of Buddha Shakyamuni*, whatever deity you pray to will come to you, but a person with heavy karmic debts won't see him, just like a blind person cannot see anyone coming to him.

This advice is invaluable. Many Han Chinese, influenced by their habits and expectations formed during Qigong practice, may expect to gain experiential results after only a few days of practice. However, gaining experiences is not the primary focus of our Dharma practice; rather, what truly matters is the genuine cultivation of love and compassion.]

"Now it looks like I will never succeed," thought Asanga as he left Kukkuta-pada Mountain, feeling discouraged. On his way, he came across a man who was rubbing a large iron bar with a soft cotton cloth.

"What are you trying to accomplish by rubbing it like that?" Asanga asked.

"I'm trying to make a needle," the man replied. "I'm shaping it by gradually wearing down this bar." [This corresponds to the Chinese proverb that says, "If you work hard enough at it, you can grind even an iron rod down to a needle."]

Asanga thought to himself, "He won't be able to create a needle by rubbing that large bar with a soft piece of cotton. Even if it were possible, would he live long enough to see it happen? If ordinary people exert such effort for such a trivial reason, it's clear that I have never truly committed myself to practicing the Dharma with any persistence."

With this realization, he returned to his practice. He continued for another three years, yet still saw no signs of progress.

[This is six years plus three years, so Asanga had practiced for nine years but still had attained no sign of progress in the practice. Therefore, if you are in retreat for two weeks and experience nothing, don't think you are a bad practitioner. Instead, you should think, "Asanga practiced for so many years but didn't even have an auspicious dream, then it is normal that I have no signs of progress after meditating for seven or eight days. Through the suffering in ascetic practice during my retreat, some of the effect of my negative karma can be exhausted."

Have I mentioned there was an old practitioner in my home monastery who had been in retreat for more than twenty years? Once, I mentioned that I wanted to find a place for retreat. He asked me, "You are so busy. Do you have time for retreat?"

I said, “For the sake of creating dependent origination, I still want to find a place where I can build a cabin to retreat inside.”

He asked, “How long will you retreat?”

I replied, “If everything goes well, I will retreat one month or one week.”

He chuckled and said, “Seven days? That doesn’t even count as a retreat.”

I thought about his words. Indeed, from the perspective of a twenty-something-year retreatant, meditating in a secluded place for seven days cannot be regarded as a “retreat.”]

“I’m certain this time that I will never succeed,” Asanga thought to himself, so he left his retreat once more. Eventually, he reached a towering rock that seemed to touch the heavens. At its base, a man was gently stroking the rock with a feather dipped in water.

“What are you doing?” Asanga asked him.

“This rock is too tall,” the man replied. “It blocks the sunlight from reaching my house, which is to the west. So, I plan to wear it away until it is gone.”

Asanga, holding the same thoughts as he had three years earlier, returned to his practice for another three years; yet he still had not even experienced a single auspicious dream.

[All these encounters in the course of his practice were the guidance from the buddhas and bodhisattvas. When Milarepa was so discouraged that he left his guru, someone on his way invited him to recite *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*, in which he came to the story of Sadaprarudita. Then he returned and continued to follow Marpa.] Utterly discouraged, Asanga thought to himself, “No matter what I do, I can never succeed!” With that, he left the mountain once again.

Along the road, he came across a female dog with two crippled hind legs, her entire rear end crawling with maggots. Despite her condition, she was full of aggression and attempted to bite Asanga as she dragged herself forward on her forelegs, her hindquarters trailing behind. Overwhelmed by deep, unbearable compassion, Asanga cut off a piece of his own flesh and offered it to the dog to eat.

[Sometimes when we encounter a suffering being, our compassion will be activated naturally. Therefore, it is very necessary for us to take a look at the outside

world and the suffering beings around us. Because of this, we will naturally develop fervent compassion.]

Asanga then decided to help remove the maggots from the dog's hindquarters. Concerned that using his fingers might harm the maggots, he realized the only way to do it was with his tongue. However, the sight of her rotten, pus-filled body made him hesitate. So, he closed his eyes and extended his tongue, intending to lick the maggots away.

Instead of making contact with the dog, his tongue touched the ground.

When he opened his eyes, he was astonished to find that the dog had disappeared. In her place stood Maitreya, surrounded by a radiant halo of light.

Asanga said sorrowfully to Maitreya, "Your compassion is truly weak. I prayed to you for twelve years, and you never appeared. Today, I had already decided to give up, and now you choose to show up on the road."

Maitreya replied, "It's not that I haven't revealed myself to you. You and I have always been together. However, your own negative actions and obscurations were too strong for you to see me. Your twelve years of practice have somewhat reduced these obscurations, allowing you to see the dog. Now, due to your great compassion, your obscurations have been entirely purified, and you can see me clearly with your own eyes. If you doubt my words, carry me on your shoulder and show me to everyone around!"

Then, Asanga placed Maitreya on his right shoulder and went to the market, asking everyone, "What do you see on my shoulder?"

Everyone replied that there was nothing there, except for one old woman with slightly fewer karmic obscurations who responded, "You are carrying the rotting corpse of a dog."

Maitreya then took Asanga to Tushita Heaven, where he imparted the Five Teachings of Maitreya and other instructions. After returning to the human realm, Asanga widely spread the teachings of the Great Vehicle.

Thus, there is no superior method for purifying negative karma than the practice of compassion. Since compassion is also the infallible cause for the arising of bodhicitta, we must employ various skillful means and make our greatest effort to cultivate compassion.

Moreover, regardless of who the deity is, from the moment we first pray

to him, he has never been separate from us. This applies to all deities including Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Maitreya. However, before our negative actions and obscurations are purified, we won't see any of the buddhas and bodhisattvas with our own eyes.

Götsangpa Gönpö Dorje (1189–1258) was a great practitioner of the Drikung Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. His guru was the lineage founder Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön (1143–1217).

Once, Götsangpa wanted to join a feast offering held in Oddiyana. Jigten Sumgön said it was not the right time for him to go yet, but if he was interested, he could visit Jalandhara, a mysterious place where dakinis met secretly in a monastery near the valley spring.

Accompanied by a young disciple, Götsangpa immediately set forth for Jalandhara. When they approached the river close to the destination, Götsangpa saw a crowd of dakinis with gilded Dharma vessels, food for Mandalas, and abundant offerings, entering a majestic Dharma hall. His disciple attendant however, due to his heavy karmic debts, could only see a small, shabby village temple, and a group of women working with rusty, broken tools. The young disciple was unwilling to move forward, so he chose to bask in the sun on the grass by the river.

Götsangpa walked alone to the door of the glorious building. As he was about to cross the doorway, two wrathful dakinis stopped him, saying no ordinary person could enter. Then Götsangpa rested in state of Mahamudra, and immediately the two wrathful gatekeepers turned into beautiful goddesses and invited him in. He made feast offerings and sang vajra songs with innumerable Vidyadharas and dakinis and received a lot of blessed objects.

On the way back, the young disciple complained that the trip was just a waste of time. Götsangpa just smiled peacefully. Later, Götsangpa gave his disciple many instructions, and eventually the young attendant also became an enlightened master.

As you can see, a practitioner with impure perception regards everything as impure because his perception is impure, so he is blind to the great qualities of a sublime being. For example, Sunaksatra regarded all deeds of the Buddha as

deceitful and hypocritical; Maitripa⁸⁷ thought Shavaripa,⁸⁸ one of the eighty-four Mahasiddhas of India, was a pig butcher; and Buddhajñānapada⁸⁹ once thought his guru Haribhadra⁹⁰ was a filthy farmer.

On the other hand, if we have pure perception, even if we see a suffering animal, we will regard the creature as the manifestation of a buddha or a bodhisattva. When we see an evil person filled with intense attachment and hatred, we will see him as the manifestation of a Mahasiddha.

When Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol⁹¹ was practicing in mountain retreat, once he and two of his disciples led a horse loaded with grain along a mountain path. On the way they met an old woman lying motionless on the ground, begging for food and clothes in a hoarse voice. Immediately Shabkar gave what she requested. It turned out the old woman was Vajravarahi.

Therefore, manifestations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas may appear in

⁸⁷ Maitripa (Skt.; Tib. མཛི་ཤི་པ་, Wyl. mai tri pa) (1007–1078?) was one of the great mahasiddhas of India, and a disciple of Naropa and Saraha. He found Distinguishing Dharma and Dharmata and the The Sublime Continuum of Maitreya. Maitripa is an important figure in Tibetan Buddhism because he was one of the main teachers of Marpa Lotsawa and Khyungpo Nalor who brought his lineage of teachings to Tibet. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁸⁸ Shavaripa (Skt. Śāvaripa; Tib. ཤ་བ་རི་པ་ or རི་ཁྲོད་དབང་ཕུག་, Wyl. sha ba ri pa or ri khrod dbang phyug), the ‘Hunter’ — one of the eighty-four mahasiddhas of India. Shavaripa was a hunter who turned to the Buddhist path and renounced his livelihood after an encounter with the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. He later became a disciple of Nagarjuna and a teacher of Maitripa. Shavaripa is a key figure in the transmission of the early Mahamudra lineage of teachings in India, and counted among the ‘Indian Patriarchs’ of the Kagyü lineage. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁸⁹ Buddhajñānapada (Skt. Buddhajñānapāda; Tib. སངས་རྒྱལ་ཡེ་ཤེས་ཞབས་, sangye yeshe shyab, Wyl. sangs rgyas ye shes zhabs) (ca. 750–820) was a disciple of Haribhadra, and is also associated with the transmission of the Guhyasamaja Tantra. He is the author of a commentary on the Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁹⁰ Haribhadra (Skt. Haribhadra, Tib. སེང་གེ་བཟང་པོ་, Senge Zangpo, Wyl. seng ge bzang po) (late 8th C.) was a great pandita and master of the prajnaparamita teachings. He received instructions directly from Maitreya and composed the Sphutartha, which is the most celebrated commentary on Maitreya’s Abhisamayalankara. Taranatha says he was a disciple of Shantarakshita. He was a teacher of Buddhajñānapada. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁹¹ Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (Tib. ཞབས་དཀར་ཚོགས་རྒྱལ་རང་རྩོམ་, Wyl. zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol) (1781–1851) — regarded as an emanation of Milarepa, he was an extraordinary lama, born in Amdo, who spent much of his life in mountain retreats, including three years on the inaccessible island of Tsonying Mahadewa in the middle of Lake Kokonor. He studied with masters of all schools, receiving Dzogchen teachings from his principal root guru Chögyal Ngakgi Wangpo (a Mongolian king and disciple of the First Doderupchen), who had spread them widely in Amdo. Shabkar was a prolific writer, said to be able to compose a hundred pages a day, and amongst the more popular of his writings is his poetic composition on Trekchö and Tögal, Khading Shoklap—Flight of the Garuda. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

any form at anytime and anywhere. Each of us should maintain a pure perception toward all sentient beings, as any of them could be a manifestation of a buddha or bodhisattva. Even if we encounter a poor being, we should see that being as a manifestation of a buddha or bodhisattva, who has come to purify our negative actions and obscurations. Therefore, we must not insult them or allow ourselves to become annoyed.

As mentioned earlier Prakasasila had three sons: Asanga, Vasubhandu, and Buddhasijha. According to the account in *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, all three developed fervent faith in Bodhisattva Maitreya of the Tushita Heaven, and they made a deal in advance that whoever died first and had his wish fulfilled would come back immediately to notify the others.

Later, Buddhasijha died first, but nothing was heard from him for three years. Vasubhandu died at an old age, while Asanga was still alive. Nothing was heard from Vasubhandu for six months. At that time, many people laughed at the two deceased brothers, saying they might have accidentally gone to a lower realm.

One day at dusk, Asanga was giving a teaching to his disciples when the sky suddenly became bright, and a celestial being slowly descended. Asanga immediately recognized the visitor was Vasubhandu, and said, “Why do you come back so late? Is there something you want to tell me?”

Vasubhandu answered, “I have been reborn at the Maitreya Pure Land in the Tushita Heaven. The moment I was born miraculously in a lotus flower, Bodhisattva Maitreya said twice, ‘Welcome, Vast Wisdom.’ I circumambulated Maitreya once and returned right away.”

Asanga asked, “Where is Buddhasijha now?”

Vasubhandu replied, “He was not reborn in the inner court but in the outer court. As a result, he spends his days indulging in playful activities with gods and goddesses and cannot take the time to send a message back.”

Asanga further asked, “What does Maitreya look like? What is he teaching?”

Vasubhandu answered, “Maitreya’s look is too great to be expressed in words. His teaching is the same as yours at present. However, when he teaches his voice is so melodious and pleasant, that listeners never get tired of listening to him.”

At Jinling Buddhist Scripture Woodblock Printing Center in Nanjing, China, there is *The Biography of Asanga and Vasubhandu* translated by Kumarajiva. I’ve

read the copy in vernacular Chinese. I wonder whether the version in ancient prose still exists or not.

The Biography says that Asanga invited Maitreya to teach in the human realm, and that the bodhisattva spent four months teaching *Yogacarabhumi-sastra*. According to a Tibetan historical account, it took Asanga a short time around noon in Tushita Heaven to receive *The Five Teachings of Maitreya*. But when Asanga came back to the human realm, he realized fifty-three years had passed.

There are different accounts in history, but in any case, it was Maitreya, not Asanga, who imparted *Yogacarabhumi-sastra* and *The Five Teachings of Maitreya*. Maitreya taught Asanga the quintessential instructions from thousands of sutras and shastras, and then Asanga taught them widely in the human realm. This understanding makes more sense.

◆ How to meditate on boundless compassion

The image used to meditate on compassion is that of a mother without arms, helplessly watching as her child is swept away by a river. The anguish of such a mother is so unbearable. Her compassion for her child is greatly intense, yet her inability to use her arms prevents her from reaching out to save him.

“What can I do now? What can I do?” she murmurs to herself, consumed by the singular thought of finding a way to rescue him. Heartbroken, she runs frantically along the riverbank, crying out in agony.

In exactly the same way, all sentient beings are swept away by the river of suffering, destined to drown in the ocean of samsara. Despite our deep compassion, we find ourselves powerless to alleviate their suffering. Reflect on this with the thought, “What can I do now?” and, from the depths of our hearts, pray to our teacher and the Three Jewels for guidance, and meditate on compassion.

Each of us should think, “All living beings are in great misery. I really want to help them, but I can’t. Let alone saving living beings, I don’t even have the capacity to help myself.” You are anguishing over this, which is the precursor of compassion.

At this time, the only thing we can do is generate bodhicitta, hoping we can soon attain Buddhahood and benefit all living beings. Meanwhile, we should teach the Dharma to others so they can also generate bodhicitta. When they attain Buddhahood, they will be free from suffering forever. Other than Buddhahood, there is no other way to achieve such ultimate freedom and liberation. With this

thought in mind, meditate accordingly and pray to the guru and the Three Jewels. This is the practice of boundless compassion, which is the root of bodhicitta.



Lesson 98

“Imagine someone of noble birth, strong, prosperous
... yourself to have a kind heart always and in all situations.”
[page 213–215]

2.2.2.1.4. Meditation on Sympathetic Joy

♦ How to meditate on sympathetic joy

When meditating on compassion, we imagine a suffering being and wish the being to be free from all suffering.

When meditating on sympathetic joy, we should visualize a being—one endowed with power, wealth, and status—residing in a higher realm and experiencing happiness, longevity, good health, numerous companions, and abundant resources. This being serves as the object of our meditation. Without feelings of jealousy or rivalry, we wish for them to become even more glorious, to enjoy greater prosperity in the higher realms, to be free from danger, and to develop increasing intelligence and other great qualities. We should also reflect, “There are countless beings in the three worlds who lack even basic necessities like food and clothing. If they could share in the fortune of this being, how wonderful it would be!” Contemplate and meditate on this repeatedly.

When we ordinary people see good things happen to others, like someone purchasing a beautiful house, it’s easy to feel jealous or to want the same for ourselves. We often prioritize our own desires over the well-being of others.

However, during meditation on sympathetic joy, we must let go of egocentric thoughts and genuinely wish for the happiness of all living beings.

When meditating on sympathetic joy, we should begin by thinking about a person who easily evoke a sense of sympathetic joy within us, such as a relative, a close friend, or someone we love. Take them as the object of our meditation, wishing for them to attain happiness and abundance. This is more in line with an ordinary person's thought.

After developing sympathetic joy toward this person, let us turn our attention to those we feel neutral about—individuals with whom our relationships are neither positive nor negative, neither close nor distant. We wish them happiness, peace, and abundance. This meditation is not difficult to practice either.

Next, focus on enemies who have harmed us or on those toward whom we feel particular jealousy. Then, completely eliminate our unwholesome thoughts, such as resentment, that arise when we find it unbearable that they have so much more than we do, and sincerely rejoice in each form of happiness that they might enjoy. In the end, rest in a state free of conceptualization.

Our minds can change after regular training in this way. This is similar to the way magicians and athletes, after years of training, can easily maneuver their bodies within their domains of expertise. Likewise, we can easily control our mind by taming it gradually. In this practice on sympathetic joy, we should start our meditation by thinking of a relative or a friend, then someone neutral, then an enemy. In the end, we can generate sympathetic joy toward all beings.

We should meditate in this way over and over again. The mind of sympathetic joy will not arise easily if we have only meditated for a few days. As mentioned in *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, those who practiced Mahayana Buddhism in previous lives can develop the four boundless qualities and bodhicitta quickly, and these great qualities will not regress regardless of the obstacles those practitioners encounter. However, for most people, it is difficult to be like them, so it is better to engage in the practice step by step.

At first, it can be challenging to meditate on sympathetic joy because we often experience jealousy when we see others succeeding. However, through the study of Mahayana Buddhism, we can gradually cultivate sympathetic joy toward those who are above, below, or equal to us in status. When others face difficulties, we feel empathy for their struggles; when they experience happiness and prosperity, we

naturally feel genuine joy for them. Even when someone acquires a new piece of clothing or a new car, we find ourselves happy for them, both in our thoughts and in our words. Ultimately, we can reach a point where we no longer feel jealousy, regardless of how happy or wealthy others may be. At the end of the meditation session, we rest our minds in a state free of conceptualization.

Virtuous behaviors involving conceptualization accumulate merit, while meditation free of conceptualization accumulates wisdom. For instance, when practicing Guru Yoga, we visualize the guru dissolving into us, and our conceptual mind becomes inseparable from the supreme wisdom of the guru. Then we rest in a state of mind that is like empty space—this is the practice of accumulating wisdom. If we have reached the state of the Middle Way or the Great Perfection, we should rest in such a state. Otherwise, as many eminent masters have suggested, we may rest in a state without any conceptualization for a short while, which is also a practice for accumulating wisdom. This is what we should do when meditating on sympathetic joy: first engage in the meditation that accumulates merit, which involves concepts, and then proceed to the meditation that accumulates wisdom, which is beyond concepts.

♦ Have a mind free of jealousy

The essence of sympathetic joy lies in cultivating a mind free of jealousy. Thus, we should strive to train our minds using all sorts of methods to prevent harmful, jealous thoughts from arising. *The Mahayana Sutra on the Deep Meaning of the Six Perfections* says:

Do not be jealous,
But instead cultivate empathetic joy.

The True Attainment Treatise says:

If one deeply cultivates kindness,
One's jealousy will be cut off forever.

If your jealousy isn't cut off, it indicates that genuine kindness has not yet arisen.

As mentioned before, we easily get jealous of our equals, and some women tend to be more jealous than others. This doesn't mean that men don't experience jealousy; some men can feel more jealousy than women. However, generally

speaking, the Buddha states in the sutras that women may be more troubled by jealousy.

When a person becomes jealous, they may not realize it, but those around them can easily notice. Due to their jealousy, such a person not only refuses to acknowledge the virtuous behaviors of others but also finds fault with those individuals and attempts to obstruct their good deeds. Additionally, historical accounts are rife with jealousy-driven killings occurring in palaces and among high-ranking individuals. Afflicted by jealousy, many people become increasingly narrow-minded and less happy. Therefore, we must guard our minds against jealousy.

Specifically, since we have taken the bodhisattva vow before the buddhas and bodhisattvas, committing ourselves to benefit all sentient beings, we now bear the responsibility to help them in achieving both temporary happiness in the human or god realms and the everlasting happiness of Buddhahood. In light of this, how can we not rejoice in the fortune and happiness that sentient beings experience as a result of their own past good actions? Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

If even this you do not want for beings,
How could you want Buddhahood for them?
And how can anyone have bodhicitta
Who is angry when another prospers?⁹²

I heard that two or three individuals in a study group won a prize on an exam, and they were very happy. In contrast, a few others who usually have good grades but did not win the prize looked jealous and upset, as reflected in their facial expressions. If they do not want others to experience the temporary happiness of winning a prize, how can they genuinely wish for the Buddhahood of countless living beings, including their enemies? After all, the benefits of attaining Buddhahood far surpass any worldly achievement.

Therefore, we should take time to reflect on Shantideva's words. While doing so, we might feel embarrassed as we compare the vows we made before the buddhas and bodhisattvas with our actual actions.

The Way of the Bodhisattva is a remarkable text that many Han Chinese are currently studying. I encourage you to continue your studies. At Larung Gar, every cohort is engaged in studying this text as well. However, I've heard that some of

⁹² Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 6, verse 83.

you are only reading the root text and skipping the commentary. This approach may prevent you from fully understanding its meaning. If you truly wish to study the text, I suggest that you at least read once the transcripts of its commentary.

The first text that the laypeople of the Bodhi Association studied is *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. However, some of them first approached the text only superficially, without much dedication. When they studied it for the second time, the profound value of bodhicitta began to take root in their minds. By the third time, they felt even more inspired. I, too, have studied and taught this text multiple times, and each time I do, I feel greatly inspired once again. This is one of the characteristics of a sublime person's vajra words.

Therefore, please do not think that *The Way of the Bodhisattva* or *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* are easy texts. In fact, they are not easy. While we may read through the text quickly, true understanding of its meaning requires deeper reflection. Upon self-examination, we often find it challenging to integrate the meaning into our minds. Therefore, it is essential that we continue to study these texts earnestly.

♦ Jealousy can corrupt one's merit

Once a person is consumed by jealousy, they will no longer see the virtues of others, and their own negative actions increase alarmingly.

The *Śrīgupta Sutra* says:

Jealousy is of the nature of ignorance,
Causing the loss of virtuous mind;
Wrong views are the condition of the three poisons,
Causing the increase of greed.

To satisfy their desires, jealous individuals become greedy. If someone prevents them from obtaining what they desire, they will become angry at that person. All these afflictions are of the nature of ignorance. Therefore, when jealousy arises, the three poisons will grow rampantly and eventually destroy all their merits.

As the glory and Dharma activities of Milarepa gained recognition, a Buddhist scholar named Tarlo became jealous and began to criticize him. Despite witnessing numerous displays of clairvoyance and miraculous powers from Milarepa, Tarlo

remained skeptical and faithless, responding only with wrong views and harsh criticism. In his next life, he was reborn as a great demon.

This is what was recorded in *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*:⁹³

When Milarepa was practicing in the Belly Cave of Nya Non, villagers venerated him and often made offerings to him. But two logicians named Tarlo and Lodung in the Nya Non Monastery were very jealous of Milarepa. They vilified him by calling him a heretic.

Once, the people of Nya Non held a great festival in the village. They invited Milarepa, his disciples, and monks from the monastery. Thrones were prepared for Tarlo and Lodung, and also a row of seats for the other scholar-monks from the monastery. A throne and more seats were made ready for Milarepa and his disciples, including Rechungpa. They were all served with veneration.

As Tarlo and Lodung were unhappy about Milarepa, they wanted to humiliate him in public. So Lodung got up from his seat and said to Milarepa, “You are an extraordinary yogi, so you must have a sound knowledge of logic. Otherwise, acting like this you will degrade the Dharma, ruin yourself and others, and disqualify yourself as a Dharma practitioner. Therefore, please give us a simple proposition in accordance with the rules of logic.”

Milarepa replied, “My own ‘logic’ is that of the guru, of the pith-instructions, of diligence and perseverance, of remaining in solitude, of meditating in the hermitage, of producing the realizations and true understanding within, of the sincere patrons with true faith, and of being a genuine and worthwhile receiver of patronage...”

Hearing this Tarlo was angry, saying, “I asked you in the language of Dharma, but you did not answer my question in Buddhist terms. Instead, you have sung a deceptive song to cheat gullible folk. Who cannot sing this kind of trash? Your song may deceive fools, but not me. If you cannot answer my questions today with scholastic language in Buddhist terms of academic tradition, but still intend to receive alms from people with your deceiving songs, you well deserve to be trampled down.”

⁹³ The translation of Khenpo's teaching on this story is based on *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, translated and annotated by Garma C. C. Chang, Shambhala Publication, 1977.

Saying this, Tarlo seized a handful of earth and threw it in Milarepa's face. Milarepa brushed the dirt off, smiled at him, and gave him some instructions.

Seeing Milarepa being insulted, Rechungpa was very unhappy, and thought to himself, "If I do not beat this sinner who is now trying to hurt my guru, I will violate the samaya vow." He then picked up a stick and was about to strike Tarlo.

Milarepa caught his arm, saying, "Rechungpa, my son! The wealth that cannot be used when one is in want, the kinsmen who do not assist when one is in need, and the Dharma that cannot help when one is under adverse conditions, will only make one more miserable. You should control yourself, be mindful, and antidote your present affliction." Hearing Milarepa's words, Rechungpa calmed down.

Frustrated and humiliated, Tarlo and Lodung again went later to Milarepa to seek revenge by having a debate. Milarepa said, "The fact that one knows the Dharma or not can easily be detected by whether or not he can conquer his own ego-clinging desires. If he can, that proves he knows and also practices the Buddhist teachings.

"One may be very eloquent in talking about the Dharma and win all the debates, but if he cannot subdue even a fraction of his own ego-clinging and desires, but merely indulges himself in words and talk, his victories in debates will never bring him any benefit but will only increase his egotism and pride. If you must insist, I have no choice but to debate with you. Now please answer me: Is space obstructing or non-obstructing?"

Tarlo answered, "Of course, space is non-obstructing."

Then Milarepa used his miraculous power. Tarlo tried to move but found he could not do so. He had to remain in his original posture unable even to open his mouth and sat stiffly there like a dead image. Whereupon Milarepa levitated, and then walked, stood, lay down, and then sat in the lotus posture, right out in space, as if he were on solid ground.

Milarepa said, "Now I shall give you my proposition: I declare that the rock in front of us is non-obstructing. What is your reaction to this statement?"

Tarlo answered, "The rock cannot be otherwise than obstructing."

Milarepa then made the rock permeable and then passed through it from the top to the bottom and from one side to the other. Also he kept half of his body in the rock and half outside it as if he were in the air.

Seeing this Tarlo got angrier, saying this was just Milarepa's "black magic." Tarlo had no faith in Milarepa, and only reacted to his miraculous power with wrong views and criticism. Tarlo was later reborn as a great demon.

Lodung, on the other hand, developed great faith in Milarepa. Later he put himself in Milarepa's care. After meditating for some time, he eventually became the foremost of the five scholar-yogi disciples of Milarepa.

Therefore, once a person is corrupted by jealousy, they no longer see the great qualities in others; neither debate nor clairvoyance help, and this person will only vilify others. Nowadays some people are like this: They constantly criticize and slander others online or in books but cannot offer any legitimate reasons justifying their actions. Even if the Buddha himself were present, there would be nothing he could do to tame such a person.

There are many other examples of what can happen under the power of jealousy, such as how Geshe Tsakpuwa attempted to poison Milarepa. Here is the story in greater details.⁹⁴

When Milarepa lived in the place of Drin Dingma, he encountered a logician named Geshe Tsakpuwa. This arrogant and wealthy Geshe was jealous of Milarepa, because villagers venerated him and made a lot of offerings to him. So Geshe Tsakpuwa decided to do something about this.

The Geshe had a lover in the village. He sent her to deliver some poisoned curds to Milarepa. Milarepa knew that he had guided his affiliated disciples on the path of awakening and liberation, and that although the woman's poisoned food could bring him no harm, the time for his death had arrived. So, he accepted the poisoned curds.

After eating the curds, Milarepa appeared very sick. Geshe Tsakpuwa made a show of bringing Milarepa offerings and pretended to inquire about his health. The Geshe said, "It is a pity that an accomplished master such as you was afflicted by this kind of illness. If there was a way to share it, you could divide it among your disciples. If there was a way to transfer it, you could give it to me."

Milarepa said, "If I were to transfer my illness to you, you would not be able to endure it for even a moment. Therefore, I will not pass it on."

⁹⁴ The translation of the story is based on *The Life of Milarepa*, translated by Andrew Quintman, Penguin Books, 2010.

The Geshe thought to himself, “He cannot actually transfer his illness; he is simply trying to deceive me.”

“Go ahead and transfer it anyway,” he urged.

When Milarepa transferred his illness to the door of his retreat cell, a loud crash echoed as the door shuddered and splintered. In that instant, Milarepa experienced relief from his illness. The Geshe, skeptical, thought to himself, “He is deceiving me with his magic. I won’t be fooled.” Thus, he insisted that Milarepa transfer the illness to him instead.

Milarepa took the illness away from the door and transferred half of it to Geshe Tsakpuwa, who immediately collapsed in agony. Paralyzed and gasping for breath, he lay there, barely conscious and on the brink of death. Milarepa then reclaimed the illness. Having endured such suffering, the Geshe was overwhelmed by an intense and unbearable regret. He said, “Most of my previous wrongdoings stem from my greed for money. I now offer all of my inner and outer possessions, along with my house, to you. Please forgive my terrible deed.”

Milarepa said, “Throughout my life, I have had no need for houses or wealth. Now, on the brink of death, I still have no need for them, so you may keep them. In the future, no matter what happens, do not commit any more evil deeds. As for what you have done this time, I promise to help you purify them.”

The Geshe said, “Although you will not take my possessions and house for yourself, you should accept them to provide support for your disciples’ practice.” Despite this earnest request, Milarepa did not accept these offerings.

Later the disciples used the offerings to establish an annual memorial service for Milarepa, a practice still performed today. Eventually Geshe Tsakpuwa renounced this life and became an excellent dharma practitioner.

When I was in middle school, I listened to a reading of *The Life of Milarepa* in Tibetan. At that time, I was unwell and stayed at Doctor Tarlo’s home for half a month. He was a monk and a dedicated practitioner. Every evening, I would ask him and Lama Tenzin Gyatso to read me Milarepa’s biography. When he read the book, Tarlo’s facial expressions were so vivid that I still remember them well.

In 1980 or 1981 when the policy on religion was loosened, a national publication house published *The Life of Milarepa*, with color illustrations. The illustration of Geshe Tsakpuwa depicted the scene when he was talking to his lover, with an expression showing he really wanted to harm Milarepa. I don’t know whether the

illustrations are kept in the new version of the book. Back then when Lama Tenzin Gyatso was reading the biography, he would pause and start to contemplate, when coming across an inspiring story.

In short, jealousy is profoundly unsettling. Even if the Buddha were physically present, he would be powerless to guide someone consumed by jealousy. A mind tainted with jealousy fails to recognize any goodness in others, which cannot give rise to even the faintest spark of faith. Without faith, one can receive neither compassion nor blessings. It's like a rusted vessel that taints whatever nectar is poured into it.

Therefore, we should examine ourselves often, and especially pay attention to what we say. It shouldn't be the case that we only bad-mouth others, as if everyone is inferior to ourselves. We should also avoid commenting on other lineages carelessly.

All the lineages carry on the Buddha's teachings, so we must see them with pure perception. After all, the manifestations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas are beyond our imagination. When taming and liberating living beings, they are even in the forms of butchers or beggars. What seems full of faults in our eyes may not necessarily be full of faults. Therefore whatever the circumstances, we should strive to hold onto pure perception.

Devadatta and Sunaksatra were cousins of the Buddha, both tormented by jealousy and unwilling to have even a sliver of faith in the Buddha. Devadatta had instigated conflicts with the Buddha in countless lifetimes, while Sunaksatra felt he was no different from the Buddha, except that the Buddha had a halo of light. Despite spending their entire lives in the Buddha's presence, they were unable to transform their minds. If even the Buddha himself could not tame disciples overwhelmed by jealousy, how much more challenging is it for present-day Dharma teachers to tame the minds of those who harbor jealousy?

- ♦ **The fault of rejoicing in others' wrongdoings, out of jealousy**

A person is more likely to feel jealous of someone in the same field due to rivalry, rather than toward a random ordinary individual. For instance, jealousy can emerge between two well-versed Dharma masters, two volunteers working on the same task, or two tofu vendors. However, if one person sells gold and the other sells charcoal, they are less likely to feel jealousy toward each other. Nevertheless, the jealousy a person feels toward others not only fails to harm those individuals but

also leads to the accumulation of serious negative karma for themselves. Mipham Rinpoche says in *The Just King*:

He who has strong jealousy and weak merit
 Vilifies others at all times.
 This brings no harm to others,
 But damages his own reputation.

Once, there were two famous geshe who were rivals. One day, one of them discovered that the other had a mistress.

The geshe said to his attendant, “Prepare some good tea, because I have very interesting news to share.”

[Back then, living conditions were not good in Tibet. When good things happened, Tibetans would prepare some good tea to celebrate. It’s like today when we celebrate good news with a meal.]

The attendant immediately made tea, served it, and asked, “What is the good news?”

The geshe replied, “I was told that my rival has a mistress! He has transgressed his precepts!”

When the renowned Tibetan master Kunpang Trakgyal heard about this tale, he frowned and commented, “I wonder whose wrongdoing is more severe between the two of them.”

One geshe had transgressed the root precepts of individual liberation, which definitely would result in a bad rebirth. The other geshe, who didn’t break the precepts himself, did rejoice in the first geshe’s transgression. So it is hard to say which geshe committed the worse action.

It is said in the *Compendium of the Essentials of Dharma* says:

If one witnesses others committing evil deeds,
 And generates the wrong thought of rejoicing about them,
 Because of one’s ignorance,
 One will have more suffering than the doers.

According to this verse it was the other geshe, the one who gloated, who committed the worse action.

Therefore, when someone is committing a wrongdoing, we should not rejoice in their negative action.

Here is an interesting story from the *Dhammapada*:

When the Buddha was in the city of Shravasti, there lived a tirthika elder whose wealth was beyond counting. His son married a woman when he was twenty years old. The couple respected and loved each other very much.

Fewer than seven days after their marriage the wife wanted to watch a show played in their back garden, so the couple went there together. The wife noticed beautiful flowers on a big tree and really liked them. To please his wife, the husband climbed the tree to pick the flower. However, he accidentally fell from the tree and died of serious injuries on the spot.

After the tragedy, the whole family was so tormented they all cried with great sadness. On the funeral day the old man grieved greatly over the death of his son.

Knowing the time to tame and liberate the family had ripened, the Buddha went to visit them. The old man and his family were deeply moved upon seeing the Buddha, so they immediately prostrated to the Buddha and told him of their grief. The Buddha talked about the impermanence of all phenomena and suffering in samsara and persuaded them to not be overly sad.

Hearing the supreme Dharma, the old man let go of his sorrow on the spot. He asked the Buddha, “What negative action had my son committed in the past that he died so young in this life?”

The Buddha said, “In the past, a young man with a bow and arrows played in the woods with three others. The young man noticed a sparrow sitting on a tree, so he wanted to shoot it down. Rather than stopping him, the three others encouraged him, saying, ‘If you can shoot the sparrow with one arrow, that’s really something!’

“Hearing this, the young man raised his bow and shot an arrow, killing the sparrow, which fell to the ground. The three of them clapped their hands and laughed with excitement. Since then, the four of them have experienced cyclic birth and death during innumerable kalpas, and all suffered painful consequences for their negative action of killing the sparrow.

“Of the three persons who rejoiced in the killing of the sparrow, one is now having a pleasant rebirth in the god realm due to prior past good actions, one has a

rebirth in the sea as a naga king, and the third one is you. The young man who killed the sparrow was first reborn in the god realm as a son of a celestial being, and later in the human realm as your son. Now he fell dead from a tree and was immediately reborn as a naga's son, who was eaten by a garuda as soon as he was born."

At that moment, three fathers from the god realm, the human realm, and the sea were grieving the loss of their sons. Due to his negative actions, the young man who killed the sparrow with an arrow has always had a short lifespan, life after life. The three persons who rejoiced in his killing had to endure the torment of losing a son at the same time. As we can see, the law of karma never fails, so we must always pay attention.

Then the Buddha said a poem to everyone:

Mind creates the three worlds of existence
And the five good or bad realms.
The existence of desire, form, and formlessness
Is all caused by past actions.
Just as a seed grows like its parent plant,
The effects of all our past actions naturally follow us like a
shadow.

Upon hearing this, everyone in the family experienced great joy. They further took refuge in the Three Jewels, took the five precepts for laypeople, received additional teachings, and attained the fruition of stream-enterer on the spot.

As we see, in the case of a person taking a life and others rejoicing in the act, the killer must repay that life with their own, and those who rejoiced will also experience torment. Therefore, the law of karma never fails. I hope we can all reflect on this case carefully and refrain from rejoicing in others' negative actions, such as transgressing precepts and taking lives. Otherwise, we too will suffer from the karmic results in the future.

In summary, jealousy or rivalry serves no benefits to ourselves and does not harm others; it only leads to an unnecessary accumulation of negative karma. Therefore, we must strive to eliminate these negative feelings. Whenever we meet someone of noble birth, dignified appearance, abundant wealth, extensive knowledge, or favorable circumstances, we should genuinely cultivate a sense of empathetic joy. We should think, "I am truly happy that this person has such good

fortune! How wonderful it would be if they could become even better off!” Let us meditate on this from the depths of our hearts.

The image used to represent boundless sympathetic joy is that of a mother camel finding her lost calf. Among all animals, camels are known to be the most affectionate mothers. When a mother camel loses her calf, her sorrow is very intense. However, when she reunites with her calf, her joy is boundless. This is the kind of sympathetic joy we should strive to cultivate.

A true practitioner rejoices in the happiness of others and feels saddened by their suffering, which is a core quality of a Mahayanist. In comparison, many of us are not like this. When people we like are happy, we feel happy; when people we dislike are happy, we feel unhappy and even refuse to verbally congratulate them. This is why our practice lacks meaningful progress.

♦ Wrapping up the four boundless qualities

The four boundless qualities are the infallible cause for the arising of bodhicitta. Without them, no matter how much we try to cultivate bodhicitta, our efforts are likely to be in vain. If bodhicitta hasn’t taken root in us, our main practices of the Great Perfection—the meditations of trekchö and tögal, or the cutting through and leap over—will undoubtedly be like building castles in the sky.

Many people have followed a top-down approach to practice the Dharma. They first received the highest empowerment, then skipped the preliminaries and directly proceeded to practicing the highest pith instructions in *Lama Yangtik* (*The Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru*) or *Yeshe Lama*,⁹⁵ just like they wanted to directly swallow a piece of meat before it is cooked.

However, the right practice sequence is not like this. We must start from establishing the foundation. Before the four boundless qualities take root in us, we must try our very best to meditate on them with great diligence.

Understanding the four boundless qualities can be challenging if the explanation is too extensive. In summary, these qualities can be encapsulated in the phrase “a kind heart.” We should strive to maintain a kind heart in all situations, always.

⁹⁵ A famous guide or manual (Tib. རྩིལ་ཡིག་, triyik, Wyl. khrid yig) of Dzogchen practice written by Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa. It is said to be a summary of the Vima Nyingtik. “Based on the innermost, unexcelled cycle of the category of pith instructions, it incorporates the essence of the Dzogchen tantras and presents primarily the practical instructions for trekchö and tögal, along with instructions for liberation in the bardo states, and liberation in pure nirmanakaya realms.” (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

As it is said in *Water-Tree Treatises: Hundred Waves of Elegant Sayings & Hundred Branches of Elegant Sayings*:

Both the noble and the lowly will rely on
 The wise who have a kind heart,
 Just like when encountering a nice pool during a trip,
 Everyone would like to jump in.

Therefore, whether one is a monastic or a layperson, high-ranked or low-ranked, noble or poor, being kind is the very essence of our being. With kindness, whatever we do can easily succeed.

We must not underestimate the power of kindness. As it is said in *Water-Tree Treatises*:

With a kind heart, a mundane deed
 Can also bring you onto the Dharma.

I often contemplate the meaning of this verse. Kindness is of great power even if it is applied to mundane endeavors. For example, when a person works as an employee or take care of family or friends, as long as this person has a kind heart, what they do will have the opportunity to become a cause for liberation.

Therefore, this Patrul Rinpoche's pith instruction is very important. I hope we will all contemplate it over and over again. In the chapter on "Following a Spiritual Friend," he also said that all the characteristics of a teacher can be summarized into "having bodhicitta," which can be further condensed into "having a kind heart." Only such a teacher can be considered a Mahayana teacher.



Lesson 99

“One day, Lord Atisa’s hand was hurting, and so he laid it ... to check your attitude all the time and to cultivate a kind heart.” [page 215–217]

Last class we learned that genuine bodhicitta is developed through the four boundless qualities, and that the latter can be summarized in the single phrase “a kind heart.” Now let’s continue.

♦ **The importance of a kind heart to a practitioner**

One day, Atisha’s hand was hurting, so he laid it in Dromtönpa’s lap and said, “Please bless my hand, because you have a kind heart.”

The power of blessing truly exists. Many people do not accept it due to the influence of materialism and atheism. It is their personal choice to reject its power. Nevertheless, all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and eminent masters do possess the power of blessing.

If a practitioner has a kind heart, their blessing is very powerful. Tibetans often say, “That enlightened master is marvelous. If he recites prayers and grants blessings, our goal can surely be accomplished without question. Why is that? Because his heart is so kind!”

When a kind-hearted master resides in a monastery, the local people will have a refuge. Even if a person is just an ordinary lay practitioner, rather than a great enlightened being, as long as they have a kind heart, people will still regard them as a bodhisattva.

It was not that a renowned Dharma master like Atisha couldn't find anyone else to bless him, so he had no choice but ask for his disciple's blessing. Normally it should be a sick disciple asking for blessings from his guru, not the other way around.

The main point here is that as long as a person is kind-hearted, whether he is a guru or a disciple, the blessings of the Three Jewels and the power of bodhicitta will dissolve into his mind. Then he can definitely benefit living beings, even just through a breath of air, a touch on another's crown, or a recitation.

Atisha always placed unique emphasis on the importance of a kind heart, and rather than ask people, "How are you?" he would say, "Has your heart been kind?" When his disciple returned from a retreat, Atisha wouldn't ask him, "Did you have a vision of your deity? Have you recognized the essential nature of the channels, energies, and essences?" Rather, he would ask, "Did you develop a kind heart?" Whenever he taught, he would add, "Have a kind heart!"

With a kind heart, all your practice can easily succeed; without it, the evil dharmas will spring up naturally. *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says:

If one practices the Dharma diligently,
Afflictions and harms won't take effect,
Because virtues are incompatible with vices,
Just like water is in conflict with fire.

Therefore, if we practice the authentic Dharma with great diligence and have a kind heart, all negative and harmful influences will have no opportunity to take root, and afflictions and harm will disappear without a trace.

Thus, I have been urging you to become more involved in the Dharma because when you listen to teachings and study texts, you will at least focus on the authentic Dharma and cut off most unwholesome thoughts.

While I may not possess all the qualities needed to teach you the Dharma, I make it a point to review the text before class and aim to share the wisdom of past eminent masters. As a result, during a lecture that lasts over an hour, I find that unwholesome thoughts seldom arise. After each lecture, I also dedicate the merit. Life becomes meaningful when we spend even a short period of time in this manner every day.

Dharma students should strive for this. In your limited lifetime, it's best to

attend a Dharma class every day. Even if you only spend one or two hours each day on the Dharma, it still holds great significance, as your virtues are activated and your vices are inhibited. While listening to the Dharma, it is difficult to become very greedy, angry, or ignorant. At worst, you might fall asleep in class, but this doesn't involve strong afflictions. I heard of someone who can sleep while listening to the teachings. What a multi-tasker! (*The audience laughs.*)

♦ **It's intention that makes an action positive or negative**

It is the intention behind an action—whether kind or unkind—that determines an action positive or negative, strong or weak.

Some people engage in significant positive actions, such as making offerings to the sangha, paving roads, or building a shrine hall. However, if their intention behind these actions is bad rather than good, it is merely a positive action by name. Therefore, the magnitude of the merit does not depend on the appearance of the action, but rather on the goodness of the intention.

The Moral Education of the Past has a story about a man named Wei Zhongda. Once Wei's soul was led to the underworld, where a court official presented all the files on his good and bad deeds in his life. Wei noticed that the files on his bad deeds filled up the whole court, while the files on his good deeds were only the size of a chopstick.

The underworld official weighed the files with a scale. It turned out that the files on Wei's bad deeds were lighter than those of his good deeds. The official told him, "You may go now."

Wei said, "I am less than forty years old, so why do I have so many files on bad deeds?"

The official answered, "Whenever you have a wrong thought, it is recorded in the underworld. There is no need to wait until the thought has materialized."

Wei then asked, "Then what is written on the files of my good deeds?"

The official said, "The government planned a big construction project to build bridges connecting three mountains. Many civilians would be put to hard labor. You urged the government not to do this, and this file of your good deeds is actually the manuscript of your letter to the government. Though your advice was not accepted, your kind intention was for the benefit of many people, so it was very powerful."

Such a folktale embodies the profound meaning of the principle of cause and effect. There are many similar folk stories and customs in the Tibetan region that encourage people to act in accordance with this principle.

Through this story, we can see that kindness has great power. If we can always be kind in our daily lives, our Dharma practice will surely be successful. Otherwise, even if we are in retreat, reciting mantras and performing good deeds every day, as long as our hearts are unkind, no matter how positive our actions may seem, those actions will yield little merit.

Some people may appear nice but are actually evil-hearted. Without a kind heart, they can relentlessly harm any being, whether an animal or a human, and they might not even hesitate to kill a person. Some practitioners exhibit this intention as well, indicating that their practice of Mahayana Buddhism is ineffective.

Atisha said:

The key sign of progress in the practice is the reduction of afflictions.

If we are less afflicted, it means we've made progress in our practice. However, if we are more afflicted and our unkind intentions grow, where is the progress in our practice?

Therefore, whether our practice is good or bad depends on our intention. When the intention behind the action is good, all physical or verbal actions are positive, even if those actions may not appear to align with the Dharma. This was illustrated by the story of the man who put the leather sole over the tsa-tsa.

The Mahayana Sutra of Previous Lives and Contemplation of the Mind-ground says:

In the three worlds,
The mind is the governor.
He who can observe the mind,
Will attain ultimate liberation;
He who cannot observe the mind,
Will ultimately sink in samsara.

In the entirety of samsara, everything is governed by the mind. If a practitioner's mind is pure, faithful, and compassionate, they have the opportunity for liberation.

However, if a person only focuses on superficial good deeds, they will remain deeply trapped in samsara and will not achieve the fruits of liberation.

Let alone practitioners, even a worldly person with an unkind heart will have his merit greatly corrupted.

Once upon a time, there was a man surnamed Li from Fujian Province, China, who passed through Quzhou on his way to take a civil-service exam in the capital city. A hotel owner dreamed that the God of Land told him, “Tomorrow a scholar surnamed Li will come. He is highly likely to be selected as a bureaucrat. Make sure you take good care of him.”

The next morning, Li indeed arrived at the hotel. The owner welcomed him with hospitality, offering him food and a carriage. Li asked why, and the owner told him about his dream. Li was very pleased and thought that night, “Once I pass the exam and get promoted to a high position, I will have to change my wife, because my current one is too ugly to be a bureaucrat’s wife.”

After Li’s departure, the hotel owner dreamed of the God of Land again, who told him, “That man is not kind-hearted. He hasn’t even been selected to be a bureaucrat, yet he wants to abandon his wife. Now he has lost the opportunity to perform well on the exam.”

When Li returned to the hotel after his exam, the owner gave him the cold shoulder and didn’t even allow him to stay. Li asked why, and the owner explained the second dream. Surprised and ashamed, Li left in disgrace. He never achieved any fame or bureaucratic position in his life. As you can see, good or bad intentions do have a significant impact on one’s life.

In this world, a kind-hearted person not only keeps his conscience clear but is also praised by others. In contrast, an evil-minded person is not trusted, no matter how capable he is in certain tasks. People hesitate to come into contact with him to avoid being harmed or betrayed, as if he were a venomous snake.

Therefore, everyone should strive to have a kind heart. However, many people today are focused solely on money, homes, and luxury brands, showing little interest in cultivating an altruistic mindset that is genuinely beneficial to us. In fact, regardless of whether one possesses these external items, a kind person can still find happiness in this life and in many lives to come. When the intention behind an action is unkind, even the seemingly most positive deed will ultimately have a negative impact.

Therefore, no matter where you are—whether in the city or in a secluded hermitage, and whatever you are doing—whether taking a bus, flying on a plane, getting up in the morning, or going to bed at night, strive to cultivate kindness. You should also repent the negative thoughts of greed, anger, and ignorance that occasionally arise within you.

Lama Tsongkhapa said,

If the intention is good, the levels and paths are good.
 If the intention is bad, the levels and paths are bad.
 Since everything depends on intentions,
 Always make sure they are positive.⁹⁶

With a kind heart, you can easily attain the transcendental achievements associated with the five paths and ten levels. Without a kind heart, you won't attain such achievements; moreover, you may even fall into the three lower realms. Whether we achieve liberation or not fully depends on our intentions, so we must cultivate kindness with great diligence.

Although some evil-minded people temporarily enjoy various forms of happiness, this is merely the karmic result of their positive actions in previous lives. Once these results are exhausted, happiness will cease to exist. At the moment of death, the negative actions a person has committed throughout their life will come to fruition, and they will inevitably experience the tormenting consequences of their actions. Therefore, kindness is the foundation of all happiness and virtue.

Here is a story from *The Four Lessons by Mr. Yuan-Liaofan*:⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 215.

⁹⁷ It is a book written by Yuan Liaofan (Chinese: ; 1533–1606), who was a Chinese official during the Ming dynasty, born in present-day Wujiang County, Jiangsu Province. Yuan wrote the book to teach his son, Yuan Tian-Chi. The principal idea behind these lessons is that destiny can be changed through proper cultivation of kindness and humility. Thus, one should not be bound by fate, but by one's own actions.

When Lü Dongbin⁹⁸ learned the skill of transforming iron into gold with Zhongli Quan,⁹⁹ the latter said, “This skill can help many poor people.”

Lü asked, “Will the gold become iron again later?”

Zhongli answered, “Five hundred years later, it will turn into iron again.”

Lü said, “If so, it will harm people five hundred years later. I’d rather not to do so.”

Zhongli exclaimed, “One has to accumulate three thousand meritorious deeds in order to succeed in Daoist practice of immortality. By generating this single intention, you have just accomplished those accumulations.”

This is a story from Daoism. There are similar stories in Buddhism, such as those of Captain Compassionate Heart and Brahmin Lover of the Stars. Though they appear to commit negative deeds, both accumulated infinite merits in a short time due to their pure and kind intentions.

Thus, the Buddha says in the *Itivuttaka*:

If the intention is pure,
So are the speech and actions.
Happiness will arise accordingly,
Like a shadow following the body.

With a pure mind, both body and speech will also become pure, and everything we do will result in positive outcomes. Then, happiness, like a shadow following the body, will accompany us wherever we go. On the other hand, if our intention is unkind, our speech and actions will be unkind as well, which will bring us no happiness and can also become the cause of our suffering. Please do ponder this over and over again, and always examine our intentions accordingly.

98 Lü Dongbin (796 CE–1016 CE) is a legendary Chinese scholar and poet said to have lived during the Tang dynasty. Whether he actually lived the two hundred and twenty years cannot be determined. Elevated to the status of an immortal in the Chinese cultural sphere by Daoists, he is one of the most widely known of the group of deities known as the Eight Immortals. Lü is also a historical figure and mentioned in the official history book History of Song. He is widely considered to be one of the earliest masters of neidan, or internal alchemy. He is also depicted in art dressed as a scholar carrying a sword to dispel evil spirits.

99 Zhongli Quan, courtesy name Jidao, is a Chinese mythological figure and one of the Eight Immortals in the Taoist pantheon. He is also known as Han Zhongli because he was said to have been born in the Han dynasty. In legend, he wields a large fan which can resurrect the dead and transform stones into silver or gold.

♦ A kind heart brings about a bright future

How is it that the paths and levels are good if the intention is good? Here is a story that offers the explanation:

An old woman was crossing a wide river with her daughter, holding her hand, when they were suddenly swept away by the current.

The mother thought, “It doesn’t matter if I am carried away by the water, as long as my daughter is safe!”

Meanwhile, the young girl thought, “It’s not a big deal if I get swept away, as long as my mother isn’t drowned!”

Tragically, both of them drowned in the river. However, due to their kind-heartedness for one another, they were reborn in the celestial realm of Brahma.

Here is a story I read from *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, in the Chinese Tripitaka:

Soon after giving birth to a child, a woman was thrown out of the house where she had been living, along with her infant. She had since been wandering, planning to go to another country. While crossing the Ganges, the current was so strong that she and her newborn were swept away by the water. Before the beggar woman drowned, she thought, “It’s not that important if I die, as long as my child is saved.” With this positive thought, she was reborn in the realm of the gods.

The Buddha told Manjushri, “At that time, the mother would rather lose her life to protect her child. Likewise, a Buddhist should rather lose his life to protect the Dharma.”

This is the main point that the Buddha wants to present through the story. When we are about to leave this world as well as when we are still alive, it is very important to have a thought of kindness.

Yesterday, on my way back to Larung Gar from a school, I had a kind thought, followed by a proud thought.

What was my kind thought? It was dark when we drove across Lhatse Mountain. The snow was falling so heavily that we couldn’t even see the road. At a bend at the mountaintop, a long cargo truck got stuck in the mud and couldn’t get out, despite the driver’s long attempt, who was shivering with cold.

Seeing this, we immediately got out of our car and offered our help. An hour

later, the truck was still stuck, and we were all shivering. At that moment, I was thinking, “No matter what, I have to stay with him tonight. Otherwise, he may freeze to death.” Later, another car drove by, and we asked for help. In the end, with everyone’s assistance, we managed to pull the truck out of the mud.

During this process, the driver was rather anxious. He had never been to this area, so he kept asking us questions. He asked, “Is there a village ahead?”

I replied, “Not within twenty kilometers.”

“How far is the village behind us then?” he asked.

“Maybe around ten kilometers away,” I answered.

As it began to get darker, the driver seemed increasingly worried, so he asked, “Are there any robbers around here?”

“Hard to say,” I replied.

“If I really can’t get my truck out, would you mind giving me a lift to the village at the foot of the mountain? I can rent a car to come back for it.”

“There’s no problem giving you a lift, but I’m sure no other driver would dare to come back here in the middle of the night.”

Fortunately, in the end, we managed to get the truck out of the mud.

On the way back, I reflected on what had just happened, initially believing that my kind intention justified my action as a good deed. However, after further contemplation, I recognized that this belief is also a sort of pride, which undermines the merit of my kind intentions.

Ordinary people can sometimes generate a few kind thoughts for various reasons, but they are likely to then generate stronger and more harmful thoughts, such as pride or rivalry. How pitiful! Without deliberate examination, we may not even realize this. As soon as we examine our minds, assessing how many kind and unkind thoughts we have in a day, we may feel quite ashamed. Nevertheless, because we have vowed to benefit all beings before the buddhas and bodhisattvas, we must strive to always have a kind heart.

As we have made the vow, we should start with cultivating the four boundless qualities. As mentioned previously, the basis of the four boundless qualities is “a kind heart,” which can be gradually developed as long as we keep up our practice.

Once we have developed kind-heartedness, all obstacles and demons will no longer disturb us, as said in the *Compendium of the Essentials of Dharma*:

The wise are good at taming
Various mental afflictions;
They will be freed from the nets of demons,
And swiftly arrive at the other shore.

Therefore, we must fight against our own unkind intentions, and to try to cultivate kind intentions in daily life.

Here is another story:

Once, six monks and a messenger boarded a ferryboat to cross the river Jasako. As the boat departed from the bank and traveled about a quarter of the way across, the boatman announced, “We’re too heavy. If anyone knows how to swim, please jump into the water. Otherwise, I will jump in myself, and one of you can take the oars.”

Unfortunately, none of them knew how to swim or row.

In a moment of desperation, the messenger jumped out of the boat, exclaiming, “It is better for me to die alone than for everyone to drown!”

At that very moment, a rainbow appeared, and a shower of flowers fell. Miraculously, the messenger, despite not knowing how to swim, was safely carried to the shore. Although he had never practiced Dharma, this outcome was the immediate benefit of a single good thought.

♦ Unkind intentions lead to a dark future

How is it that the paths and levels are bad if the intention is unkind?

Once, there was a beggar lying at the entrance of the royal palace, thinking, “I wish the king would be beheaded so that I could take his place!”

This thought consumed him throughout the night until he finally fell asleep. As morning approached, the king drove out in his carriage, and one of the wheels rolled over the beggar’s neck, severing his head.

Unless we remain mindful and vigilant about the purpose of our pursuit for the Dharma, and continually observe our thoughts, intense feelings of attachment and hatred can easily lead to significant negative consequences. While the old beggar’s

wishes could never come true, the result of his thoughts manifested immediately. As said in *The Sutra on Judgment of Merits or Demerits*:

He who has a kind heart will experience good karmic effects;
He who has an unkind heart will experience bad karmic effects.

Was it possible for the king, comfortably asleep on his jeweled bed in the palace, to lose his head? Even if he were to be beheaded, wouldn't it be more likely that the crown prince would assume the throne? And if he somehow didn't, could a scabrous old beggar really take over, despite the presence of ministers who were similar to tigers, leopards, and bears? Such absurd thoughts can arise if one doesn't examine one's own mind closely. Therefore, the beggar's malicious thought about the king really didn't make any sense.

We must never allow ourselves to regularly generate unkind thoughts. However, some individuals often entertain malicious ideas, especially towards those with whom they have poor relations, such as: "I want to kill him!" "I want to harm him!" along with other similar harmful thoughts. Nowadays, the internet is flooded with information, much of which is negative. Those who publish such content also create serious negative karma through their harmful speech. As we learn from the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* and *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*, the karmic effects of a single action can be unimaginable, and even negative thoughts or harsh words can lead to severe consequences.

There is a similar story in the *Dhammapada*:

Once, in order to tame his people, King Prasenajit prepared a meal offering for the Buddha and his sangha, hoping the Buddha could teach the Dharma in public. The Buddha accepted the offering, and gave a teaching to the public.

Two businessmen happened to pass by. One of them listened to the Buddha's teaching, and said happily, "The Buddha is like an emperor, and his disciples follow him like loyal ministers. The Buddha must truly have great love, compassion, and great qualities, so that King Prasenajit venerates him and makes offerings to him. The Buddha is such a noble teacher that I should also follow his teachings."

The other businessman had an arrogant thought, saying, "The King is really foolish! The Buddha is like an ox, and his disciples are like a carriage. The ox pulls the carriage from place to place and owns nothing. Why are you venerating him?"

[No matter which eminent master is teaching the Dharma, different listeners

may have different experience, which is also related to each listener's merits. Those who have merit will encounter the authentic Dharma, and the Dharma will benefit them. Moreover, such benefit will last for a long time.

Those who don't have enough merit are enthusiastic about the Dharma at the very beginning. The moment they encounter the Dharma they want to take ordination. They vow to accomplish all the hearing, contemplation, and meditation. However, as time passes by their minds gradually change, and in the end, they have wrong thoughts toward the teacher, lose faith in the Dharma, and commit great negative actions.

Therefore, throughout my study of the Dharma over the past many years, I always feel that anyone who can keep studying and practicing the Dharma has great merits. Some people don't have the opportunity to stay in a secluded place. But if they can keep pursuing the Dharma for a long time through various means, and remain unchanged regardless of external circumstances, they also have great merits.]

Later the two businessmen left at the same time. After walking a dozen kilometers they rested in a gazebo by the roadside, and started to drink alcohol. The businessman who had a kind thought was protected by the four great heavenly kings, because of his veneration and joy toward the Buddha.

The businessman who had an unkind thought was possessed by ghosts who made him drink a lot, and he eventually fell unconscious out of the gazebo. The next morning, a group of merchants passed by in carriages. The carriage wheels rolled over that man and killed him.

Seeing this, the businessman who venerated the Buddha was afraid of being misunderstood by people he knew, who would say he killed his friend out of greed for his wealth. So, he decided to leave his own country for another country.

At that time the king of that country had just died, and there was no crown prince. There was a prophecy that said, "A man will come to this country. If he is the heir to the throne, the old king's horse will kneel down before him." So the ministers went everywhere, in search of their new sovereign.

When the businessman arrived in the country, the horse immediately knelt down before him and started to lick his feet. Then the ministers happily made him the new king.

Therefore, we should remain kind-hearted and always examine our own

minds, so as not to generate unkind thoughts that may result in negative actions. As Geshe Shawopa says,

Govern the mind's kingdom, or else the three realms will expand.

Atisha also says in *The Bodhisattva's Garland of Jewels*:

Three times each day, three times at night,
Again and again, examine your thoughts.¹⁰⁰

We must examine our mind during the six times in a whole day, and don't let the mind go astray. In doing so, we will reach the state as described in the *Acts of the Buddha* (*Buddhacharita*):

Right thoughts reside in the mind,
So all evil thoughts cannot infiltrate.

Here is another story:

One day, the Buddha and his sangha were invited to a benefactor's home for a meal offering. It happened that two beggars, a young ksatriya and a young brahmin, were also present. The brahmin approached the benefactor and begged before the Buddha and the monks had been served and ended up receiving nothing. The ksatriya, on the other hand, waited patiently until everyone had been served and received a generous portion of the food left over from the monks' bowls.

[One beggar received food and the other didn't, and everyone's merit is indeed different. A person who doesn't get what he wants can easily become angry, whereas a person who gets what he wants might be happy that he will make a positive aspiration.

The same is true when we give out prizes. Someone who receives a prize might be happy and immediately makes an aspiration: "May the Three Jewels, the guru, and the Dharma protectors grant me blessings, so that I will never part from the guru, the Three Jewels, all the buddhas and bodhisattvas in this life and many lives yet to come!" Some others don't receive any prize, so they are upset and find everyone annoying. However, they don't know this has something to do with their merit.]

¹⁰⁰ It is translated by Rigpa Translations, 2008. Revised 2012.

That afternoon, on the road, the two young beggars shared their thoughts with each other.

“If I were rich,” said the young ksatriya, “I would spend my life providing clothes and alms to the Buddha and his sangha. I would honor them by giving everything I have.”

“And if I were a powerful king,” replied the young brahmin, “I would have that shaven-headed bigot beheaded, along with his entire sangha!”

The young ksatriya traveled to another country and settled beneath a great tree. While the shadows of the surrounding trees shifted with the sun, the shadow of this particular tree remained unmoved. [A person of great merit, regardless of where they live, will be protected by animals and plants, and many miraculous things will occur. This was true in the past and remains true in the present. People with merit and those without merit differ significantly in many aspects, including their circumstances, the respect they receive from others, and more.]

At that time, the king of that country had just died, leaving no heir. As a result, the people decided that the most meritorious and powerful individual in the land would be chosen as their new king. While searching for their new king, they discovered a young ksatriya sleeping under a tree, still in the shade although midday had long passed. They woke him up and made him king. From that moment on, the ksatriya honored the Buddha and his sangha, which fulfilled his wish.

As for the young brahmin, it is said that he lay down at a crossroads to rest, and his head was cut off by the wheel of a passing wagon. [This young brahmin harbored an unkind thought toward the Buddha, which didn’t come true but instead caused harm to himself. Therefore, even if we cannot generate kind intentions, we must avoid harboring evil thoughts. Otherwise, negative consequences will befall us. There are many such cases from the past to the present.]

There is a similar story from the *Sutra of the Questions of Pratibhānamati*, which was translated into Chinese from Sanskrit during the Northern Wei dynasty. I compared the story in Patrul Rinpoche’s text with the one in this sutra and found that both stories are basically the same, with only a slight difference in plot. The story in the sutra also states that when a venerable elder invited the Buddha and his sangha for a meal offering, one beggar received food while the other did not. The second beggar did not receive food because the Buddha had not yet begun to offer food to others. As a result, the Buddha established a precept that monastics should

offer food to the needy before eating. In the end, the beggar with good intentions became a king and made offerings to the Buddha for seven days, whereas the beggar with evil intentions was beheaded by a carriage wheel and was reborn in hell.

In fact, if we learn to always have only kind thoughts, we can fulfill all our wishes for this lifetime. Benevolent gods will watch over us, and we will receive blessings from all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Our actions will be positive, and we will face no suffering at the moment of death. In future lives, we will always be reborn in celestial or human realms until finally we attain Buddhahood.

The *Madhyama Agama* says:

At the moment of death if you have a kind thought,
All the dharmas in your mind
Are in accordance with right views.
Because of this cause and this condition,
When your body stops functioning and your life ends,
You'll have a good rebirth in the celestial realm.

On the other hand, it says:

At the moment of death if you have an unkind thought,
All the dharmas in your mind
Are in accordance with wrong views.
Because of this cause and this condition,
When your body stops functioning and your life ends,
You'll have a bad rebirth in the hell realm

Thus, when we are about to leave this world, the most important thing is to have a kind thought. When someone is dying, be sure not to cry near their ears or speak ill of others, so they can depart in a state of kind-heartedness. This is an important instruction for attaining a good rebirth after death.

Furthermore, we should avoid rushing off without examining our intentions and engaging in a display of virtuous activities—prostrations, circumambulations, prayers, recitations of mantras, and so on.

For example, you managed to circumambulate the mandala stupa ten thousand times, recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra one hundred million times, or travel to Lhasa through long prostrations. These virtuous activities of your body and speech

are indeed rejoicing and inspiring, but if you didn't perform them with a kind mind, the merit isn't particularly great. It's better for you to accomplish preliminary practices in a secluded place with a mind of bodhicitta.

Thus, it is important to check our thoughts all the time and to cultivate a kind heart. This is extremely important.



Lesson 100

“A king’s first priority is to overcome all his rivals, ... beings either—try to cultivate bodhicitta all the time.” [page 218–222]

Today we proceed to the section on arousing bodhicitta.

Sangha members within Larung Gar are now accumulating one hundred thousand recitations of the bodhicitta prayer. Members outside Larung Gar are also studying this part of the text, through audios and videos, and other teaching materials. All of you must try your very best to arouse bodhicitta, no matter what.

The *Daśadharmas Sūtra* lists four reasons for arousing bodhicitta: 1) knowing the merits of bodhicitta; 2) developing sincere faith in the Buddha or other noble beings; 3) witnessing the suffering of living beings; 4) being accepted and guided by a qualified teacher.

The *Bodhisattva Stages* also explains four reasons for arousing bodhicitta: 1) possessing the bodhisattva’s disposition; 2) being taken under the care of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and qualified teachers; 3) developing great compassion upon seeing the suffering of others; 4) being not daunted by difficulties and hardships in the bodhisattva’s way of life.

All the buddhas and bodhisattvas aroused bodhicitta in the past, so they are able to benefit infinite living beings. We should emulate them, because the only way to benefit all beings is through arousing bodhicitta. *The Most Supreme King of All Dharmas Sūtra* says:

He who likes to attain the bodhi that past buddhas attained
Must arouse bodhicitta and engage in bodhisattva's activities.

Before cultivating bodhicitta, we must train our minds in the four boundless qualities—first by developing an intellectual understanding of these qualities and then practicing them accordingly. Furthermore, we should also recognize the merits of bodhicitta and the sufferings of all living beings. By following this sequence, we will be able to arouse genuine bodhicitta.

2.2.2.2. Arousing Bodhicitta

2.2.2.2.1. Classification of Bodhicitta

♦ Classification based on the degrees of courage

Based on the degree of courage, bodhicitta can be classified into the courage of a king, a boatman, and a shepherd.

1) The courage of a king

A king's foremost priority is to defeat his rivals, promote his supporters, and establish his sovereignty. Only after accomplishing this can he effectively care for the welfare of his subjects. Similarly, the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for oneself before helping others achieve Buddhahood is referred to as the king's way of arousing bodhicitta.

2) The courage of a boatman

A boatman seeks to reach the other shore with all his passengers. Similarly, the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for oneself and all beings simultaneously is referred to as the boatman's way of arousing bodhicitta.

3) The courage of a shepherd

Shepherds herd their sheep in front of them, ensuring the sheep can find grass and water while protecting them from wolves, jackals, and other wild animals. Shepherds guide the flock from behind. Similarly, those who aspire to help all beings in the three worlds attain Buddhahood before achieving it for themselves embody the shepherd's way of arousing bodhicitta.

Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind talks about this classification based on the three degrees of courage. Longchenpa also quoted the scriptural evidence from the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* to explain that the king's way, called "arousing bodhicitta with the great wish," is the least courageous of the three. It will take a practitioner with this kind of bodhicitta thirty-three asamkhya kalpas to attain Buddhahood.

The boatman's way, called "arousing bodhicitta with sacred wisdom," is more courageous. Middling practitioners possess this kind of bodhicitta, and it will take them seven asamkhya kalpas to attain Buddhahood. It is said that Bodhisattva Maitreya aroused bodhicitta in this manner.

The shepherd's way, known as "the arousing of bodhicitta beyond compare," is the most courageous of all. Superior practitioners possess this kind of bodhicitta, and it will take them three asamkhya kalpas to attain Buddhahood. It is said to be the way Bodhisattva Manjushri aroused bodhicitta.

The Shurangama Sutra says:

Before achieving liberation for oneself,

One first liberates others—

This attitude is a bodhisattva's bodhicitta.

Of course, here "others" refers to all living beings. It definitely goes beyond human beings. Nowadays many Buddhists are willing to work hard for the well-being of mankind, but not that of other living beings. Some Mahayanists are like this as well, which is not in line with the tenets of Mahayana Buddhism. In fact, we should benefit all living beings in the three worlds. Please do remember this!

Regarding the third way of arousing bodhicitta, namely, the shepherd's way, many people may wonder, "If a practitioner attains Buddhahood only after all beings of the three worlds have been established in perfect Buddhahood, then this practitioner will have nothing to do after he himself becomes a buddha. Since the sole activity of a buddha is to benefit living beings and nothing else, if all living beings are in perfect Buddhahood, what's the point of becoming a buddha?"

Well, you don't have to worry about this. It's impossible to finish liberating all beings in the three worlds. If the number of living beings were finite, it would have been possible to liberate them all in one day; however, the number is infinite, so the day when we can liberate them all will never come.

Why is it still essential to cultivate bodhicitta in the third way? It primarily reflects the enormous courage of the practitioner. Despite the infinite number of living beings, the practitioner aspires to help all attain Buddhahood before seeking it for themselves. This enormous courage often enables practitioners to achieve Buddhahood more swiftly. It is similar to those individuals who consistently prioritize others, even choosing to go without food to ensure others can survive. Such selfless individuals are naturally cared for and loved, and they often find that their lives are not as difficult.

Therefore, these three similes are used to illustrate the differences in the courage of Mahayanists. This doesn't literally mean that a Mahayanist must attain Buddhahood before, simultaneously with, or after all beings. This is how you should understand the classifications of bodhicitta, based on the three degrees of courage.

◆ Classification according to the bodhisattva levels

According to the bodhisattva levels including the five paths¹⁰¹ and ten stages,¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Five paths (Skt. pañcamārga; Tib. ལམ་ངམ་, lam nga, Wyl. lam lnga) — a succession of five stages or paths describing the entire spiritual journey towards liberation. They appear with similar names in both the Basic yana (Sarvastivadin and Sautrantika schools) and Mahayana, but their interpretation is considerably different. They are:

- the path of accumulation (Skt. sambhāramārga)
- the path of joining (also called 'engagement' or 'junction') (Skt. prayogamārga)
- the path of seeing (or 'insight') (Skt. darśanamārga)
- the path of meditation (or 'cultivation') (Skt. bhāvanāmārga)
- the path of no-more-learning (Skt. aśaikṣamārga) (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

¹⁰² Tenbhumis (Skt. daśabhūmi; Tib. ས་ཅུ་, sa chu, Wyl. sabcu) — ten stages or 'grounds' used in the Mahayana to describe the progression of a practitioner on the path to enlightenment. They are:

- Perfect Joy (Skt. pramuditābhūmi; Tib. རབ་རྒྱལ་པ་, rabtugawa, Wyl. rabtudga' ba)
- Immaculate / Stainless (Skt. vimalābhūmi; Tib. ལྷིན་མེད་པ་, drimamepa, Wyl. dri ma med pa)
- Luminous / Illuminating (Skt. prabhākāribhūmi; Tib. འད་ལྗེད་པ་, ö jepa, Wyl. 'odbyedpa)
- Radiant (Skt. arcīṣmatībhūmi; Tib. འད་འཕྱོ་ཅན་, ö trochen, Wyl. 'od 'phro can)
- Hard to Keep / Hard to Conquer (Skt. sudurjayābhūmi; Tib. ཉེན་ཏུ་སྒྱུར་དགའ་པ་, shintujankawa, Wyl. shin tusbyangdka' ba)
- Clearly Manifest (Skt. abhimukhibhūmi; Tib. མངོན་དུ་གྱུར་པ་, ngöntugyurpa, Wyl. mngon du gyurba)
- Far Progressed (Skt. duraṅgamabhūmi; Tib. རིང་ཏུ་སྒྱུར་པ་, ringtusongwa, Wyl. ring du song ba)
- Immovable (Skt. acālabhūmi; Tib. མི་གཡོག་པ་, miyowa, Wyl. mi gyoba)
- Perfect Intellect (Skt. sādhumatībhūmi; Tib. ལེགས་པ་ལྡིང་ལྡོང་པ་, lekpélodro, Wyl. legs pa'iblogros)
- Cloud of Dharma (Skt. dharmameghāabhūmi; Tib. ཆོས་གྱི་ཁྲིན་, chökyi trin, Wyl. choskyisprin)

there are four kinds of arousing bodhicitta: practicing with aspiration, through excellent and perfectly pure intention, by arousing fully matured bodhicitta, and free from all obscurations. In Prabhākaramitra's version of *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, it says:

Arousing bodhicitta of aspiring conduct,
Arousing bodhicitta of perfectly pure intention,
Arousing fully matured bodhicitta and arousing bodhicitta free
from all obscurations—
According to the bodhisattva levels,
There are four different ways of arousing bodhicitta.

1) Arousing bodhicitta by practicing aspiration

On the paths of accumulating and joining, arousing bodhicitta is referred to as “arousing bodhicitta by practicing with aspiration.”

This way of arousing bodhicitta is for practitioners in the preparatory stages that lay the groundwork for the perfect enlightenment. With faith and self-encouragement, these practitioners aspire, “To attain Buddhahood for the sake of benefiting all sentient beings, I must arouse the supreme bodhicitta!” They make this aspiration proactively and effortfully in their mind.

2) Arousing bodhicitta through excellent and perfectly pure intention

From the first to the seventh bodhisattva level, it is called “arousing bodhicitta through excellent and perfectly pure intention.”

Why is it “through excellent and perfectly pure intention”? This is because those who have attained the first to the seventh bodhisattva levels are sublime beings who no longer possess any deliberate self-centered motivation when arousing bodhicitta. In contrast, no matter how much ordinary people strive to arouse bodhicitta, they cannot completely eliminate selfish motivations.

Some people say, “As far as this work is concerned, from beginning to end, I have no selfish motivation at all. All I do is for living beings, my country, and society...”

Well, this may sound good, but it is very difficult for an ordinary person to

The eleventh bhumi, Universal Radiance (Tib. ཀུན་ཏུ་རྣམ་ཐོས་པའི་བླ་མ་, kuntu ö, Wyl. kuntu 'od), is buddhahood according to the sutra system. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

truly achieve this. However, bodhisattvas at the first to the seventh stages have transcended the level of ordinary people. They strive solely for the benefit of all living beings, arousing bodhicitta through excellent and perfectly pure intention.

3) Arousing fully matured bodhicitta

On the three pure levels (the eighth to the tenth bodhisattva level), it is called “arousing fully matured bodhicitta.”

As those who have studied the *Treasury of Abhidharma* know, “fully matured” refers to the fact that the results of one’s actions fully ripen no matter what. For example, when the result of a person’s action that results in a bad rebirth in hell has matured, they will definitely fall into the hell realm, even if they don’t want to. When the effect of a person’s killing that results in a short lifespan and frequent disease has matured, they have to experience those, no matter what.

Similarly, those who have attained the three pure levels arouse bodhicitta in an effortless manner, just as water spontaneously flows downstream. They don’t need anyone to encourage them to arouse bodhicitta, nor do they have to remind themselves constantly.

4) Arousing bodhicitta free from all obscurations

At the level of Buddhahood, there are neither conceptual obscurations nor afflictive obscurations. According to the Nyingma school, afflictive obscurations are completely eliminated at the eighth bodhisattva level, and the most subtle elements of conceptual obscurations are entirely eradicated at the level of Buddhahood, which means a buddha has no obscurations whatsoever. Therefore, Buddhahood is referred to as “arousing bodhicitta free from all obscurations.”

This is the four kinds of bodhicitta according to the bodhisattva levels. Here, the classification is based on the five paths. If it is classified by ten stages, the first one, “arousing bodhicitta by practicing with aspiration,” should be excluded.

♦ Classification according to the nature of bodhicitta

There are two types of bodhicitta: relative bodhicitta and absolute bodhicitta.

1) Relative bodhicitta

Relative bodhicitta has two aspects: intention and application.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ It is also called aspirational bodhicitta and practical bodhicitta.

a) Intention

In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva says of these two aspects of bodhicitta:

Bodhicitta, the awakened mind,
Is known in brief to have two aspects:
First, aspiring, bodhicitta in intention;
Then active bodhicitta, practical engagement.¹⁰⁴

Bodhicitta of intention is like wishing to go somewhere, and bodhicitta of application is like embarking on the journey to go there. Likewise, that we aspire to benefit all beings is bodhicitta of intention, whereas that we act on this aspiration through six transcendent perfections and countless virtuous deeds is bodhicitta of application.

Some people talk about arousing bodhicitta every day for many years, yet when they really have an opportunity to help others, they remain indifferent and inactive. However, when this is about helping themselves, they are alert and involved. In this case they only have intentions but not application, so they are not really arousing bodhicitta.

On the other hand, some people have never aspired to arouse bodhicitta. They simply perform virtuous deeds such as generosity and discipline, which appears to be the conduct of a bodhisattva. However they've never thought about establishing all beings in perfect Buddhahood, so their deeds are not driven by the bodhicitta of intention. In such cases, they are not considered as having bodhicitta.

A person who hasn't studied Mahayana Buddhism may not really understand this. Nowadays some teachers dissuade their disciples from hearing and contemplating the Dharma. Well, if you have the most superior faculties, it is fine if you don't listen to any Dharma teachings, and you may attain realization and rest in a very high state right after receiving the guru's pointing-out instructions. This happens among practitioners of Chan schools and the Great Perfection. However, do you have such superior faculties? You may want to reflect on this.

Nowadays, many people like to be "practitioners with superior faculties" because practicing preliminaries, arousing bodhicitta, and applying transcendent

¹⁰⁴ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 1, verse 15.

perfections and countless virtuous actions can be quite tiring. They don't want to start from grade one; rather, they aim to obtain a doctorate degree immediately, which is unrealistic.

In worldly life, you may network here and there and somehow acquire an undeserved doctorate degree. However, without the corresponding knowledge and capacity, a mere certificate stating that you hold a doctorate degree from a certain university doesn't help you accomplish tasks. On the other hand, if you possess knowledge and skills, even without a certificate or others' approval, you can still achieve a lot. Similarly, if you have genuinely attained realization, even if no one recognizes you as a great enlightened practitioner, you can still benefit many living beings.

Regarding the difference between the bodhicitta of intention and the bodhicitta of application, Patrul Rinpoche uses the example of a journey to Lhasa. The first step is the intention, "I am going to go to Lhasa." [At the time of Patrul Rinpoche, Tibetans longed to visit Lhasa to fulfill their ultimate dream of seeing the Jowo Rinpoche.] The corresponding initial thought, "I am going to do whatever will ensure that all beings attain Buddhahood," is the intention aspect of arousing bodhicitta.

[We already know this from studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. The intention aspect of arousing bodhicitta is thinking, "I want to liberate all beings." When listening to Mahayana teachings, many people generate such thoughts and make corresponding aspirations together with others. However, when it comes time to apply these thoughts, especially when they encounter hot-tempered individuals, they may easily give up.]

b) Application

After aspiring to reach Lhasa, the Tibetan gathers the necessary supplies and horses, then embarks on the journey. In a similar way, after generating the bodhicitta of intention, we choose to practice generosity, uphold discipline, cultivate tolerance, apply diligence, remain in meditative absorption, and train our minds in discriminating wisdom. To help all sentient beings attain Buddhahood, we actively implement the six transcendent perfections. This reflects the actual journey and embodies the application aspect of bodhicitta.

[Many of you have aroused the intention aspect of bodhicitta and are currently

working on the application aspect. However, many novice Mahayanists haven't yet set out on the road and are still preparing supplies for the trip.]

The abovementioned bodhicitta of intention and application is relative bodhicitta. It is not easy to arouse such a type of bodhicitta. Although it is easy to talk about bodhicitta, when you really encounter difficulties in life, your intention may vanish completely. It is particularly difficult for householders to arouse bodhicitta. *The Sutra on Upasaka Precepts* says:

A monastic arousing bodhicitta is not difficult;

A householder arousing bodhicitta is considered inconceivable.

Some practitioners live a worldly life while cultivating bodhicitta, which, in my view, is very precious. I hope you will never abandon bodhicitta for the rest of your life, no matter how difficult your circumstances may become. Even if you do not achieve a successful practice in this life, as long as you don't abandon bodhicitta, this supreme source of merit will protect you from a bad rebirth, as elaborated in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* with the simile of a diamond.¹⁰⁵ The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche emphasized this repeatedly in many of his teachings. Therefore, whether you are a monastic or a householder, now that you have encountered the great teaching on bodhicitta, make sure that you do not give it up easily.

2) Absolute bodhicitta

¹⁰⁵ The corresponding verses in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (translated by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala, 1993, page 1487–1488):

Just as even a cracked diamond is better than an ornament of gold, the finest of precious metals, in the same way the diamond of the aspiration for omniscience is better than the gold ornaments of the virtues of hearers and individual illuminates, even if the will is broken by adversity.

Just as a diamond, even if cracked, relieves poverty, in the same way the diamond of the determination for omniscience, even if split, relieves the poverty of the mundane whirl.

Just as a diamond, however little, breaks all gems and stones, in the same way the diamond of the aspiration for omniscience, focused on however small an object, breaks all ignorance.

Just as a diamond does not come into the hands of an ordinary man, the diamond of the determination for omniscience does not come into the hands of those of low intentions and poor roots of goodness.

Just as someone who has no knowledge of gems does not recognize the qualities of diamonds or understand their excellence, in the same way a stupid person does not know the qualities of the diamond of wisdom of the aspiration for enlightenment and does not understand its excellence.

Just as a diamond cannot be worn out, the diamond of the aspiration for enlightenment, the basis of omniscience, cannot be worn out.

Both the intention and application aspects are considered relative bodhicitta. After extensive training for a long time in relative bodhicitta on the paths of accumulation and joining, a practitioner can eventually reach the path of seeing and attain the first bodhisattva level. At this stage, they have the genuine experience of suchness, which is the true nature of all phenomena. This is the wisdom beyond all elaboration—the truth of emptiness. At that moment, the practitioner awakens absolute bodhicitta. It is said in a ritual for the Medicine Buddha:

Absolute bodhicitta is a state devoid of any conceptual elaboration.

It's only when a practitioner reaches the first bodhisattva level that they truly attain realization and possess absolute bodhicitta. Although some practitioners may not have reached this level, they can still experience a state akin to absolute bodhicitta. For example, when a practitioner is in the acceptance stage of the path of joining, they will no longer be reborn in lower realms and have obtained a general understanding of the nature of all phenomena. At this point, they can be considered to have roughly aroused absolute bodhicitta. Please note my use of the word “roughly,” as some Buddhist Logicians may wish to initiate a debate with me later.

True absolute bodhicitta is attained through the power of meditation and does not rely on rituals. In comparison, to generate relative bodhicitta, we, as beginners, need to engage in a ritual where we take the bodhisattva vow in the presence of a qualified teacher. For example, before each Dharma class, the sangha members at Larung Gar all recite the following bodhicitta prayer:

Just as all the Buddhas of the past
Have brought forth the awakened mind,
And in the precepts of the Bodhisattvas
Step-by-step abode and trained,
Likewise, for the benefit of beings,
I will bring to birth an awakened mind,
And following those precepts,
I will abide and train myself.

After taking the bodhisattva vow, it is essential to continually renew it to ensure that the relative bodhicitta we have aroused does not diminish but instead grows stronger over time. This is why I value our class time; it allows us to generate

bodhicitta together. Even when classes are not in session, we should still uphold the bodhisattva vow and preferably generate bodhicitta six times each day: three times during the day and three times at night. If that is not possible, we should at least strive to generate bodhicitta once a day. Failing to do so—even once every ten days, once a month, or even once a year—is not acceptable. Until reaching the level of a bodhisattva, it is unwise for an ordinary person to feel proud of their practical state or to even consider themselves an accomplished practitioner while neglecting their bodhisattva vows.

Why is that? Because if a person is truly free of greed, anger, and ignorance, it is acceptable for them to claim they have attained the fruition of a stream-enterer or arhat. However, if a person claims to be an accomplished practitioner while their afflictions are still so fervent, they are merely a person who “achieves” afflictions. Many people do not have a clear understanding of themselves.

As ordinary beings, we’d better recite the bodhicitta prayer once every day, and take the bodhisattva vow in the presence of the guru or in front of the field of refuge. This is very necessary. We should keep this daily practice in our lifetime.

Nowadays, many people are on the hedonic treadmill, constantly chasing something new while discarding anything old. As far as spiritual teachers are concerned, they follow one guru from a particular lineage for a while and then move on to another guru to sample the “taste” of a different lineage. In fact, no matter how many gurus they have changed or how many lineages they have experienced, the fundamental tenets of Mahayana Buddhism taught by qualified gurus remain the same. Therefore, there is no significant difference among the core teachings of lineages such as Nyingma, Kagyu, Kadampa, Gelug, Chan, Pure Land, and others. Thus, it is not particularly necessary to switch lineages constantly.

Besides, a practitioner without a steady mind cannot obtain any true benefit, regardless of where they pursue the Dharma. Therefore, I hope you can primarily engage in a single practice for an extended and consistent period. Bodhicitta practice requires long-term dedication. I hope you can strive to cultivate and strengthen your bodhicitta by taking the bodhisattva vows over and over again, anytime and anywhere.

2.2.2.2.2. Taking the Vow of Bodhicitta

When practicing bodhicitta, we should visualize all the buddhas, bodhisattvas,

and other deities in the sky before us, just as we do in the refuge practice. Regard them as witnesses to our generation of bodhicitta, and reflect on the following thought:

“Among all the countless sentient beings in the vast universe, every one of them, without exception, have been my parent in the endless cycle of birth and death since the beginningless time. I am certain that, as my parents, they have cared for me with the utmost tenderness, offering me the best of their own food and clothing and nurturing me with all their love, just as my current parents do.”

[This thought is of vital importance. Now, when you are completing one hundred thousand recitations of the bodhicitta prayer, have you thought like this? If you’ve neither thought about it nor put it into real practice, no matter how much I talk about it, it won’t help.]

The Kadampa lineage has a seven-point pith instruction for generating bodhicitta, related to its cause and effect.¹⁰⁶ The first point is recognizing all beings as our past mothers, and the second is remembering their kindness. We should think that all living beings in the three worlds have been our parents, who took care of us as our current parents do. Except for a few cases where parents have negative karmic connections with their children, the love and care most parents provide is beyond words. Regarding these teachings, we should first understand them through scriptural evidence and reasoning, and then put them into practice. In doing so, we can generate unwavering trust and appreciation for the practice, which allows us to truly arouse bodhicitta and vow to establish all living beings in perfect Buddhahood.

Then, continue to think: “Now all these kind parents are struggling in the turbulent waves of samsara’s vast ocean of suffering. They have been plunged into the deepest darkness of confusion, unaware of the true path to follow or the false

¹⁰⁶ Seven-point pith instruction for generating bodhicitta related to its cause and effect (Tib. རྒྱལ་བ་མཉམ་པ་ལྟར་, Wyl. rgyu ‘bras man ngagbdun) — the way of generating bodhicitta as taught by Atisha, which has the following seven points:

- recognizing beings as our past mothers
- remembering the kindness of beings
- a sense of gratitude for the kindness
- love, wishing beings have happiness
- compassion
- responsibility
- bodhicitta

The first six points relate to the causes of bodhicitta, and the last one is the result, bodhicitta itself. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

path to avoid. Without a qualified teacher to guide them, they have no refuge or protection, no leader or companion, and no hope—lost like a blind man wandering alone in a desolate plain.

My dear mothers, how can I hope to liberate myself while leaving you behind in samsara? For the sake of all beings, I will awaken the sublime bodhicitta. Inspired by the noble deeds of the bodhisattvas of the past, I will exert every effort until not a single being remains in samsara!”

In the *Sutra of the Great Assembly*, the Buddha says:

Living beings fall into the river of birth and death
Because their minds are deluded;
They are like a blind man who cannot see,
So they are always plunged into suffering.

Therefore, we must vow to liberate and guide these beings so that they will be free from suffering. With this attitude, we then recite the following verse as many times as possible:

*Ho! Mesmerized by the sheer variety of perceptions, which
are like the illusory reflections of the moon in water,
Beings wander endlessly astray in samsara's vicious cycle.
In order that they may find comfort and ease in the luminos-
ity and all-pervading space of the true nature of their
minds,
I generate the immeasurable love, compassion, joy and
equanimity of the awakened mind, the heart of bodhicit-
ta.*¹⁰⁷

We may also recite this verse in Tibetan. All appearances in this world are insubstantial, much like reflections in water, but sentient beings do not realize this, so they wander endlessly in samsara due to their ignorance. To bring them rest in the luminous space of awareness, allowing them to achieve everlasting liberation and freedom, we must train our minds in the four boundless qualities and eventually arouse bodhicitta.

¹⁰⁷ The text is translated by Rigpa Translation, revised for Longchen Nyintik Project, 2023.

During the recitation, we must think of this: “For the well-being of all living beings, I am willing to contribute everything.” By doing so, we will attain the supreme happiness as it is mentioned in *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*:

Worldly beings are in pursuit of their own happiness,
 But they get no happiness, but extreme torments at all times;
 Bodhisattvas strive for the happiness of others,
 And they benefit both [self and others] and get ultimate
 happiness.

Therefore, when we generate bodhicitta, make sure to have a vast mind and to prioritize the happiness of all beings.

In this practice, we may visualize the buddhas, contemplate the benefits and qualities of bodhicitta, or make the following aspiration: “All living beings are so tormented. In whatever way the buddhas and bodhisattvas vowed to benefit them, I shall make the same aspiration.” As it is said in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

All living beings in various realms
 Were reborn as a result of their karmas;
 Being forced by birth, old age, sickness, and death,
 They constantly experience the endless sufferings of the body
 and mind.
 To bring peace and happiness to all living beings,
 I vow to arouse the sublime bodhicitta.

Then, recite the bodhicitta prayer at least one hundred thousand times.

In doing so, we will often think of benefiting living beings. After this preliminary practice, we will have the great power and capacity to benefit others. However, if a practitioner merely accumulates the quantity of practice without paying attention to the quality, their mind may not change significantly. Nevertheless, following the tradition of lineage masters, we must recite the bodhicitta prayer one hundred thousand times during our preliminary practices.

At the end of the session, visualize that, through the power of our deep devotion to the deities of the field of merit, the entire assembly transforms into light, beginning from the outer edges and finally merging into Padmasambhava at the center, who represents the union of all three refuges. Padmasambhava then

dissolves into light and merges with us, enabling the absolute bodhicitta present in the minds of the refuge deities to arise clearly in our own minds. Then, make this wishing prayer:

*May bodhicitta, precious and sublime,
Arise where it has not yet come to be;
And where it has arisen may it never fail
But grow and flourish ever more and more.*¹⁰⁸

This verse is in the bodhicitta prayer that Larung Gar sangha members recite every day.¹⁰⁹

[When seeing a Buddha's statue or on pilgrimage at a sacred place, many gurus recite this verse to generate bodhicitta. *The Questions of Brahmaṇiṣṣacintin* has a very similar verse about arousing bodhicitta. It is very important for us to generate bodhicitta in such ways in our daily lives.]

Then we may dedicate the merit with the lines from *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's Aspiration to Excellent Conduct*:

*Emulating the hero Manjushri,
Samantabhadra and all those with knowledge,
I too make a perfect dedication
Of all actions that are positive.*¹¹⁰

If time permits, we may finish the rest of the verses in the bodhicitta section of Mipham Rinpoche's *Illuminating the Path to Liberation* or recite the entire text of *The King of Aspiration Prayers Samantabhadra's Aspiration to Excellent Conduct*, and *An Aspiration toward the Meaning of the Indivisible Ground, Path and Fruition of the Great Perfection Manjushri*.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 221.

¹⁰⁹ The Larung Gar chanting book is available at: <https://khenposodargye.org/teachings/larung-daily-prayers/>

¹¹⁰ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 221.

¹¹¹ The full title is: *The Self-Radiance of Indestructible Awareness and Emptiness: An Aspiration towards the Meaning of the Indivisible Ground, Path and Fruition of the Great Perfection*

When we are meditating on bodhicitta, it's best if we regard the practice as something very important. By doing so, we may be able to truly arouse bodhicitta. Otherwise, if we just have a rough meditation and our recitation of the bodhicitta prayer is even faster than that of the Avalokiteshvara mantra, we may finish the recitation of one hundred thousand in a few days, but the practice won't be effective.

In fact, the quantity of practice is not of the utmost importance. What really matters is that we contemplate the benefits of bodhicitta over and over again, meditate on bodhicitta according to the instructions, and pray for the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas to merge into our mindstream so that bodhicitta can be truly aroused in our minds. In the past, most of our thoughts and actions probably centered around ourselves rather than others. However, starting today, we should pray for the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas so that we can benefit all living beings. We should make this aspiration.

♦ The supreme merit of arousing bodhicitta

This arousing of bodhicitta is the quintessence of the 84,000 teachings of the Buddha. While having bodhicitta is sufficient on its own, lacking it renders anything else futile. Bodhicitta is a panacea, the remedy for all illnesses, as said in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* says:

Bodhicitta is the most supreme;
It is like the medicine of Agada,¹¹²
That can cure all illnesses,
And offers all peace and happiness.

So, no matter who we are, whether monastics or householders, we should strive to arouse bodhicitta. Without bodhicitta truly arising in our minds, no matter how eloquently we can talk about bodhicitta, it brings no real benefit to ourselves.

All other Dharma practices, including the two accumulations, the purification

Manjushri, authored by Mipham Rinpoche. Khenpo Sodargye mentioned in the teaching that only those who have received the empowerment of the Great Perfection are eligible to recite this prayer.

¹¹² Agada is one of the eight branches into which ayurveda medicine is traditionally divided. Literally, gada means a disease and agada means any agent which makes the body free from disease; however, the term agada is used specifically for the branch of medicine dealing with toxicology, the description of the different types of poisons, and their antidotes. [Source: Vaidya Bhagwan Dash; Lalitesh Kashyap (1994). *Basic Principles of Ayurveda*. Concept Publishing Company. pp. 584, 46, 55. ISBN 978-81-7022-257-6.]

of defilements, meditation on deities, and recitation of mantras, simply serve as methods to make this wish-fulfilling jewel, bodhicitta, arise in the mind. With bodhicitta, everything is easy to achieve, as said in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

The great mind—the mind of bodhicitta—
Is supreme among all kinds of mind.
It can free one from all restrains,
And enable one to possess all qualities.

Without bodhicitta, none of the other Dharma practices can, on their own, lead us to Buddhahood.

Nowadays, many Buddhists don't understand this, but we are fortunate to have encountered Mahayana Buddhism and to have listened to teachings on bodhicitta. How blessed we are!

I often think, "In the 21st century, human beings have complicated minds and diverse lives. Living in such a world, we have encountered Mahayana Buddhism, come to understand the essence of its tenets, and learned what to do and what not to do. We are truly fortunate!"

I've met some people who, after studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, felt their lives had taken a new direction. With the help of Shantideva's wisdom and blessings, they have ignited a beacon of liberation.

Once bodhicitta has been aroused in us, any Dharma practice we engage in will lead to the attainment of perfect Buddhahood. Even if we don't meditate every day but participate in mundane tasks such as carrying water, cooking, typing, digging, and the like, all these actions will still guide us to liberation as long as they are inspired by our bodhicitta. We should always strive to use any means available to cultivate even the slightest spark of bodhicitta within us.

It's worth mentioning that although all teachers are no different from the Buddha, the teacher who provides us with the instructions on arousing bodhicitta sets us on the Mahayana path, making their kindness greater than that of teachers who offer other instructions. This kindness is beyond words and cannot be repaid enough. The only thing we can do is try our very best to benefit all living beings.

When Atisha spoke the names of his teachers, he would place his palms together before his heart. However, when he mentioned Suvarnadvipa, he would

join his hands above his head, and tears would fill his eyes. His disciples were curious about this distinction.

“Is there really a difference in the qualities or kindness of these teachers of yours?” they asked.

“All my teachers were truly accomplished masters,” Atisha replied. “In terms of their qualities, they are identical. However, there is a difference in their kindness. The little bit of bodhicitta that has arisen in my mind is from the kindness of Suvarnadvipa, which is why I feel the deepest gratitude toward him.”

As noted in his biography,¹¹³ Atisha followed 157 teachers in his life. He regarded each of his teachers as no different from the Buddha, and we should emulate his pure perception. In contrast, a person who hasn’t established pure perception may view their teachers as ordinary beings and fail to see any of them as accomplished. This reflects their lack of pure perception.

When Atisha first heard the name of Suvarnadvipa, he was filled with enormous joy and vowed to follow him. Then he took 125 disciples with him to Suvarnadvipa’s place, which is today’s Sumatra in Indonesia, and to get there they sailed for thirteen months across the ocean. During the trip Atisha encountered many obstacles, such as being thwarted when *Ishvara*¹¹⁴ transformed into a big makara fish, being unable to sail the boat for half a month, and more.

Finally, he managed to arrive at his destination. He had followed Suvarnadvipa for twelve years, during which he primarily studied the *Compendium of Training*, *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, and *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and primarily meditated on the bodhicitta of tonglen, or giving and taking. Eventually, he obtained all the great qualities of Suvarnadvipa.

Atisha then returned home with some merchants. When Atisha was in Tibet, he often paid homage to his teacher Suvarnadvipa, saying his bodhicitta entirely came from the kindness of Suvarnadvipa.

Regarding bodhicitta, the most important thing is not just to arouse it, but to ensure that it has actually arisen. Therefore, when we practice bodhicitta, it is

¹¹³ The biography was translated in Chinese by Master Fazun, a twentieth-century Chinese translator of Buddhist scriptures and scholar of Tibetan religious and political history.

¹¹⁴ *Ishvara*, or Maheśvara (Sanskrit; Pali: Mahissara; traditional Chinese/Japanese: ; Pinyin: Dàizàitiān, Romanji: Daijizaiten) is the ruler of all three realms of samsara in Buddhist Mythology. He is also sometimes referred to as SabbalokādhīpatiDevā in Pali literature. His main duty is to give spiritual knowledge. He is one of the Yakkhas who can be invoked for the protection.

not enough to merely pay lip service by saying, “I want to generate bodhicitta.” The crucial aspect is to truly have it arise within us. The love and compassion of bodhicitta must genuinely be alive in us.

Each of us should reflect on ourselves to see whether bodhicitta has arisen within us. When bodhicitta has truly arisen, any aspects of our Dharma practice will become easy, and we will hardly fail in the activities of benefiting others. Even when we encounter a setback, we will let it be and won’t suffer from it at all, because we will no longer have any selfish concerns—the root of suffering.

Some time ago, I noticed that several Dharma practitioners felt quite distressed while engaging in activities aimed at benefiting others. I encouraged them to cultivate a carefree acceptance of any outcome, as long as they were putting forth their best effort, and to avoid selfish thoughts throughout the process. Selfishness can lead to misconduct, resulting in eventual regret for those involved. On the other hand, when one acts selflessly, everything tends to align positively, provided that the individuals involved are genuinely committed to their efforts.

Patrul Rinpoche says:

To recite the formula many hundreds of thousands of times
without taking the meaning to heart, therefore, is utterly pointless.

Here, he uses the phrase “many hundreds of thousands of times” instead of “one hundred thousand times” as requested in our preliminary practices, emphasizing that if the recitation is not guided by bodhicitta, even extensive recitation is ultimately pointless.

In commenting on this statement, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and other masters noted that the wording “utterly pointless” is rhetorical hyperbole—an intentional exaggeration for emphasis. The meaning is that without bodhicitta, even with diligent recitation of the prayer, the merit created is very limited. Therefore, this does not literally mean such a recitation is “utterly pointless,” as it can still plant the virtuous root for merit.

To take the bodhicitta vow in the presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, only to break it later, would be to deceive them. There is no worse fault than this. As said in the *Sutra of the Great Assembly*:

If evil beings in the worlds of ten directions
All hold knives and sticks to coerce my body,

My mind will remain unwavered and hold onto bodhicitta,
Because I have compassion for all beings.

Our bodhicitta will not and cannot waver, because in the presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas we have taken the vow to establish all suffering living beings in perfect Buddhahood. If we have such a firm vow, our bodhicitta will never regress, and our practice will be a success.

At the end of this part, Patrul Rinpoche says, “do not cheat sentient beings either—try to cultivate bodhicitta all the time.” This is the goal of every practitioner.



Lesson 101

“For the bodhicitta of intention, the training has three stages ... how he first began to benefit others.” [page 222–224]

Today we will continue to study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

The last class was the 100th of this teaching series, and I have taught a large portion of the text. I gave 201 classes in total when teaching *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. I do not know how many more classes I have to teach for *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, but I do hope we can continue working together to complete this teaching.

Regarding the length of a teaching, delivering one or two classes is relatively easy for me. After I gave a talk at a community event or university, I often heard people ask, “Are you tired?” My response was, “It’s not stressful for me to give a talk or two.”

In contrast, teaching a series can be more challenging. As a teacher, it can be difficult to engage every listener, as Dharma students have different preferences and perspectives. Repeating a Buddhist story or scriptural reference may bore some Dharma students, but introducing entirely new material each class is also not feasible. Additionally, for the listeners, the constant flow of teachings can create a certain level of pressure.

Especially in the current degenerate age, many people feel reluctant to teach or study the Dharma. Some don’t even know very basic Buddhist teachings, let alone

delve deeply into the Dharma. However, now that you are fortunate enough to have encountered the Dharma, you should strive together and make an all-out effort.

Of the uncommon preliminary practices, we have completed the section on taking the vow of bodhicitta, so now let's proceed to training in the bodhicitta precepts. After taking the vow of bodhicitta, we must train ourselves in these precepts. Let's first discuss the precepts pertaining to the bodhicitta of intention.

I believe that all of you may have generated the bodhicitta of intention. If I ask those of you who have generated this bodhicitta to raise your hands, everyone present today will do so. Each of you has taken the vow of bodhicitta in the presence of the guru and the Three Jewels, affirming your aspiration to benefit countless living beings. However, simply taking the vow is not enough. What comes next? There are corresponding trainings for you to engage in.

It is only through Dharma study that you will come to understand this. Speaking of Dharma study, it doesn't mean you must attend a lecture in front of a particular teacher. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the Dharma is so profound that without a systematic, comprehensive, and sequential study of it, and with only a partial and out-of-context understanding, your practice—whatever it may be—won't be successful. The same is true for the study of Mahayana bodhicitta; therefore, you must grasp its ultimate meaning through learning the related teachings.

However, how you respond to the Mahayana teachings depends on your merit. Some people have accumulated great merit from actions of past lives, so after hearing teachings on bodhicitta or the ten positive actions, they are truly blissful. Every hair on their bodies stands on end, or their eyes fill with tears.

By contrast, some others remain indifferent upon hearing teachings on the defects of samsara or the merit of bodhicitta. No matter how hard others try to persuade them to take the vow of bodhicitta, they are unwilling to do so. The *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* says:

Beings with little merit
Are not interested in bodhicitta.
They don't examine the faults of samsara,
Neither do they appreciate bodhicitta.

Those who lack merit have no interest in performing virtuous deeds or

avoiding vicious ones. They never reflect on the faults and sufferings of samsara, nor do they seek the benefits of bodhicitta. From this, we understand that everyone's likes and dislikes toward the Dharma correspond to the merit accumulated from their past actions.

Now that we can engage in the long-term study and practice of the Dharma, it is also due to the merit accumulated from past lives. Otherwise, even if a person genuinely looks forward to studying the Dharma, they may very likely give up halfway after encountering obstacles. In contrast, regardless of their choices—whether establishing a worldly career or becoming a monastic—those with great merit can always hold onto the right view and achieve whatever they aim for.

Therefore, in the course of our Dharma study and practice, it is very important to frequently repent by reciting the Vajrasattva mantra and the hundred-syllable mantra in order to purify our negative karma. At the same time, it is essential to pray to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Especially in a quiet place like a shrine hall or during group chanting, we should cultivate sincere devotion toward the buddhas and bodhisattvas. We should think, “Through my fervent prayer, may the supreme blessings and wisdom of the buddhas and bodhisattvas merge into my mind, elevate my attitude, purify my negative habitual tendencies, and allow my seed of liberation to blossom and reach fruition soon.” Whether we are alone or with a group, we should always pray in this manner.

In fact, one's mind can change gradually. For example, if you have great faith in Padmasambhava and always think of him and pray to him, then with Padmasambhava's blessing, your karmic obstacles will eventually be purified, and your merit will increase to perfection.

When meditating on bodhicitta, we also pray to Padmasambhava and visualize our root guru as indivisible from him. Many people first pray to Padmasambhava before reciting the bodhicitta prayer, and when their devotion culminates, they cannot help but shed tears. In doing so, the blessings of the Three Jewels will surely merge into the ocean of their minds, allowing the moonlight of liberation to shine forth. Therefore, as Buddhists, it is essential to pray frequently.

2.2.2.3. Training in the Bodhicitta Precepts

For the bodhicitta of intention, the training has three stages: considering

others as equal to oneself, exchanging oneself and others, and taking others as more important than oneself.

For the bodhicitta of application, the training involves practicing the six transcendent perfections.

2.2.2.3.1. Training in the Precepts of the Bodhicitta of Intention

2.2.2.3.1.1. Considering Others As Equal To Oneself

♦ Why are others equal to oneself?

The reason we have been drifting in the vast ocean of suffering in samsara since beginningless time is due to our clinging to a “self” where there is no “self,” and holding onto a sense of “I” where there is no “I.” We constantly place ourselves in the most important position, cherishing ourselves above all else.

The *Lankavatara Sutra* says:

There is neither “self” in the five aggregates,
Nor “other selves” and “all living beings.”

In truth, as said in *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, there is neither “I” nor “you,” and all appearances in the universe are like illusory dreams. However, ordinary people believe in the inherent existence of things that actually don’t inherently exist, and they firmly cling to everything around them, which is the sole cause of the samsaric cycle of living beings.

Through various means Buddhism reveals the truth of no-self, which enables innumerable practitioners to understand there is no inherent existence of self. With this view established in our minds, we will lament how sentient beings in this world are ignorant of this truth. Why is that? There is no “I” in this world and this applies to every sentient being. This is not a compulsive tenet imposed by anyone. Rather, after examining “I” with the great logical arguments of the Middle Way¹¹⁵ and real practice, we indeed cannot find the actual existence of “I.”

¹¹⁵ The four great logical arguments of the Middle Way (Tib. དབུ་མའི་གཏན་ཆོག་མ་ཆེན་པོ་བཞི་, umétentsikchenposhyi; Wyl. dbuma’igtantshigschen po bzhi) are:

- The investigation of the cause: the Diamond Splinters
- The investigation of the result: refuting existent or non-existent results
- The investigation of the essential identity: ‘neither one nor many’

However, countless beings are not aware of this; instead, they have been attached to “I” and “mine,” which keeps them wandering in endless samsara. How pitiful!

After understanding this, we should reflect in this way: Wherever I am and at any time, my only desire is for my own comfort and happiness, wishing to avoid even a moment of suffering. For instance, if a small thorn pricks my skin, or a spark lands on me, the pain seems unbearable, and I instinctively cry out, “It hurts, it hurts!”

The other day, I saw a layman in yellow clothing who is present in today’s class. He was whining that day, and it caught my attention. Initially, I thought something serious had happened, but then I found out that his foot had been pricked by a very small nail.

Of course, I would be just like him if I were being pricked by a tiny nail, or I might even shout much louder than he did. When I received an intramuscular or intravenous injection, I felt a lot of pain if the nurse or doctor didn’t use a gentle execution. Why do we behave like this? Because we are very attached to “I.”

Here is the example that Patrul Rinpoche gives in the text:

If a tiny louse bites us on the back, we often react with intense anger. We catch the louse, place it on one of our thumbnails, and crush it hard with the other. Even after it is dead, we may continue grinding our nails together in frustration. While this is a self-defensive response, it reveals a lack of consideration for the lives of other beings.

Most people today see no harm in killing pests such as lice, mosquitoes, cockroaches, or mice. Occasionally, some Buddhists even argue that it’s acceptable to use pesticides. However, since these actions are often driven by anger, they can lead to rebirth in the Rounding-Up and Crushing Hell.

Buddhism never advocates killing other beings, including so-called pests. We may find lice on our bodies, but as a Buddhist, we should deal it well according to the instructions in the precepts, rather than killing them directly with pesticide.

In the past some Tibetan practitioners also paid little attention to their personal hygiene. I found this unnecessary because the precepts place great

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- The investigation of all: the Great Interdependence

Sometimes it is said that there are ‘five great arguments of the Middle Way,’ but, according to Mipham Rinpoche, the fifth—the investigation of both the cause and the effect: refuting production according to the four alternatives—can be included within the first category, i.e., the investigation of the cause. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

emphasis on physical cleanliness. Moreover, it also says clearly in the kriya tantra and the charya tantra that a practitioner must often clean their residence and their body. Therefore, it is necessary to take care of one's body.

However, this “care” doesn't mean we must be so meticulous about our bodies that we can't tolerate the slightest harm caused by others. For example, when a louse or mosquito bites us, we feel compelled to kill it, or when a dog bites us, we might feel justified in doing the same. Such actions are completely contrary to the values of Mahayana bodhicitta. We should be ashamed to find such minor discomforts so difficult to endure and to react in a way that inflicts so much pain on another being.

Like us, all beings in the three worlds seek happiness and wish to avoid suffering.

Buddhist love and compassion extend impartially to all beings. The good news is that today many people have the opportunity to engage with this Dharma teaching. While some may not fully grasp or implement its principles in practice, they at least begin to understand the greatness of Buddhism.

However, despite their desire for happiness, they remain unaware that true happiness arises from practicing the ten positive actions. Although they do not want to suffer, they invest their efforts in the ten harmful actions that lead to suffering. As a result, their aspirations and actions are misaligned, resulting in continuous suffering.

The Mahayana Sutra on Repaying Kindness also says:

Being in the samsaric ocean of the five realms
Is like falling into filthy mud;
Entangled by attachment and desires,
One lacks wisdom and are deluded by worldly phenomena.

Sentient beings in the six realms of samsara are sunk in the ocean of life and death, as if they were deeply trapped in the mud. This is because they are entangled by attachment and lack of wisdom, so they are fooled by various phenomena of confusion.

Sometimes, when I observe the activities that many worldly people engage in, I cannot help but feel a sense of sadness and genuine pity for them. They are unaware that, ultimately, the “I” does not exist at all, and they spend their days rushing about for the “I.” At the relative level, one's own life is equal to that of others, yet

individuals choose to harm others for their own benefit, which is unreasonable. Sadly, this is what is happening in our society.

In fact, all sentient beings have each, at some point since beginningless time, been our parents. Now that we are fortunate enough to have encountered a qualified teacher and embarked on the path of the Dharma, we can, through hearing and contemplation, distinguish what is beneficial from what is detrimental. We should not ignore the suffering beings around us in our pursuit of personal liberation through practice. For all sentient beings, who are bound by the chains of ignorance and delusion and are like our own mothers, we should offer love and protection without differentiating them from ourselves. We should patiently endure their wrongdoings and stubbornness, cultivate equanimity toward friends and foes alike, and make every effort to relieve them of their suffering.

As I have stressed repeatedly, as Mahayana practitioners, we need to work harder to bring benefit to others instead of focusing only on our own liberation. In this regard, the performance of some religions is quite commendable. In one city each year, they may establish several hundred or more centers or churches and attract hundreds of thousands of followers. They put effort into promoting their religions in an organized and systematic manner, leading to more and more people joining them.

In comparison, the size of the Buddhist community in some cities is shrinking yearly, and some Buddhists even convert to other religions. In other cities, although the number of Buddhists is slowly increasing, the number of centers barely grows. Why is this happening? It is because many so-called Mahayanists only care about their own liberation and rarely consider others' well-being; all they do every day is hold their mala beads and recite mantras.

While it is true that, with the blessings of the Three Jewels, most Buddhist practitioners can manage their lives without worrying about basic necessities like food and clothing—unlike some less fortunate individuals—it is important not to focus solely on ourselves while ignoring those around us, let alone all sentient beings. There are many people around us whom we can benefit, and we should start by sharing Buddhist teachings with them.

Buddhism does not need to compete with other religions, but there is much to learn from their enthusiasm in promoting their belief systems. The Buddhist tenets of compassion and wisdom are widely regarded as extraordinary compared

to those of other religions. Unfortunately, many Buddhists have become self-focused, neglecting to share these precious values with others. Initially, when they began their spiritual journey, their primary aim was to alleviate their own afflictions, and they did not adopt the same goal of liberation from samsara as Shravaka practitioners. Instead, they often seek personal prosperity and individual happiness, hoping to escape the turmoil of afflictive emotions. Their practices of meditation and recitation have been largely motivated by this narrow goal, which falls short of what is expected from a true Buddhist practitioner.

As we can see, many beings around us are living a miserable life. In Prabhākaramitra's version of *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, it says:

Living beings lack freedom,
And often commit wrongdoings.
Bear with them and cultivate more compassion,
So you have no afflictions and transgression.

Living beings are tormented by their afflictions and often engage in wrongful actions, such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. Their minds have never remained in a state of freedom—uncontrolled by desire, aversion, and ignorance. Mahayanists who have cultivated bodhicitta should compassionately understand the misdeeds of living beings, adapt to their needs with skillful means, and remain untainted by their wrong views.

Whatever good or useful things we desire for ourselves, others desire them just as deeply. Therefore, while we work diligently to attain our own happiness and comfort, we should also strive equally hard for the happiness and comfort of others. Just as we would do our best to avoid even the slightest suffering for ourselves, we should aim to prevent others from experiencing any harm as well. Likewise, just as we take joy in our own happiness and prosperity, we should genuinely rejoice when others are thriving as well.

Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Since I and other beings both,
In wanting happiness, are equal and alike,
What difference is there to distinguish us,
That I should strive to have my bliss alone?¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group,

Every day, we recite, “However the buddhas and bodhisattvas generate bodhicitta, I shall do the same.” While this statement may sound uplifting, if we never truly intend to put it into practice, we are deceiving all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Then, when we reflect on our actual behavior, we should feel a sense of embarrassment. In essence, recognizing that there is no distinction between us and all living beings in the three worlds, let us make it our sole mission to discover ways to bring happiness to each of them, now and for all time.

♦ **It takes persistence to train in bodhicitta**

Bodhicitta won’t arise in just a few days, or after attending only one or two Dharma classes. Nevertheless, those who have fervent faith in Mahayana Buddhism will successfully arouse bodhicitta sooner or later, through their persistent practice.

I truly admire many senior practitioners who always regard Dharma practice as the most important aspect of life. Some young practitioners, on the other hand, do not share this perspective; they may diligently pursue the Dharma at first, but soon abandon their practice. For example, after listening to a teacher’s instruction, reading a good Dharma book, or encountering something inspiring, they may immediately embark on a retreat during which they practice from early morning to late evening. It seems they are on the right track. However, after a while, they no longer maintain their practice, and eventually stop abruptly, as if they have collapsed due to a severe illness.

A khenpo once told me about a tulku he met abroad. One day, the khenpo noticed that the tulku had a swollen face and looked pale, so he asked whether the tulku was sick. Normally, the tulku didn’t discuss his virtuous qualities, but this time he mentioned a bit, saying, “Since I first arrived here, I have been to many places over the past few days. I have been busy meeting people day and night and attending conferences to discuss various issues until midnight. After I finally return to my room, I have to complete my lengthy routine recitation. It is around 4 a.m. when I finish the recitation. I then proceed to my meditation practice. Then the new day starts, and I get busy again. So, I haven’t slept for two days. In a few days, I should be able to resume my previous schedule.”

I reflect upon this; indeed, when we are busy, many of us prioritize work and set aside recitation and meditation. By contrast, this tulku, a senior practitioner, has never paused his practice, not only in the present but even during the Cultural

Revolution. During that time, he managed to recite *Chanting the Names of Manjushri* a dozen times every day without interruption, and even during the most dangerous periods he still managed to recite it at least three times a day.

Recently a disciple of an eminent master of Chinese Buddhism visited me. The master is more than one hundred years old, and I asked the disciple how everything is with his teacher. I was told the master still gets up at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. for his Dharma practice. An elderly Tibetan practitioner in my hometown also follows the same schedule of practice.

Whenever I meet the disciples of an elderly practitioner, I always ask, “What time does the elderly practitioner wake up in the morning? What time does he go to bed at night? How does he prioritize the practice of Dharma in his daily life?” After hearing about the routines of these elderly practitioners, I often feel inadequate about my own practice. While I hardly waste time on the eight worldly concerns and non-Dharma activities, I find that my virtuous actions are far fewer than theirs.

Here is a great verse from the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma*:

Be diligent and take no rest—
Engaging in positive actions this way
Will bring one long-lasting happiness
And the attainment of nirvana in the future.

Those who practice in this way are sure to achieve accomplishments in the future.

Most ordinary people share the same outward appearances as those elderly practitioners: They all made of flesh and blood, take three meals a day, and so forth. However, unlike senior practitioners, most ordinary people may lack the mental capacity to engage in virtuous deeds, although this difference is not visible from appearances. Just as we cannot judge a person’s character as good or bad based solely on their looks, we cannot ascertain whether someone is selfish or altruistic just by looking at them. Yet, there can be a significant disparity in their internal qualities and motivations to benefit others.

Therefore, we should emulate those elderly practitioners and make an all-out effort in our Dharma practice. Of course, this should be done within our means,

and there is no need to attempt things beyond our capabilities. *The Treatise on the Provisions for Enlightenment* (Skt.: *Bodhisambhāraśāstra*) also says:

A Bodhisattva should not abandon living beings.

He should always take them under his care, according to his own capability.

A small tractor that can carry only a ton of cargo cannot compare to a big truck that can handle a thirty-ton load. Similarly, a novice bodhisattva who has just taken the vow of bodhicitta is not yet capable of liberating innumerable beings, offering their flesh to others, remaining fully awake 24/7, and constantly meditating on the sufferings of all beings. Nevertheless, we should still strive to do our very best to care for others, which is very important.

♦ The importance of considering others as equal to oneself

When Trungpa Sinachen requested Padampa Sangye to summarize all practical instructions in a single sentence, the great master responded, “Whatever you desire, others desire just as much; so act on that!”

[I often encounter someone who says, “I am too lazy and busy to practice. Can you give me a pith instruction that summarizes all the practices and that I can follow for a lifetime? This instruction must help me uproot my ego clinging and bring me swift accomplishment. Please provide me with such an instruction in a single sentence.”]

Padampa Sangye’s answer corresponds to the important teaching in the *Analects of Confucius*:

What you do not wish upon yourself, extend not to others.

Zigong once asked Confucius, “Is there an instruction one can follow all one’s life?” Confucius answered, “Yes, it’s kindness and forgiveness.” Then Confucius recited the above-mentioned quote.

Recently some professors didn’t give an accurate explanation of this quote when giving a public teaching of the *Analects of Confucius*, so they received criticism from other intellectuals. In fact, whether one is teaching ancient Chinese literature

or the tenets of Buddhism, one must stay close to the original meaning. Otherwise, the teacher will be criticized by others.

This quote from Confucius also touches on the core teaching of Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, we should completely eradicate the negative mindsets of selfishness and aversion toward others, and regard ourselves and others as entirely equal. We should constantly remind ourselves of this.

2.2.2.3.1.2. Exchanging Oneself and Others

- ♦ **The practice and standard of exchanging oneself and others**

Here is how to do the practice:

Look at a being who is actually suffering from sickness, hunger, thirst, or some other mental affliction. If no such being is present, imagine such a person, animal, or other being in front of you. As you exhale, visualize yourself giving that being all your happiness and the best of everything you possess—your body, your wealth, and your merits—much like removing your own clothes and dressing the being with them. Then, as you inhale, imagine drawing in all of that being's suffering, envisioning the being becoming happy and free from all afflictions as a result.

The Seven Points of Training the Mind also covers this especially profound practice. Start this meditation on giving happiness and taking suffering with one individual, and then gradually extend it to include all living beings.

Whenever you experience anything undesirable or painful, cultivate deep, heartfelt compassion for all the countless beings in the three worlds of samsara who are enduring similar suffering. Wish fervently that all their suffering may ripen in you instead, allowing them to be free from suffering and find happiness. When you feel joy or contentment, extend that happiness with the wish that it may bring joy to all beings. Generate this thought from the bottom of your heart and meditate on this over and over again.

Here is an example given by Patrul Rinpoche regarding the criterion of considering others as equal to oneself:

Two of us have to go out in the snow; I have a pair of boots, while the other walks barefoot. I remove one boot and give it to the other person. Now we each put on one boot, so we will be able to proceed. Each of us has one barefoot, so we suffer

the cold in the same way. Each of us also has one foot in a boot, so we experience the comfort of warmth altogether.

If we can do so in all our actual activities in life, we are indeed considering others as equal to ourselves.

When meditating on exchanging oneself and others, we should meditate to give both boots to the other without any consideration for ourselves. Our only motivation is this: “I will take over all his sufferings and give him all my happiness.” This practice is of a higher level.

Here is what Patrul Rinpoche used to say about the criterion of exchanging oneself and others:

Imagine there are five herders, and one of them owns a raincoat large enough for four people to use. When they encounter a heavy downpour, the owner of the raincoat gives it to the other four, willingly choosing to get drenched. If in all actions we can act like this, then this is the true practice of exchanging oneself and others.

In today’s world, there exists much hatred among people, which is opposed to the tenets of Mahayana Buddhism. Some individuals may speak sweetly, saying, “I am willing to sacrifice myself for world peace and democracy,” but what they really do is not for others, but for themselves.

From the perspective of the law of karma, those who suffer from their negative actions are indeed pitiful, but the wrongdoers are even more so. In the “plays” of this world, all beings are playing different roles. Nevertheless, no matter what happens, we Mahayanists who have taken the bodhicitta vows must always prioritize the benefit of all living beings. We must never abandon bodhicitta, as said in the *Sutra of the Great Assembly*:

Even if I experience innumerable torments in the three lower
realms,
I will never lose my bodhicitta.

The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras says:

With utmost diligence, [bodhisattvas] benefit sentient beings,
For great compassion is their nature.

♦ The merit of exchanging oneself and others

This bodhicitta practice of exchanging oneself and others is the ultimate and unending quintessential meditation for anyone on the Mahayana path. Even if one does not practice it long-term, merely giving rise to this exchange once can purify negative actions and obscurations accumulated over many kalpas, leading to a significant accumulation of merit and wisdom. It can liberate one from lower realms and wrong views.

In one of his previous lives, the Buddha was reborn in a hell where beings were forced to pull wagons. At that time, he and his companion, Kamarupa, were pulling a wagon together. However, because they were too weak to move it, they were beaten and struck with blazing weapons by the guards, causing them extreme suffering.

The Buddha thought, “Even together, we can’t move the wagon, and we’re both equally suffering. It would be better if I alone pull the wagon and bore the torments, allowing my companion to find relief.” So, he told the guards, “Please put my companion’s harness around my neck and let me pull the wagon alone.”

The guards angrily responded, “Who can stop others from experiencing the effects of their own actions?” Then they struck the Buddha’s head with an iron hammer. Because of this thought of compassion, the Buddha immediately left that life in hell and was reborn in a god realm. It is said that this marked the beginning of the Buddha’s journey of benefiting others.

The Mahayana Sutra on Repaying Kindness also covers this story. Bodhisattva King of Joy asked the Buddha, “What made you generate bodhicitta for the first time?” The Buddha shared the above-mentioned experience. It is also mentioned in the Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish, in which Ananda asked the Buddha, “How did you first generate bodhicitta?” The Buddha answered with this story.

There are different accounts in sutras regarding how the Buddha first generated the bodhicitta of benefiting all living beings. For example, as recorded in the *Vinayavastu*, King Pasenadi once asked the Buddha, “What brought you to first generate bodhicitta?”

The Buddha answered the question with a story:

Many kalpas ago, there was a monarch who really liked an elephant. So he asked a trainer to train this elephant. After a while, the trainer said the elephant was tamed and gave it back to the monarch.

One day the monarch rode on the back of the elephant and went hunting in a forest. Suddenly this male elephant sensed the smell of a female elephant and started to go wild. The monarch was scared. The trainer called on the monarch to hold onto a branch, thus bringing him to safety. Meanwhile, the elephant continued to charge forward and was soon out of sight.

The monarch went into a rage and shouted to the trainer, “How dare you put me on the elephant’s back without having tamed it?”

The trainer answered, “I have indeed tamed the elephant. It’s just that this animal went out of control after smelling a female elephant. There is nothing I can do. Since it is already tamed, soon it will return by itself.”

Seven days later, the elephant indeed returned. To demonstrate to the monarch that the elephant was indeed tamed, the trainer asked the elephant to pick up a red-hot metal ball with his trunk. The animal obeyed the instruction without hesitation, despite the excruciating burns.

The trainer asked the monarch, “Do you want to continue? If I ask him to swallow the metal ball he will do so, but he will doubtless be killed.” The monarch then called the demonstration to a halt.

The monarch asked, “The elephant is indeed well tamed, but why did he go wild the other day?”

The trainer answered, “I can only train and tame the elephant’s body, but not the mind.”

“Who can tame the elephant’s mind then?” The monarch asked.

“Only the Buddha,” The trainer answered. Then he started to speak to the monarch of the Buddha’s great qualities and wisdom.

The monarch developed great faith in the Buddha and also took the vow of bodhicitta, saying:

[I vow] to accumulate innumerable merits in pursuit of
 Buddhahood,
 And eventually become a Sugata,¹¹⁷ the sovereign who gains
 mastery over all;
 To those who haven’t yet reached the other shore,

¹¹⁷ Sugata (Skt.; Tib. བདེ་བར་གསེགས་པ་, dewarshekpā, Wyl. bde bar gshegs pa) — an epithet of the Buddha, literally meaning ‘gone to bliss’.

I vow to bring them to the other shore.
Hearing the Buddha is devoid of attachment, I also vow to
generate bodhicitta
As well as spread the supreme Dharma and benefit beings;
I aspire to attain Buddhahood
And help all sentient beings to eliminate their attachments.

The monarch was one of the past lives of Buddha Shakyamuni. This story can be found in *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*.

To sum up, when we first generate the intention to benefit all beings, it marks the beginning of our bodhicitta. For every Buddhist, refuge is indeed very important, but what's most important is to cultivate bodhicitta. After hearing Mahayana teachings, we should think in this way: "I need to take the first step toward enlightenment. From now on, I vow to benefit all beings." We can make such an aspiration in our minds or write it down in our diary. Eventually, we will surely attain perfect enlightenment.



Lesson 102

“Another story tells how the Buddha, in a previous rebirth ... mentality which gives so much importance to yourself.” [page 224–228]

Now we are studying the section “training in the bodhicitta precepts,” that is, what we should be doing after taking the vow of bodhicitta. Last class we talked about the training in exchanging oneself and others.

The notion of exchanging yourself and others is similar to the worldly expression of “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes,” and is a mandatory training for a Mahayanist. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

If I do not interchange
My happiness for others’ pain,
Enlightenment will never be attained,
And even in samsara, joy will fly from me.¹¹⁸

The key to training in bodhicitta is to eliminate clinging to “I,” which is not an easy task for us. In comparison, it is not very difficult for us to let go of our clinging to things. As long as we learn some of the Dharma teachings, through examination with our wisdom we will know that everything in samsara—including persons, things, fame, and wealth—is not worth clinging to.

For example, you may antidote your own clinging to wealth by the thought

¹¹⁸ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

that you cannot take even one penny with you at the moment of death; you may antidote your clinging to romance or status by the thought that it is just your fabricated thought without any inherent meaning. However, it is very difficult to completely let go of your clinging to “I,” and solely to strive for the well-beings of all living beings, like a great bodhisattva.

However, without relinquishing the “I” completely, your suffering will never end. Shantideva also says:

If this “I” is not relinquished wholly,
Sorrow likewise cannot be avoided.
If they do not keep away from fire,
People cannot escape from being burned.

We have already studied *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, so we should know this very well.

Therefore, we must relinquish the “I” by all means and devote ourselves to activities of benefiting others. It is quite hard for us ordinary people to do so. However, now that we’ve encountered qualified teachers and the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, we’ll be able to achieve this sooner or later, as long as we try our very best to train our minds in exchanging self and others. Having aroused bodhicitta in this way, even if one has a bad rebirth in hell, one can swiftly be freed from the torments of hell, let alone suffering in the human realm.

As we know, if a being is reborn in hell this fully ripened effect is hard to exhaust. However, the power of bodhicitta is so strong that negative karma can be swiftly purified. As mentioned in the last class, in a previous life the Buddha experienced a moment of kind thought of taking another person’s suffering onto himself. Because of this thought, the Buddha immediately left that life in hell, and was reborn in a god realm.

Inspired by the Buddha’s experience, when we are experiencing torments or slandered by others in this life, we should adopt bodhicitta and visualize we are taking onto ourselves all the other beings’ sufferings. By doing so, all the wrongdoings we have committed since time without beginning will be purified on the spot. It is even mentioned in some scriptures that even the five crimes with immediate retribution can be purified by the power of bodhicitta.

In Patrul Rinpoche’s text, he introduces another story about how the Buddha,

in a previous rebirth as the “daughter” of the sea captain Vallabha, was liberated from the lower realms upon truly experiencing the exchange of himself with others.

This story can be found in the *Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra*. I gave a brief teaching of this sutra once. Today, I will first tell the story according to this sutra, then move to the version told by Patrul Rinpoche in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Actually, almost about ninety percent of the stories that Patrul Rinpoche put in the text are from the Tripitaka; only about ten percent of the stories originate from Tibetan Buddhism per se.

♦ **The story of Maitrakanyaka in the *Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra***

As recorded in the *Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra*, once when the Buddha was in the city of Rajgir, he spoke the following verse to his monks:

Making a bit of offering to parents, one attains infinite merits;
Committing a bit of disobedience to them, one accumulates
infinite faults.

The sangha asked, “What are the corresponding karmic effects?” The Buddha answered the question with a story:

A long time ago, in the city of Varanasi, there lived a venerable elder whose son was named Maitrakanyaka. When Maitrakanyaka was still young his father died, so he was brought up by his mother alone. When he grew up the family was out of money, so he made a living by selling firewood. He started from earning two *karsa* each day, and eventually four, eight, and sixteen *karsa* per day. Maitrakanyaka would give all his earnings to his mother.

People noticed that Maitrakanyaka was a smart young man, and asked him, “Your father used to bring back jewels from ocean voyages. Why don’t you do the same?”

Hearing this, Maitrakanyaka asked his mother, “What was my father’s caste occupation?”

“He belonged to the caste of those who brought back jewels from ocean voyages,” His mother answered.

Maitrakanyaka asked his mother, “My father used to search for jewels. Why can’t I do the same?”

His mother thought he was a filial child who would always stay with her, so she joked, “Of course you can do the same.”

With his mother’s permission, Maitrakanyaka made up his mind. Having found his voyage companions, he said goodbye to his mother.

His mother was shocked, saying, “You are the only child I have! Unless I am dead, how can I let you leave me?”

Maitrakanyaka answered, “Had you not granted me the permission, I wouldn’t have dared to go. But since you’ve already said yes, why are you stopping me? I must go!”

Seeing how determined he was, his mother besought him not to depart and threw herself in despair at his feet, but Maitrakanyaka managed to withdraw himself from his mother’s grasp. During the process, he pulled out a few dozen strands of her hair. Worried that her son would be considered unfilial, she had to let him go.

He and his companions set off on a voyage for jewels. Once they got jewels, they set forth to return. There were two ways to go back: one was over the ocean, and the other over a land route. His companions chose the land route, so he followed.

At that time, there was a rule: In case of robbery, if the merchant leader was captured, all his merchandise would then belong to the robbers; if the merchant leader was not captured, the robbers had to return his merchandise upon his request.

Therefore, Maitrakanyaka always slept separately from his companions, who normally would wake him up each morning so they could travel together again. One night it was so windy that their night routine was messed up. On the next morning his companions forgot to wake him up, so Maitrakanyaka was separated from the group and got lost. Worse yet, he didn’t know the way home.

While wandering around, he saw from afar a town made of lapis lazuli. Starving and tired, he went to the town, where four beautiful goddesses welcomed him at the gate. In their company, he lived a life of great pleasure for forty thousand years.

Later he got bored, so he left there. Then he arrived at a town made of crystal, where eight beautiful goddesses welcomed him in the same manner. After eighty

thousand pleasant years passed among them, Maitrakanyaka got bored and departed again.

He came to a town made of silver, where he was welcomed by sixteen beautiful goddesses. He lived a pleasurable life with them for 160,000 years.

Later, he left again and went to a town made of gold. He lived happily with thirty-two beautiful goddesses for 320,000 years.

When he was about to depart again, the goddesses persuaded him to stay, saying there would no longer be a pleasant place for him. Maitrakanyaka didn't listen, believing there must be somewhere better. So he left again.

He then saw a town made of iron. Upon entering the town, he saw no goddess coming to welcome him, but a suffering man with a fire wheel revolving on his head. When the man saw Maitrakanyana, he transferred the wheel to Maitrakanyana's head and left.

Maitrakanyana asked a nearby guard, "When can I remove this fire wheel from my head?" The guard answered, "When there is a person who has accumulated the same merits and faults as you did, and also experienced seeking jewels in the sea, traveling to each of the towns, and spending the same amount of time there, he can then replace you. Otherwise, this wheel will never fall off you to the ground."

Maitrakanyana asked, "What merit have I accumulated, and what wrongdoings have I committed??" The guard answered, "When you were in Jambudvipa you offered two karsa to your mother, and because of this you could come to the town of lapis lazuli, where you enjoyed forty thousand years of pleasure with four beautiful goddesses. Because you offered four karsa to your mother, you were able to arrive at the town of crystal where you happily spent eighty thousand years with eight beautiful goddesses. Just like this, your happy experience multiplied as you offered more.

However, because you disobeyed your mother and pulled off her hair, you had to experience the karmic effect of the revolving wheel. You will only be freed from this torment when someone who commits the same misdeeds like yours replaces you in the future."

Maitrakanyana asked again, "Is there any being who is suffering the same torment?" The guard said, "Yes, thousands upon thousands. The number is immeasurable."

Hearing this, Maitrakanyana thought to himself: “Since I have to experience this torment, may all their suffering ripen in me, and may I alone bear it for all of them.” Immediately, the wheel fell to the ground.

He asked the guard, “Didn’t you say this wheel won’t fall to the ground? How is it on the ground now?” The guard was furious, and killed Maitrakanyana by beating his head with a metal rake. Maitrakanyana then was reborn in the Tushita Heaven.

The Buddha told the sangha, “Maitrakanyana was a previous rebirth of me. Thus, a minor misdeed toward the parents will bring major negative consequence, whereas a minor offering will result in infinite merit. Therefore, we must devote ourselves to taking care of our parents.”

There is also a story about exchanging oneself and others in *A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden*, a Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia compiled by Daoshi more than one thousand years ago.

There was a man named Lu Yuanli in the Tang dynasty, who lost consciousness due to a severe illness. He woke up a day later and told others his experience:

In his experience someone brought him to a hall where he saw dozens of steaming stoves, on top of which were steamers filled with innumerable sinners.

Seeing the suffering beings, he made a vast aspiration, saying, “May all their suffering ripen on me, and may I bear it for all of them!” Then he jumped onto the stoves. He fainted on the spot, and didn’t feel any pain.

Then a monk appeared and rescued him, telling him, “I know you really mean it. Now you may go back.” Then Lu Yuanli regained his consciousness, as if waking up from a dream. He regained his life.

As you see, it is mentioned in many reliable Tibetan and Chinese accounts that one may swiftly be freed from suffering after having the thought of exchanging oneself and others. Make sure you don’t consider these stories fictions or fairytales. Rather you should think, “As of now, whether I am in a lower realm, a bad dream, or a torment of my present life, I must vow to take the suffering of all living beings on me, and bear it for all of them!”

This may be a bit hard to do at first, but over time it will become your habit. Although I myself haven’t trained very well in bodhicitta, I do have fervent faith in this practice. When I have a nightmare, fall ill, or encounter mishaps, I can

always generate such a thought. Although the power of my thought may not be very strong, I can still experience a satisfying end result when exchanging myself and others. Therefore, I do hope each of you will apply this profound instruction in your daily life.

♦ *The story of daughter of Vallabha in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher**

Once, there was a householder named Vallabha, whose sons had all died. When another son was born, he chose to name him Daughter, hoping this would ensure the child's survival. Vallabha then set out to sea in search of precious gems, but tragically, his ship sank, and he perished.

As the son grew older, he inquired about his father's caste occupation. His mother, worried that revealing the truth might lead him to a life at sea like his father's, told him that his father had been a grain merchant. Consequently, the son took on the role of a grain merchant himself and supported his mother with the four coins he earned each day.

However, the other grain merchants soon informed him that he was not a member of their caste, making it improper for him to engage in their trade. As a result, he was compelled to cease his work.

[Caste plays a crucial role in Indian society. There are the caste of brahmins, the caste of merchants, the caste of farmers, and more. When a person is born into a caste, it cannot be changed. Normally, people of the same cast can get engaged, have dinner together, and so forth. Sometimes cast conflicts can occur during elections of senior government officials, and sometimes there are even riots caused by caste issues.]

He returned to his mother to ask her again about his father. This time, she revealed that his father had been an incense seller. Inspired, he began selling incense himself and used the eight coins he earned each day to support his mother.

[He was quite filial at the beginning. Some of us are as filial as he on certain issues. However, under other circumstances, we are unfilial. Therefore, toward our parents, we often accumulate the mixture of positive and negative karma.]

But Daughter was stopped once again, and then his mother told him that his father had sold clothes. He then established himself as a clothing merchant and

soon began earning sixteen coins a day to support his mother. However, he was once again driven out of business by other clothing merchants.

[How tiring! He had just established a business, but then he had to give it up and start from scratch again. That's not easy!]

When he learned from his mother that he belonged to the jewelers' caste, he began selling jewels and brought home thirty-two coins each day to give to her.

It was then that the other jewelers informed him that he belonged to the caste of those who brought back jewels from ocean voyages, and that this was his destined work.

When he arrived home that day, he announced to his mother, "I belong to the caste of jewel hunters, and I'm going to sail across the great ocean to pursue my own trade!"

"It's true that you come from the jewel hunters' caste," she replied, "but your father and all your ancestors have died at sea in their quest for jewels. If you go, you will meet the same fate. Please don't go! Stay at home and trade here instead."

However, he could not heed her pleas. He prepared everything he needed for his journey. As he set out, his mother, unable to let him leave, grabbed the hem of his garment and wept. In his anger, he shouted, "Your tears will bring me bad luck on my journey across the ocean!" Then he kicked her in the head and departed.

[If we have done something similar in this life, we must repent.]

During the voyage, his ship was wrecked, and nearly the entire crew drowned. However, Daughter managed to cling to a plank and was washed ashore on an island. There, he found a town called Joy. In a magnificent house adorned with precious metals and jewels, four beautiful goddesses arranged silken cushions for him to sit on and offered him three white foods and three sweet delicacies.

As he prepared to depart, they warned him, "Do not travel south. Great misfortune will befall you if you do!"

Once a person's karma has ripened, they cannot be dissuaded from their path. Daughter did not heed the warnings and set off on his journey. He arrived in a town called Joyous, which was even more beautiful than the last one. There, eight stunning women offered themselves at his service. As before, they cautioned him about the great misfortune that awaited if he continued south, but he disregarded their advice and ventured forth once more.

In a town called Intoxication, more perfect than the others, he was welcomed by sixteen exquisite goddesses who also served and warned him, but their efforts ultimately proved futile.

As he continued his journey, he encountered a magnificent white fortress that reached up to the skies. It was called Guru Brahma's Castle, where thirty-two stunningly beautiful goddesses invited him inside. They prepared a couch of silken cushions and served him three white dishes and three sweet ones, urging him to stay. However, he remained resolute in his decision to leave.

As he got ready to depart, the goddesses cried out, "Wherever you go, please avoid the south! Evil awaits you there!" Despite their warnings, he felt an irresistible urge to head south, and south he went.

[He was driven by his karmic wind and couldn't exert any self-control. Some practitioners are like this. Dharma peers and the teacher tried to persuade them to stay at Larung Gar, but they insisted on their decision to leave. However, in the end, they deeply regretted their departure.]

Soon, a fortress of iron loomed before him, its towers reaching high into the sky. At the gate stood a black man with menacing red eyes, gripping a long iron bar in his fist. When Daughter asked what lay inside the building, the man remained silent. As Daughter drew closer, he peered inside and noticed many more men like the first one. A wave of terror washed over him, causing his hair to stand on end.

He thought to himself, "This must be the danger they warned me about."

He stepped inside and saw a man whose brain was being crushed by a steel wheel spinning on his head.

"What did you do to deserve this?" asked Daughter.

"I kicked my mother in the head, and this is the fully ripened effect. But what about you? Why didn't you embrace the happiness offered at Guru Brahma's Castle? Why seek suffering here?"

"I suppose my karma has led me here as well," thought Daughter.

At that moment, a voice from the sky proclaimed, "Let those who are bound be freed, and those who are free be bound!"

Suddenly, the steel wheel began spinning on Daughter's head. Like the other man, his brain was crushed to a pulp, and he experienced excruciating pain and

suffering. This suffering stirred within him a profound compassion for all those who shared his plight.

[When in torment, we are more likely to generate compassion. Recently a hunter who used to kill many deer and jackals had a car accident, and his leg was almost completely broken. He was sent to a county hospital for an operation. His doctor didn't give him anesthesia, so he underwent excruciating pain.

At that time, he remembered the piercing screams of those beasts whose legs were broken by his gunshot. Then he realized, "I've never thought of the suffering of those animals. Now the karmic effect has ripened when I am still alive." While experiencing the pain, he started to recite the Vajrasattva mantra. This hunter is someone I know, and he told me this story in person.

In fact, when we are happy, it is hard for us to reflect on this. Only when mishaps befall on us will we realize they are the karmic effects we deserve. However, it is too late to regret by then.

When I had a spine problem, my doctor treated me with a small knife propulsion device. When the pain was unbearable, a thought occurred to me: "Had I been a Spanish bullfighter in a previous life? I might have stabbed my sword into a bull's back often, so I have to experience the same in this life." Maybe it's true. This is what I thought at the time.]

Daughter thought, "In the realms of samsara, there are others who, like me, suffer for having kicked their mothers' heads. May all their suffering ripen in me, so that I alone can bear it for all of them. May none of them ever experience such pain again in any of their future rebirths."

[The nature of samsara is suffering. As long as you are still trapped in samsara, no matter how wealthy, privileged, or talented you are, you will definitely experience suffering. Therefore, having such a thought at the moment of torment is very important.]

Immediately the wheel flew up into the air, his suffering came to an end. Despite having wronged his mother, he experienced immediate relief through a moment of virtuous thought. In this state of bliss, he ascended to the height of seven palm trees.

Parents are very significant objects for our engagement in both good and bad actions. Any karmic effect caused by our minor disrespect or insults toward them is difficult to exhaust.

Here is a story from *The Sutra on Going Forth*:

A mother and her daughter got two buckets of milk from a ranch. The daughter was asked to carry the large bucket of milk, and the mother carried the small one. On the way home, the mother repeatedly urged her daughter to hurry up, saying the road trip was dangerous and she was worried about mishaps. The daughter was very tired from carrying her load, so she got angry and lied to her mother, “I have to go to the bathroom. I will be back very soon. Please carry this large bucket for now.”

Then, the daughter deliberately walked slowly. Her mother walked six krośa¹¹⁹ with the large bucket on her back. The daughter was a previous rebirth of Yasodharā, the wife of Prince Siddhartha. Because of what she did to her mother in her previous life, Yasodharā’s pregnancy lasted six years before she finally gave birth to Rahula.

The Buddha says in this sutra:

All karmas, whether good or bad, are not experienced in vain;
One will inevitably face the consequences of their own actions.

Therefore, our experience of happiness and suffering doesn’t happen for no reason. We are the creator of our own good and bad karma. The happy and painful things we undergo in samsara are results of the good and bad activities we’ve done.

Therefore, we must respect and serve our parents well. Whenever possible, we should gather with them, as it is said in the *Itivuttaka*:

Those who long for blessing and happiness
Should respect their parents,
Pay homage and make offering to them,
Love and care for them, and live close to them.

However, due to various reasons many people pay no attention to their parents, and there are fewer and fewer children who are truly filial and obedient to their parents. In fact, parents are very significant objects of our actions. Make sure we all pay enough attention to this.

¹¹⁹ Krośa is a unit of measurement which is derived from a Sanskrit term, क्रोश krośa, which means to “call,” as the unit was supposed to represent the distance at which another human could be heard. It is an ancient Indian subcontinental standard unit of distance, in use since at least 4 BC. According to the Artha-śāstra, a krośa or kos is about three thousand meters or 1.8 miles.

♦ **The bodhicitta of exchanging oneself and others can swiftly purify negative karmas**

The story of Daughter tells us that bodhicitta can even purify the ripened effects of previous negative activities.

Here is a similar story from *The Collected Writings of Master Yinguang*:

In the early twentieth century of China, there was a man named Xu Weiru who suffered severe rectal prolapse. After each defecation he had to wait fifteen minutes for his anus to slowly go back before he could move.

In the first lunar month of 1919, he had to rush and leave by car due to an emergency right after his defecation. As a result, his rectal prolapse got so much worse that his anus could no longer go back. For seven days and seven nights, he suffered enormous and unceasing pain.

He first countered the pain by reciting the Buddha's name, but nothing changed. Then he aroused bodhicitta, thinking, "This disease brings excruciating pain. May I experience more pain so others don't have to get the same disease!" He then practiced recitation with great devotion and eventually fell asleep. When he woke up he found himself fully cured, and the disease never arose in him again.

There are countless stories about how bodhicitta removed sufferings. People of the past made good records of it. However, people of the present don't have much personal experience of the Buddha's blessing, or the power of bodhicitta and faith, due to their own lack of faith. Even though there are some examples few of them are recorded, which is a great pity.

♦ **The instruction on exchanging oneself with others is extremely precious**

The bodhicitta practice of exchanging oneself with others is the essential, ultimate, and indispensable method for attaining enlightenment. In fact, the geshe of the Kadampa lineage used to make it the core of their practice.

Geshe Chekawa of the Kadampa lineage was a great master who was well-versed in both the New and Ancient Traditions and had memorized numerous texts on logic. Once, he visited Geshe Chakshingwa and noticed a small text resting on his pillow. Curious, he opened it and found the following verse:

Offer gain and victory to others.

Take loss and defeat for yourself.

Chekawa was struck by the profundity of this teaching and asked Chakshingwa for the title of the text.

“It’s the *Eight Verses of Training the Mind* by Langri Thangpa,” said Chakshingwa.

“Who holds its transmission?”

[Whatever teaching or texts are written by a master, the transmission is very important.]

“Geshe Langri Thangpa himself.”

Chekawa was resolute in his desire to receive these teachings. He first traveled to Lhasa, where he spent several days circumambulating sacred sites.

One evening, a leper from Langthang told him that Langri Thangpa had passed away.

[This is not good news! I used to have a great faith in a Geshe and had been begging my father to take me to see him. Finally, we managed to pay him a visit. However, when we arrived at his door, we were told the Geshe had passed away the night before. I was so sad. This happened when I was twelve years old.]

Chekawa inquired about the successor of the lineage and learned that there were two potential candidates: Shangshungpa and Dodepa, but that they could not reach an agreement on the matter. However, the two of them were not arguing out of competitiveness.

[They both had been practicing the *Eight Verses of Training the Mind* so well that they didn’t want to pursue any of the eight worldly concerns. Neither of them wanted to be the successor. Each only wanted to serve the other.]

Shangshungpa said to Dodepa, “You are older, more experienced, and well-respected; you should take the succession. I will serve you as if you were Langri Thangpa himself.”

In response, Dodepa replied, “You are younger and more learned. You should be the successor!”

The two Geshees actually viewed each other with pure perception, but Geshe Chekawa mistakenly heard that they were in conflict over who would become the

successor. He thought to himself, “They surely don’t have the transmission of this teaching. Who could possibly have it now?”

[Geshe Chekawa had a commentary on the *Eight Verses of Training the Mind* which is not very extensive and just offers a literal interpretation. At the beginning of the commentary, Chekawa said, “I first developed faith in the Kadampa teachings because of the *Eight Verses*.” I wanted to translate this commentary but haven’t found time for it. In fact, you will receive great blessings from studying Chekawa’s commentary.]

He tried to find out who was the lineage’s best holder, and someone told him that it was Sharawa. So, Chekawa went to visit Sharawa.

Sharawa was delivering a series of teachings to a few thousand sangha members. Chekawa listened for several days, but he did not hear him mention the specific teaching he was seeking.

[Yesterday a layman also told me, “I am here for teaching of the Great Perfection. I listened to you for a few days, but didn’t hear you say a word about the Great Perfection. May you please give me a bit of teaching on it?”]

Chekawa thought to himself, “Sharawa doesn’t seem to have it either, but I’ll ask him. If he has the transmission of this teaching, I’ll stay; otherwise, I should leave.”

With that in mind, Chekawa approached Sharawa, who was circumambulating a stupa. He spread a cloth on the ground and invited Sharawa to sit for a moment. “I have something to ask you,” he said.

“Yes, venerable monk,” Sharawa replied. “What is your concern? Personally, I’ve always found my answers on my meditation cushion.”

“I came across these words in a text: ‘Offer gain and victory to others. Take loss and defeat for yourself.’ I found them very inspiring. Is this a profound teaching or not?”

“Venerable monk,” Sharawa said, “whether or not you appreciate this teaching, if you wish to attain Buddhahood, the practice of this teaching is absolutely indispensable.”

“Do you have the transmission of this teaching?” Chekawa asked.

“Yes, and it is my main practice,” Sharawa replied.

[The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche requested everyone at Larung Gar to learn three texts by heart: the *Eight Verses of Training the Mind*, *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, and *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*. We were also asked to take the texts with us wherever we go. As I mentioned many times, these three texts, plus Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's *Song of Victory*, while short are the essence of the essence, you can receive incredible blessings if you recite the texts often. Once the blessings merge into your mind, all of your practices will be easy. Otherwise, your practice can barely be successful if you only have intellectual understanding of the Dharma.]

"Please, I beg you, grant me the transmission," requested Chekawa.

"If you can stay here for a long time," Sharawa replied, "I can pass it on to you. Otherwise, if you only stay for a day or two and then leave, that may not be possible. This teaching requires long-term practice."

Thus, Chekawa followed Sharawa for six years. During this time, Sharawa guided him solely in the practice of the *Eight Verses of Training the Mind*, and he devoted himself wholeheartedly to it. Through this practice, Chekawa was able to completely eliminate his self-attachment.

To relinquish the attachment to "I" is extremely important. Otherwise, it will be as it is said in the *Flower Ornament Sutra*:

If one believes the "I" truly exists,
One is falling into a dangerous path.

Of course, only those with the sources of merit are interested in such teaching. *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* also says:

The noble ones have no interest in vices;
The evil ones have no interest in virtues.

Therefore, only a truly wise man can generate faith and joy in the teaching of exchanging oneself and others.

Through this bodhicitta training, one can alleviate physical pain and mental suffering in this life. Based on my own experience, I truly believe that the bodhicitta practice of exchanging oneself with others is more effective than any medical treatment in terms of eliminating suffering. Of course, we may still need to take medication or receive an intravenous injection. However, during medical

treatment, we should also often engage in the practice of exchanging ourselves with others.

Sometimes I feel that getting sick can actually be a good thing. If I didn't fall ill, I would have fewer opportunities to practice exchanging myself with others. Whenever I experience pain, illness, or a mishap, I immediately think of this practice and implement it. There is no better method to alleviate the sickness and suffering of this life. Moreover, there is no better way to subjugate spirits, negative forces, and obstacle makers. Therefore, we should abandon the toxic mindset of self-attachment and diligently cultivate bodhicitta through the practice of exchanging ourselves with others.



Lesson 103

“I may be in samsara, I may be reborn in hell, ... thousand gods who listened to his teachings and perceived the truth.”
[page 228–231]

Regarding training in the precepts of the bodhicitta of intention, we have already studied the meditation on considering others as equal to oneself, and the meditation on exchanging oneself and others. Today, we will proceed to the meditation on considering others more important than oneself.

“Being altruistic,” different belief systems may hold different views on this. Mahayana Buddhism puts emphasis on bodhicitta which covers supreme views and practices that involve loving and benefiting all living beings. In comparison, although other religions or philanthropic organizations also stress the importance of altruism, their views and practices differ significantly from that of bodhicitta.

Regarding altruism, ancient Chinese philosophers such as Mengzi, Mozi, and Yangzi held different views. Yangzi promoted the principle of “self-interest,” while Mozi developed the principle of “universal love.” Mengzi considered both of their principles extreme.

Mengzi said, “Yangzi’s principle of caring for one’s own interest does not acknowledge the authority of the sovereign. Mozi’s principle of loving universally for all does not acknowledge special affection for one’s father. One who acknowledges neither the sovereign nor the father is like a beast.”

Of course Yangzi’s philosophy, which is self-centered without caring about others, doesn’t make sense. When a person is always self-centered, he will be

especially attached to himself and his own ideas. Other than himself he cares about nobody, not even the sovereign, parents, the Three Jewels, the Buddha, and the teacher.

However, how is it that Mozi's principle of universal love renders the fault of having no specific affection for one's father? How can this be equivalent to the behavior of beasts? Have you ever seen a beast which has universal love for everyone? Mengzi probably didn't fully understand the principle of Mozi, so his refutation is not solid.

However, Mozi's principle of universal love is not identical to the altruistic values of Mahayana Buddhism. Without a systematic study of the Dharma, one may not be able to fully grasp the vastness and profundity of Mahayana Buddhism. Only when a person experiences the true essence of Mahayana bodhicitta will they feel they have developed a bird's-eye view as if from the top of Mount Meru. All worldly philosophies and principles will then fall within the scope of their vision.

Today we'll study the meditation of considering others more important than oneself. This practice requires us to, throughout our Mahayana journey, think very little of ourselves, and put all other beings in a more important position.

In fact, a person with genuine bodhicitta always puts the benefit of others first. Take the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche for example: all his actions and thoughts were driven by altruistic motivations. Even when he appeared to be dressing, eating, or sleeping, it was actually his skillful means to benefit others.

I am very fortunate to have followed my root guru, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, for nearly twenty years, which allowed me many opportunities to stay close to him and witness his actions. Since my guru left this world, I often reflect on various aspects of his life. I have come to realize that he had lived for propagating the Dharma and benefiting beings. As long as it was beneficial to others, he would do and say whatever was needed. In contrast, if something was only beneficial to himself but not to others, he would certainly refrain from doing or saying it. This is truly great and admirable!

Of course, it is extremely important for us ordinary beings to emulate the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's deeds. However, I hesitate to categorize you all as ordinary beings. There must be many great bodhisattvas among you. As the old saying goes, "Among three people walking together, there must be one who can be

my teacher.” Venerable Atisha also said, “Of four monastics, there is one sublime being.” Therefore, some of you may not be ordinary beings.

Even if we cannot remain altruistic at all times, we must recognize our responsibility to benefit others. A banker’s task is to manage money; a teacher’s task is to educate students. What is the task of us Buddhists who have taken the vow of bodhicitta? I believe you know it very well.

2.2.2.3.1.3. Considering Others More Important than Oneself

When doing this practice, we should think:

“I may be in samsara, reborn in hell, ill, feverish, or facing any other misfortune, but I will endure it all. May the sufferings of others ripen on me! May other beings receive all my happiness and the effects of all my good actions!”

We should cultivate this thought in the depths of our hearts and actually put it into practice, emulating the example set by great teachers.

Langri Thangpa says in the *Eight Verses of Training the Mind*:

In brief, directly or indirectly,
I will offer help and happiness to all my mothers,
And secretly take upon myself
All their hurt and suffering.

We should keep this instruction firmly in our minds and put it into real practice. Whenever we encounter a mishap in life, we should arouse such a thought.

The practice of considering others as more important than oneself is essential for us to eventually arouse bodhicitta. Of course, as ordinary beings, it is easy for us to talk about and think of placing ourselves in a secondary position while prioritizing others. However, few of us can truly do so when something crucial arises. Nevertheless, we still need to study the Dharma and strive to increase our altruism.

People who are truly altruistic will not waver or easily give up on endeavors that can help others. Those whose altruism is not fully developed, when happy and in a good mood, may claim, “I strive to establish innumerable mother-like beings in perfect enlightenment.” Nevertheless, in times of crisis, they may easily abandon others and focus solely on protecting themselves. This is similar to what happened

during the Cultural Revolution, when a strong attachment to self-interest caused many people to compromise their beliefs and readily abandon others.

Then, what should a true Mahayanist do? Great masters of the past and present have set examples for us through their inspiring deeds. Here are a few such stories.

♦ **The story of Maitriyogi**

Maitriyogi was one of Atisha's teachers. Once, while he was teaching the Dharma, a man nearby threw a stone at a dog. Maitriyogi cried out in pain, "Ouch! Ouch!" and fell from his throne. Seeing that the dog was unharmed, the people present thought he was being overly dramatic and pretending. They thought, "Someone hit the dog with a stone, not the teacher, so why does he appear to be in pain?"

[When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was teaching Lama Yangtik, he addressed how disciples often develop wrong views towards their guru, thinking things like, "This action of the guru is unreasonable," or "What the guru did is unfair." Such thoughts indicate that the disciple is being influenced by negative forces. In this context, Maitriyogi was attuned to the audience's thoughts. As a wise teacher, he could discern what his disciples were thinking simply by observing their facial expressions. Indeed, an extraordinary guru also possesses the supernatural ability to read minds, allowing him to fully comprehend his disciples' thoughts.]

Maitriyogi, aware of their thoughts, turned to reveal his back, where the welt of the stone thrown at the dog was clearly visible. This evidence convinced everyone present that Maitriyogi had physically taken upon himself the pain inflicted by the stone striking the dog.

According to the Biography of Atisha, Maitriyogi was a great teacher with sublime bodhicitta. Atisha noted that among the many teachers he had followed, some were renowned masters recognized as manifestations of the Buddha, while others appeared to be ordinary individuals. Nevertheless, all his teachers possessed supreme worldly and transcendental qualities.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche stated that if a practitioner shares the same pure perception of all teachers as Atisha did, the more teachers he follows, the better. However, a practitioner without pure perception is better off not following too many teachers.

Many eminent masters of the past did similar acts of taking upon themselves

the suffering of another being as Maitriyogi did. There is a historical account in *The Stories of the Great Achievers in Himalaya* about an eminent master who noticed a group of people about to burn a thief to death. The master told the gang that it was he who had stolen their belongings, not the thief they had caught. As a result, the master was burned to death in place of the thief.

A few months after I came to Larung Gar, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche went to Xinlong, a county in the west of Sichuan Province, after teaching us the *Ornament of the Middle Way*. I didn't accompany him on that trip.

Later, a Dharma fellow who went with him told me, "When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was expounding the Dharma at Xinlong, someone was hitting a dog outside. Rinpoche reacted in the same manner as Maitriyogi did. He was crying, physically taking upon himself the pain of the dog."

Here is another story about the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. One day a lama named Khenlo was bitten on his foot by a venomous snake, and no treatment was effective. That night, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche physically took upon himself Khenlo's pain from the snake bite. On the next day, Khenlo's foot was fully healed, and no trace of the bite was left.

However, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's foot became swollen, and the mark of a bite appeared on the very spot where Khenlo's foot had been bitten. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche remained ill for fifteen days. This story can be found in the Biography of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

Therefore, great achieved masters do put the benefit of all living beings first, as said in *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*:

He loves others more than he loves himself;
He forgets himself and only strives to benefit all beings.

Bodhisattvas benefit all beings in a purely selfless manner, rather than in an egocentric manner. If a person clings to the "I," they will unavoidably experience more sufferings in samsara. As it is said in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Countless ages, O my mind,
You spent, desiring to attain your aims.
And what great weariness it was,

While your reward was only misery!¹²⁰

♦ The story of Dharmaraksita

Master Dharmaraksita began his spiritual journey as a Shravaka pandita of the Vaibhashika school. Although he had not encountered Mahayana teachings in the earlier part of his life, he possessed a natural affinity to Mahayana tradition, and, without any deliberate effort, he was filled with great compassion.

[Some eminent masters in Thailand and Sri Lanka are Shravaka practitioners, but they have fervent motivation to benefit all beings, which far exceeds that of those Mahayana practitioners who only pay lip service.]

Once, Dharmaraksita's neighbor fell seriously ill. The doctor declared, "To treat this illness, I need to feed him the flesh of a living person. If I can obtain it, the illness can be cured. However, living flesh is difficult to find, so it seems there is no hope to treat him."

In response, Dharmaraksita said, "If it can cure his illness, I will offer my flesh." Without hesitation, he cut a piece of flesh from his own thigh and gave it to the doctor. His neighbor ate the flesh, and, sure enough, he was cured.

Dharmaraksita, who had not yet realized emptiness, experienced immense pain from his action. However, his profound compassion prevented him from feeling any regret.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked the neighbor.

"Yes, I'm fine, but look at the difficulties I've caused you!"

"I would even face death if it meant bringing you happiness," replied Dharmaraksita.

He was in such pain that he couldn't sleep at all. Finally, during the early hours of the morning, he dozed off and began to dream.

In his dream, a man dressed entirely in white appeared before him and said, "Whoever seeks enlightenment must endure trials like yours. Well done! Well done!" The man then spat on the wound and rubbed it with his hand. Miraculously, the wound vanished without leaving a scar.

¹²⁰ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

When Dharmaraksita awoke from his dream, he discovered that his wound had indeed been healed. The man in white had been Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

From then on, Dharmaraksita attained the authentic realization of the ultimate truth of emptiness and was able to fluently and effortlessly recite all the verses of Nagarjuna's *Five Treatise on the Middle Way*.¹²¹

Asanga's experience was similar. It was only when great compassion arose in his mind that he had a direct vision of Bodhisattva Maitreya. He then went to Tushita Heaven, where he received teachings on Maitreya's Five Treatises. When Dharmaraksita was still an ordinary being, he offered his own flesh to the patient out of his immense compassion. Because of this, he then realized emptiness.

While studying the *Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way*, we learned that a Mahayanist can experience one of two situations: they may first develop great compassion, followed by a realization of emptiness, or they may realize emptiness first and then cultivate great compassion. Dharmaraksita's case exemplifies the first scenario.

Generally speaking, however, it is not recommended for an ordinary person to offer their own body. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche mentioned that Dharmaraksita's case was exceptional, because it is only after attaining the first bodhisattva level that an individual can offer their body as easily as giving away a vegetable, without any attachment. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche also said that offering one's body before having attained the first stage is not recommended anywhere, including in the text of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

The Sutra on the Mahayana Principle of Six Paramitas says:

One upholds the precepts not out of fear of hell,
Nor for the purpose of seeking rebirth in a god realm,
Nor for one's own personal liberation.

This state of having no fear of the hell realm is characteristic of the first bodhisattva level and above. Aside from noble beings who have attained at least the first bodhisattva level, only those who do not believe in the law of karma dare to claim, "I fear no hell. It's fine if I fall into hell." Rather than having reached a

¹²¹ They are: *The Root Verses of the Middle Way*, *The Refutation of Objections*, *The Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*, *The Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning*, and *Crushing to Fine Power*.

high state of realization, they are simply foolish. It's akin to an intoxicated person yelling, "I fear no prison! Arrest me! Go ahead!" How foolish!

Before reaching the first bodhisattva level, it is not advisable for a person to offer their body. While an ordinary individual can make donations that pose minimal risk to their health, such as blood donation, offering an eye or another body part while alive could lead to regret and potentially foster anger. This anger can ultimately undermine all their accumulated merit.

Today, many individuals, upon realizing that they can no longer survive, choose to donate their organs—such as the liver, kidneys, and corneas—to patients in need after their deaths. This selfless act is commendably encouraged by hospitals and the media, and many people have embraced the idea. As Mahayanists who have studied altruism, we should consider being more proactive in this endeavor. However, in light of current circumstances, it is difficult to determine whether organ donation is indeed a positive choice.

Legislation on organ donation after death has been enacted by many Western countries a long time ago. According to the law, organ donation can only occur if the donor has expressed their willingness before death or if their immediate family members provide consent, and the donor must be declared dead before their organs are recovered.

However, there have been instances where some hospitals and individuals in certain countries, motivated by greed, have removed a patient's heart or liver before they were declared medically dead to ensure the quality of the donated organs, neglecting the suffering a donor may experience when their organs are taken too early. In such cases, the donor's consciousness may not have completely left the body, and they may become aware of and distressed by what is happening, even if they had agreed to the donation previously. This is because when a person is in the intermediate state of bardo, their consciousness becomes much more acute and sensitive to the actions of others.

Organ transplantation is in great demand in today's society. For example, statistics show that in China, due to the shortage of organs, fewer than ten thousand successful transplants are performed each year. The ratio of supply to demand for organ transplants is 1:150. Given this shortage, a wealthy patient may be willing to pay 1,000,000 yuan for a liver that would otherwise cost 200,000 yuan, and he may even bribe the doctor to obtain it. As a result, a doctor who accepts the bribe may

deliberately diagnose a patient as incurable, who could have otherwise been saved, in order to secure the liver for the wealthy patient. Even worse, he may remove the patient's organs before clinical death. This is truly terrible.

Therefore, we are neither opposed to nor fully in agreement with the act of organ donation for two reasons. First, the relevant legislation is not yet fully established. Thus, even if a person is willing to donate their organs, without legal safeguards, various problems can easily arise. Second, some individuals may not adhere to ethical standards when managing others' organ donations. Sometimes they may have no qualms about engaging in unethical behavior for the sake of money. Given this, it's difficult to predict how your wishes or agreements on organ donation may be interpreted.

There is an article about organ donation in a Chinese textbook for fourth graders.

A fourteen-year-old girl lost her mother to a disease. The hospital asked the family to donate her mother's corneas. The father agreed. The girl strongly opposed the decision, crying, "How can you let them treat my mom like that! She came to this world whole, and she should also die whole!" He father said, "Your mother and I have agreed to help others get better with our organs after we die."

Later the girl grew up, got married, and had a daughter. When the woman's father was in his late years, he agreed to donate his organs, especially his corneas. The woman's daughter, who was then fourteen years old, supported her grandfather's decision, and later said she also wanted to donate her corneas after her death.

Two weeks later, the woman's daughter was killed in a car accident. Following her own daughter's wish, she had donated her corneas, which allowed two blind people to regain their vision.

This story advocates organ donation from a positive perspective. But as I just mentioned, given what's happening in reality, you should engage in careful research before making your own decision.

In countries such as the United States and Canada, when a person applies for a driver's license, they are asked to fill out a form regarding their willingness to donate organs in the event of a car accident. China also plans to implement a similar system. The Vice Minister of Health informed journalists that it would be enacted this year.

However, it is reported that ninety percent of drivers oppose this idea. Some

believe that obtaining a driver's license is a joyful occasion, and filling out an agreement on organ donation diminishes that happiness. Many Chinese people consider "death" a taboo subject. There are indeed cultural differences on this topic across countries.

Nevertheless, as the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said, it is not advisable for an ordinary person to donate organs, not even burning off a finger as an offering to the Buddha. Burning off a finger in front of a Buddha statue causes excruciating pain, and one may eventually regret it or develop other unwholesome thoughts. Therefore, we should focus on actions within our capacity. For things beyond our capacity, we can vow to undertake them later when we are able.

♦ The story of Padma

The *Sutra on Past Lives of the Buddha as Bodhisattvas* has a similar story, as that in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

In the past, there was a king named Padma, whose people suffered from sores. He discovered that the source of the illness was a poisonous tree. When his people drank water contaminated with leaves from the tree, they developed sores. He immediately ordered the tree to be uprooted. Most people recovered, but there were still some who could not be cured due to having the sores for too long.

King Padma consulted doctors and was told that the illness could be cured with the flesh of a specific fish. According to the doctors, there was no alternative solution.

Upon hearing this, King Padma climbed a tree near the river and vowed to reincarnate as a fish after he died. He then jumped into the river and took his own life. Soon, he became a fish. Many patients ate the fish, and their sores were all healed.

This is a story about Buddha Shakyamuni in his previous life which is similar to that of Padma in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, but not identical.

Here is another story in the *Sutra of Jataka* tales:

There was once a king whose country had a great drought. Not even a drop of rain fell for three years, and his people suffered tremendously. The king was so worried he asked several Brahmins to perform a fortune telling when it would rain. The Brahmins told him, "It will rain after the drought lasts ten years."

Filled with distress, the king decided to sacrifice himself to relieve his people's hunger. He performed a ceremony of confession and purification and vowed to become a big fish after his death so that he could offer his flesh to everyone. Then the king fasted for seven days and starved.

When he died, he indeed became a fish as big as the Black Mountain, and was two thousand kilometers long. His people cut off his flesh to eat and survived the famine.

This story is very close to the one about King Padma in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Here is the story:

In ancient times, Buddha Shakyamuni, in a previous life as a king named Padma, faced a severe epidemic that claimed the lives of many of his subjects. Concerned for their well-being, the king summoned the doctors to inquire about the proper treatment for the disease.

"This disease can be cured with the flesh of the *rohita* fish," they said. "Since the disease has clouded our minds, we are unable to come up with any other remedy."

On the morning of an auspicious day, the king bathed, put on new clothes, performed a ritual of confession and purification, made great offerings to the Three Jewels, and prayed fervently, saying, 'After I die, may I be reborn immediately as a *rohita* fish in the Nivritta River!'" He then leapt from the palace, which was hundreds of feet high, and instantly was reborn as a fish in the river.

[It normally takes a long time to be reborn from a womb or from an egg, but Padma immediately transformed into a *rohita* fish from the miraculous birth.]

Then, the fish cried out in human language, saying, "I am a *rohita* fish; take my flesh and eat it!"

At this, everyone rushed to eat it. Typically, when their own interests are at stake, people often disregard the lives of others, and so they began to cut into the fish's flesh.

Once one side was consumed, the fish flipped over, presenting the other side for them to eat. As they alternated between sides, the first side of the fish would grow back. This way, by continuously eating from both sides of the fish, everyone who was ill found healing. Then the fish spoke to them all:

"I am Padma, your king. I sacrificed my life and was reborn as a *rohita* fish to

save you from the epidemic. If you wish to repay me, you should strive to avoid doing evil and commit to doing good.”

They all obeyed him, and from that day forward, never again experienced bad rebirths. This story can also be found in *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*.

As shown in the story, to benefit living beings, a bodhisattva can completely sacrifice himself. *Jatakamala: A Garland of Birth Stories* says:

Bodhisattvas have the power of compassion and aspiration;
They care for and sympathize with all living beings,
Can sacrifice themselves with great courage,
And never develop sorrowful thoughts.

♦ The story of a giant turtle

Many kalpas ago, Buddha Shakyamuni was reborn as a giant turtle. During this time, five hundred merchants set out to the ocean in search of treasures. However, they encountered a shipwreck along the way and fell into the water, facing the risk of drowning. In this moment of peril, the turtle called out in human language, “Climb onto my back, and I will carry you to safety on the other shore!”

All the merchants heeded the turtle’s advice. As they all boarded, the weight became overwhelming. Nevertheless, the turtle summoned all its strength and swam towards the shore. Once it reached land and let the merchants disembark, it was so exhausted that it fell asleep before it could return to the sea. While it slept, a swarm of eighty thousand flies began to suck its blood.

[The turtle story is also in the *Saṅghabhedavastu of Mula-Sarvastivada Vinaya*, which says that an ant noticed the turtle, so it brought eighty thousand ants from the nest to eat the turtle. The turtle was so exhausted it kept sleeping until the ants ate off all its skin, leaving only its flesh exposed to the air.]

When the turtle woke up and noticed the number of flies, it thought, “If I return to the water or roll over, these flies will be killed.” So, it chose to remain still, sacrificing its body and life.

[Many inspiring stories recount the actions of the Buddha in his previous lives. If we were faced with similar situations, it’s unlikely we could emulate his level of sacrifice for sentient beings.]

After attaining Buddhahood, the Buddha turned the first Dharma Wheel at the Deer Park. During this event, the five bhikkhus, including Kaundinya, along with eighty thousand celestial beings, achieved realization upon hearing the teachings.

The sangha asked the Buddha, “How are the eighty thousand gods able to realize the truth?” The Buddha told the turtle story and said, “The eighty thousand gods are the eighty thousand flies. I fed them with my blood and flesh in my previous life. Now that I’ve attained perfect enlightenment, I satisfy them with the Dharma.”

Practicing bodhicitta generates great merit when a practitioner focuses on bringing happiness to sentient beings, even if that intention lasts just a split second. While we may not be able to emulate the realized bodhisattvas who selflessly offer their flesh and blood, we can at least strive to maintain the intention of helping others at all times.

The Questions of the Naga King Sāgara says:

For tens of thousands of kalpas,
The act of making abundant offerings to others with an equal
mind
Cannot surpass the act of care and sympathy
With a compassionate heart, in terms of merit.

In fact, it is not very difficult to arouse such a compassionate thought in a short period of time.

In the process of meditating on bodhicitta, you may recite the bodhicitta prayer while reflecting on today’s stories about Padma, Maitriyogi, Dharmaraksita, the turtle, and many other tales of our Teacher Shakyamuni in his past lives.

Through contemplation during the recitation of the prayer, you will discover that all our suffering and pain originate from our self-clinging. The practice of bodhicitta can diminish our self-clinging and enhance our altruistic mindset. In doing so, both worldly and transcendental happiness will naturally arise. I hope each of you will practice with great diligence to cultivate genuine bodhicitta.



Lesson 104

“On another occasion, the Buddha was reborn in the land ... He returned to the palace, and brought benefit and happiness to his subjects.” [page 231–234]

It is a big project to teach *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. I don’t know how many classes are still left before we finish studying the text. Nevertheless, we should start well and end well with the teaching.

I have been praying that I can complete the teaching of the text and that you can also finish the entire teaching. Unless impermanence arises, which is out of anyone’s control, many people will stick to their vows and won’t have any problem finishing the teaching.

However, I’ve noticed that some laypeople who follow the live broadcast often skip classes. In contrast, ninety-nine percent of the sangha members at Larung Gar are able to attend each class. Of course, there are a few members, including those who sit close to my seat, who are often absent. I don’t know whether it is because they are unwell or not in a good mood. If the absence is due to illness, I hope they will apply for sick leave directly with me; if the absence is due to a bad mood, they don’t have to inform me since I cannot do much about it anyway.

Regarding group learning, it doesn’t work for a Dharma student to attend class when they want to and skip it when they are not in the mood. For many years, we have placed great importance on studying the Dharma, always making it a top priority. I hope those who follow the teachings can adjust their mindset and attitude, if necessary.

Nowadays, many laypeople are not very motivated to study the Dharma. They have numerous excuses for not attending classes: having dinner with friends today, taking a business trip with a boss tomorrow, and other commitments the day after tomorrow. It may be difficult for some of these Buddhists to maintain a flexible schedule due to the nature of their work. However, some other Buddhists are not too busy to attend classes. Their absence may indicate that they do not consider attending a Dharma class to be the most important thing in life.

In fact, long-term and consistent study and contemplation of the Dharma are extremely important. Whether it's about practicing the Dharma or propagating it, we must listen to teachings as well as engage in practice. In doing so, we can antidote afflictions and benefit living beings. If one doesn't pursue the Dharma, that's another matter. As long as one chooses to embark on the Dharma path, long-term and consistent study and contemplation of the Dharma are indispensable. We must not forgo them or exchange them for other pursuits.

Therefore, I emphasize this issue before today's teaching, in case some long-term Dharma students grow weary of listening to teachings. In fact, to help you maintain a sense of novelty in the Dharma, I can always share brief pith instructions or simple Buddhist stories. For example, I can discuss the love songs of Tsangyang Gyatso today and the life stories of National Master Yulin tomorrow. By doing so, I can certainly capture your attention more effectively. However, what's most important for you is not to know all of these, but to study the Dharma in a systematic manner.

Now that you can systematically study the Dharma, please do appreciate this opportunity. Such opportunities do not last, as external circumstances are constantly changing, and impermanence can affect you at any time. If one day you find yourself without the chance to study the Dharma, you may come to realize how fortunate you used to be and how precious this experience is. I want you to cherish this opportunity not because my teaching is great, but because you are receiving the Buddha's teachings. In particular, the pith instructions from Patrul Rinpoche are extremely rare and valuable. Each of you should genuinely appreciate these teachings, for only by doing so can you gain true benefits from them.

Today we'll finish the section on "training in the precepts of the bodhicitta of aspiration." In the next class, we'll move on to the section on "training in the precepts of the bodhicitta of application." We've already studied the bodhicitta practices of "considering others as equal to oneself," "exchanging oneself and

others,” and “considering others more important than oneself.” In the last practice, we explored a few stories, and now let’s continue.

There are many stories about the earlier births of Buddha in which he offered his body. Here is one of such stories in *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*:

In one of his previous lives, the Buddha was a forest deer who had fervent love and compassion. One day, a forest fire broke out, and as the deer was about to flee, he noticed that a river was blocking the escape route for many animals. The deer then stretched his front and rear legs over the riverbanks, creating a bridge so that the other animals could safely cross.

In the end, he was severely wounded and exhausted. However, he noticed that a rabbit had not yet crossed the river, so he held on with his last ounce of strength until the rabbit passed. Then the deer fell into the river and died. The rabbit he had saved was later reborn as Subhadra, the last disciple taken by Shakyamuni Buddha.

There are many inspiring stories about the Buddha’s previous lives, from which we can see that he was willing to forgo family, offer wealth, and even sacrifice his body for the benefit of others, never regretting any of his altruistic actions. As stated in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

City and land,
Wife and lifespan,
When offering everything,
He never regrets.

In my PowerPoint presentation, there are quotes from scriptures that you should take note of. In fact, when teaching, Dharma teachers should ensure that listeners can access the quotes or instructions. Some of you may not be able to note everything due to poor memory or eyesight, but you should consider borrowing others’ notes after class.

I have heard that some Dharma teachers teach well but often keep their teaching materials secret. When a Dharma student asks for the cited quotes from scriptures, these teachers may refuse to share them. There is no need to keep quotes confidential. The goal of teaching the Dharma is to help listeners understand and remember the teachings. If a teacher is unwilling to share teaching materials with others, it may be better not to teach.

As the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once mentioned in class, some Dharma

masters recite numerous scripture quotes, which can seem quite impressive. However, they do not teach according to the disposition and capacity of their Dharma students. They merely appear learned before the students, which is not ideal. The teachers may not act this way out of arrogance; it may simply be due to their inexperience in teaching.

I hope that Dharma teachers and knowledgeable laypeople do their best to assist Dharma students who haven't fully grasped the teachings. I noticed that some individuals, while taking notes on scriptural evidence, obstruct others' views with their bodies, forcing their classmates to see the notes only by peering under the note-taker's armpit. Buddha Shakyamuni was willing to offer his body for the benefit of others, while some Buddhists hesitate to share a quote. In this case, learning Mahayana Buddhism has lost its purpose.

Some great Tibetan masters make every effort, after each class, to help listeners understand the teachings. Take Khenpo Depa, for example: he used to teach in the morning and offer tutoring services in the afternoon. At that time, there was no tutor to assist him, so he was responsible for conducting the tutoring sessions himself. When Khenpo Depa noticed that disciples failed to jot down quotes, he would recite the scriptural evidence repeatedly, write it down for them, ask them to memorize it, or copy the quotes onto pieces of paper as handouts. He would do this even if there was only one Dharma student in need. With this in mind, what should we do now? We should all reflect on this.

Of course, if a Dharma teacher is leading a large class, it can be difficult to convey scriptural evidence to each individual student, one by one. In such cases, the teacher can prepare a handout with relevant scriptural references for the class. This can help attendees memorize the quotes. Our goal is to ensure that people understand our teachings, and this must be made clear.

♦ The story of Manicūda “Jewel Crest”

King *Manicūda*, or “Jewel Crest,” was one of the Buddha's previous lives. The story of his selfless offering, which we are about to cover, actually took place, so we shouldn't regard it as a fictional legend. As we reflect on the Buddha's deeds in his previous lives, we may feel somewhat embarrassed. Although we have taken the vow of bodhicitta in the presence of the buddhas, the bodhisattvas, the gurus, and the Three Jewels, we often forget to put that vow into practice in our lives.

Many of our actions may suggest that we have not even generated the bodhicitta of aspiration.

When a person has aroused the genuine bodhicitta of aspiration, they will at least consider others as equal to themselves and exchange themselves with others. But are we able to do these things? It's very difficult. Nevertheless, we are all followers of Buddha Shakyamuni, or his "fans" in today's language. Thus, we should try our very best to emulate the Buddha's actions.

Since time without beginning, we have been tormented by self-clinging. To rid ourselves of self-clinging, we should meditate on emptiness on one hand and train our minds in bodhicitta on the other. We should emulate the Buddha's selfless and altruistic behaviors in his previous lives, just as a student emulates their teacher.

Now let's study the story of Manicūda:

In one of his previous lives, the Buddha was reborn in the land of Śāketa as the son of King Golden Crest and Queen Joyous Beauty. He was distinguished by a protuberance on his head adorned with a precious jewel, from which nectar flowed that could transform iron into gold. Consequently, he was known as Manicūda, meaning "Jewel Crest." At the time of his birth, there was a rain of various precious substances, and he also had a magnificent elephant named Excellent Mountain.

After Jewel Crest grew up and ascended to the throne as the king, he governed his worldly affairs by adhering to the Dharma and always practiced generosity toward the poor, which successfully eliminated poverty and begging.

A rishi named Brighu had a beautiful daughter who was born from a lotus and possessed all the auspicious signs. Brighu gave Jewel Crest his daughter's hand in marriage. Soon, the couple had a son who looked exactly like his father, and they named him Lotus Crest.

One day, the king decided to organize a grand offering and invited numerous guests, including the rishi Brighu and a king named Dusyanta, Hard-to-Endure.

[Hard-to-Endure is a bad character in this story. Do keep this in mind. It's like when reading novels, some people like to remember when a new important character is introduced, to see what role they are going to play in the story.]

At that time, Indra transformed into a raksasa to test the king's intentions. Emerging from the oblation fire, the raksasa approached the king and pleaded for food and drink. The king offered a variety of delicious dishes, but the raksasa

rejected them all, smiling as he said, “What I truly need is the warm flesh and blood of a freshly slaughtered animal.”

The king felt a bit troubled and thought to himself: “If I don’t harm sentient beings, I won’t be able to provide that kind of flesh and blood. But I would rather give up my own life than harm any sentient being. If I don’t give it to him, this rakṣasa will be deeply disappointed. What should I do?” Then, another thought arose: “It seems the time has come to offer my own flesh and blood.” So, he said, “I will give you my own flesh and blood!”

[In today’s world, not to mention a national leader, even a low-level government official may remain silent and indifferent to others’ requests. Therefore, sometimes it is not easy for us to put bodhicitta into real practice under such circumstances.

Recently, I was expounding the Dharma in a Tibetan region, and tens of thousands of Tibetans attended. In the audience, there was a girl around ten years old, blind in one eye, dressed in rags, who spoke loudly and asked me whether I could solicit donations for her sick mother on the spot. I didn’t have the right to do so because I had to respect the local monastery and the event organizer. So, she kept shouting in a high-pitched voice, telling people how severe her mother’s illness was. Since she was still a young child, many adults didn’t take her seriously, and some staff members even wanted to push her out of the audience.

At that moment, I thought, “If the Buddha in his previous life had encountered a suffering being like her, he wouldn’t have rejected her request.” Although I was in an awkward situation and not allowed to solicit donations for her mother while giving the teaching, I dissuaded the event organizer from sending her away. When my teaching was over, I invited her over and gave her some money.

When we encounter another’s request in our lives, we should think carefully about how to deal with it. A worldly person can bluntly reject the request by saying, “I won’t give it to you! I don’t have it!” but the Buddha in his previous lives wouldn’t have done the same. We should all ponder this.]

The king’s retinue was shocked and panicked upon hearing that he intended to offer his own flesh and blood. Despite their desperate pleas, they could not dissuade him.

The king pricked his jugular vein with a needle and offered his blood for the rakṣasa to drink, and the rakṣasa drank until he was completely satisfied. After that,

the king cut off his own flesh and fed it to him, and the rakṣasa continued eating until the king's white bones were exposed before he stopped.

[When it comes to offering one's body, some of us might be willing to do so—like donating blood or a kidney—as long as it does not cause severe harm to our health. However, most of us would be unable to offer our flesh and blood in the same way the king did.]

The retinue was filled with deep sorrow, especially the queen, who was so overwhelmed with grief that she fainted and fell to the ground.

The king remained in control of his faculties. At that moment, Indra said joyfully, "I am Indra. I do not need flesh and blood, so you may stop the offering!" Indra then applied divine nectar to the king's wounds, and immediately, the king was fully restored to his former condition.

[When the Buddha was in his previous lives, Indra often tested his intentions. You can find many such stories in *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*.]

Later, the king gave the elephant Excellent Mountain to his minister named Chariot of Brahma.

[Maybe this minister truly needed the elephant. When the Buddha was in his previous rebirths, he satisfied the needs of all beings brought to him and gave the most precious items from the palace to others. Since the elephant was no longer with him, when Hard-to-Endure demanded the animal, something happened, as explained in the following plot. Hard-to-Endure might have begun to covet the elephant when he came to attend the grand offering dinner organized by the king.]

At that time, one of the risi Marici's disciples, an accomplished practitioner of concentration, arrived. King Jewel Crest received him with great respect and asked about his needs.

The disciple said, "I wish to repay the kindness of my teacher who taught me the Vedas. Now, in his old age, my teacher has no attendants to serve him. So, I wish to offer him servants and have come to ask for your wife and son."

King Jewel Crest agreed. Thus, the disciple left with the queen and prince and offered them to his teacher as servants.

[The idea of giving one's wife and son to others can be difficult for modern individuals to grasp. Not only do we struggle with the thought of parting with our

family members, but we also cannot tolerate even the slightest harm coming to them; in such cases, we might feel compelled to seek revenge. The mere thought of separation from our loved ones brings us distress and longing, and our emotional responses are entirely valid.

However, it is essential to understand the king's story within its context. According to sutras, the king's offering of his wife and son was not against their personal wishes. As a bodhisattva, he did not impose his authority to force this decision. Instead, the wife and son had made vows alongside the king in previous lives to support him in fulfilling his noble bodhisattva aspirations. For further details, one can refer to the *Sutra of the Collection of the Six Perfections*, which recounts many instances where the Buddha, in earlier incarnations, offered his wife and son while reminding them of the vows made together.

People today, especially young men and women, often have strong attachments to romance and relationships. Some may react irrationally following a breakup or divorce, and even some lay practitioners display similar behaviors.

In the worldly context, wives and children are among the most cherished attachments. However, from the bodhisattva's perspective, the king's offering of his wife and son symbolizes his intention to sever worldly emotional ties and transform personal feelings into great love for all sentient beings. For the wife and son, the altruistic act of forgoing personal attachments and small affections to support the bodhisattva on his path to enlightenment can lead to greater benefits in both their current and future lives.

In his past lives, rather than clinging to romantic relationships, the Buddha, along with his wife and son, prioritized the well-being of all living beings. Their mutual loving-kindness, devoid of self-interest, manifested as vast and impartial love. This meant they were willing to unconditionally give everything for the happiness of others.]

King Hard-to-Endure really liked the king's elephant. After returning to his own kingdom, Hard-to-Endure sent a message to King Jewel Crest, saying, "You must give me your elephant."

Feeling troubled, King Jewel Crest replied, "I have already given the elephant to my minister."

But King Hard-to-Endure refused to listen and threatened, "If you don't give

me the elephant, I will resort to force!” He then mobilized a large army, preparing for war.

Overwhelmed by profound sadness, King Jewel Crest thought to himself sorrowfully, “Alas! When driven by greed, even the closest friends can quickly become the greatest enemies. If I lead my army into war, victory would be easy to achieve, but it would inevitably harm many sentient beings. It’s better that I flee!”

[When war breaks out, surely many beings will die. It has been this way in the past and continues to be so in the present. The scars left on the battlefield take humanity years to heal.]

At that moment, four pratyekabuddhas appeared before him and said, “Great King, the time has come for you to go to the forest.” Then, with their miraculous powers, they took the king out of the palace and led him to a secluded forest, where he began a life of spiritual practice.

[At that time, King Jewel Crest had fled, his wife and son were offered to riṣi Marīcī, and the elephant was given away as well; significant changes had occurred in the country. All this happened because the king didn’t want to bring suffering to living beings. In contrast, nowadays many national leaders claim their actions are for the benefit of the whole world and all countries, but in fact, their deeds are self-centered. Their actions are quite different from what the Buddha did when he was King Jewel Crest. People interested in military science can reflect on this starkly different motivation and sense of responsibility.]

At that time, since the kingdom was leaderless, the ministers under King Jewel Crest went to riṣi Marīcī, requesting to get back the young prince. Marīcī agreed and returned the prince. Later, the prince led the army in battle against King Hard-to-Endure and achieved a great victory.

[As noted in Gendün Chöphel’s *Guide to Sacred Places in India*, many kings in the land of India would flee to forests when their countries were invaded by others. Sometimes such a king, isolated on a mountain, would gaze at his palace from afar knowing he was getting old, and that there were few chances for him to return. The king would then start to shed tears.]

After the crushing defeat, King Hard-to-Endure fled back to his kingdom. His vile character and despicable actions brought severe plague and famine upon his own kingdom.

[On the day after Japan’s 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, I happened to

give a talk at the doctoral symposium at Nanjing University in China. I told them, “In the past, the Imperial Japanese Army brutally murdered hundreds of thousands of Nanjingers, and the Nanjing Massacre was horrific. However, now that Japan is suffering from earthquakes of up to magnitude 9.0, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and the Fukushima nuclear disaster, with many people having died, I hope each of us can recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra 108 times for them.”

While I was reciting the mantra, I noticed that a few individuals didn’t join the group recitation. That’s understandable, as not everyone can embrace the altruistic and inclusive spirit of Mahayana Buddhism and treat a nation that has caused them great harm with compassion.]

King Hard-to-Endure asked his brahmins, “How can we bring the plague and famine to an end?”

The brahmins replied, “The remedy is King Jewel Crest’s protuberance. The nectar it produces can even turn iron into gold and transform misfortune into good fortune. Therefore, you should go and request it.”

King Hard-to-Endure said, “He probably won’t give it to me.”

[According to the worldly mindset, it was King Hard-to-Endure who caused King Jewel Crest to flee from his palace; how was it even possible that the King would be willing to give his protuberance to Hard-to-Endure?]

The brahmins insisted, “It is well known that King Jewel Crest is generous beyond measure and would give anything. As long as you send someone to ask, you will surely receive it.”

So, King Hard-to-Endure sent a brahmin to make the request.

King Jewel Crest was strolling through the forest, enjoying the scenery, and unknowingly wandered near Marici’s hermitage.

[Sometimes one may encounter an enemy or friend due to inconceivable causes and conditions.]

Meanwhile, at a nearby spot, the queen, King Jewel Crest’s wife, was searching for roots and leaves to offer to Marici. Suddenly, she encountered a hunter who developed lustful desires toward her and intended to assault her.

In this dangerous situation, although she had left King Jewel Crest, she constantly thought of him and, in her distress, cried out loudly, “King Jewel Crest, save me!” She broke down in tears.

Hearing her voice from afar, the king rushed over to see what was happening. The hunter, upon seeing the king approaching from a distance, mistook him for a rishi. Fearing a deadly curse, the hunter fled in panic.

[The rishi's curse can make a person vomit blood and die on the spot.]

The king, witnessing this situation, recalled how the queen had once lived in the palace, lacking nothing in terms of food and clothing, attended by maidservants and enjoying great comfort. But now, she was suffering greatly, wearing tattered clothes, scavenging for roots and leaves, and had become thin, tanned, and particularly haggard. Deeply saddened, he sighed and lamented, "Alas! All compounded things are unreliable."

[Over the course of King Jewel Crest's life, happiness and pain alternate back and forth, wealth and poverty always take turns. The King realized that nothing was reliable, so he awakened to great disenchantment with samsara.

The Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation says:

Of all the big and small dharmas in this world,
Nothing is permanent,
All of them cannot stay long,
They appear briefly like a lightning.

Everything, including your talent, status, family, friends, teacher, is impermanent and non-reliable. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

The gathering together will be dispersed instantly;
Wealth and superiority are all impermanent.

Those who haven't studied the principle of impermanence can hardly accept the tragedy of losing a loved one, health, or wealth. They may even suffer a mental breakdown. In contrast, those who have studied impermanence won't experience the same level of suffering as a worldly person does. Even if they cannot fully put all of the Buddha's teachings into practice, they are less likely to contemplate suicide due to their inability to accept impermanence.

I encourage you to take a closer look at this story. After all, the Buddha's stories from his previous lives differ from folktales in that the former convey important Dharma values. Many Dharma practitioners may not remember Dharma stories;

however, they can vividly recall worldly stories, especially Hollywood movies. We could say this is the result of the negative influence of their karma.]

It was at that moment that the brahmin sent by King Hard-to-Endure arrived. The messenger informed the king about what had happened in his kingdom and requested the protuberance on his head.

“You may cut it off yourself and take it,” said the king.

The brahmin did so and left with the protuberance. As a result, the plague and famine came to an end in the Hard-to-Endure kingdom.

After having his protuberance cut off, King Jewel Crest experienced excruciating pain, which caused him to give rise to immense compassion for the beings in the hot hells, so much so that he fainted to the ground.

At that moment, auspicious signs appeared, drawing many celestial beings and a large number of the king’s court to gather at the scene.

“Dear King,” they said, “what has happened?”

The king stood up, gently wiped the blood from his face, and said, “King Hard-to-Endure sent someone for my protuberance and I gave it to him.”

[The king’s inconceivable action of returning good for evil is worthy of our careful contemplation.]

“In offering your protuberance, what are you hoping for?” they asked.

The king replied, “I wasn’t seeking anything for myself. My only wish was for Hard-to-Endure’s kingdom to be saved from plague and famine. However, there is still one thing I really want...”

“What is that?” they asked.

“To be able to save and protect all beings,” he replied.

[In his previous lives, the Buddha was consistently like this. Aside from protecting all beings, he had no other intentions. We Mahayanists should strive to emulate him to the best of our abilities. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should ignore our own need for necessities or that we must focus solely on other beings every day. To truly protect others, we must also maintain the health of our own bodies, which is very necessary.]

“Don’t you feel any regret for giving away your protuberance?” they asked.

“No. Not at all,” said the king.

“Seeing the pain on your face, it’s hard to believe what you just said.” They commented.

“Well,” the king swore, “if I really have no regrets about having given away my protuberance to King Hard-to-Endure, may my body be restored to what it was before!” Right after his words, the king’s body was back to its previous condition.

[According to some scriptures, this was the experience when the Buddha attained at least the first stage of the Bodhisattva level in his causal stage. Otherwise, he would have the power to say words of truth, and his body wouldn’t become exactly as it was before immediately.]

His followers then begged the king to return to the palace, but he rejected their request.

At that moment, the four pratyekabuddhas reappeared.

“Since you provide so much assistance to your enemies, why not extend the same to your friends?” they suggested. “You should return to your palace now.”

He went back to the palace and brought benefit and happiness to his subjects.

In previous lives the Buddha offered his body innumerable times, which, as mentioned in *Genealogy of the Sakya Clan*, was testified to by Earth gods. Also he didn’t ask for anything in return for his offerings, as said in *Sutra of the Questions of Manjushri*:

The sun and the moon shine upon flowers,
Without expecting rewards from them;
Likewise, the Tathagata seeks no reciprocation
As he has no grasping and clinging.

According to *Sutra of the Question of Maitreya*:

In his previous lives, the Buddha was a prince who made profound sacrifices: in one life, he offered his blood; in another, his bone marrow; and in yet another, his eyes. These touching stories are numerous and deeply moving.

When practicing the bodhicitta of aspiration, we should remind ourselves, “Although I cannot presently offer my body as the Buddha did, I can still prioritize the well-being of others. Having taken the bodhicitta vows, I know that even a

single kind thought I generate at the moment of my death—one that wishes to benefit others—holds great significance. Therefore, I must strive to help beings as much as possible.” It’s important to keep this in mind.

Why do I often stress the importance of laying a solid foundation through studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*? It’s because, without establishing that foundation through training in the preliminary practices and receiving empowerment, your practices of the primordial purity and spontaneous presence of the Great Perfection are very likely to be ineffective in the end.

I can offer you the highest teachings of those practices, but they will be unhelpful if you haven’t built a solid foundation through the practices of the four thoughts, following a spiritual teacher, taking refuge, arousing bodhicitta, purifying obscurations, and more. In contrast, when you have a solid foundation, the higher teachings and practices will be easy to grasp. As mentioned in the life stories of many great teachers, the most crucial aspect of one’s practice is to first establish a solid foundation.

Regarding this, the *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

Through the sequential practices,
One can gradually grasp all the Dharma.
It’s like one first establishes a foundation,
Then builds a palace upon it.

This is the vajra speech of the Tathagata. As Buddhists, we must truly believe in it. Otherwise, we will keep wandering in samsara due to our own ignorance, as said in *The Prophecy Concerning Strivivarta*:

He, who doesn’t believe in the Tathagata’s words corresponding to reality, will experience great torments in the long-lasting dark night of cyclic existence.

Such a person will always experience excruciating suffering in the darkness of samsara for innumerable kalpas and will have no way to get liberated.

None of us wants to be like this. We all want to soon recognize the nature of the mind, to be freed from the samsaric ocean of suffering, and to reach the supreme island of liberation. This is the ultimate goal for each of us Buddhists. Our aim is

not wealth or personal happiness; rather, we seek liberation from samsara and to bring benefits to countless beings. Please remember this!

Therefore, we should place importance on the study of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and engage in sequential practices. Only by doing so can we attain perfection in our practice.

Through my years of study of the Dharma and my limited practical experience, I genuinely believe that it is only through sequential and systematic hearing, contemplation, and meditation that we can fully appreciate the profound flavor of the Dharma, which brings great benefits to ourselves and others.

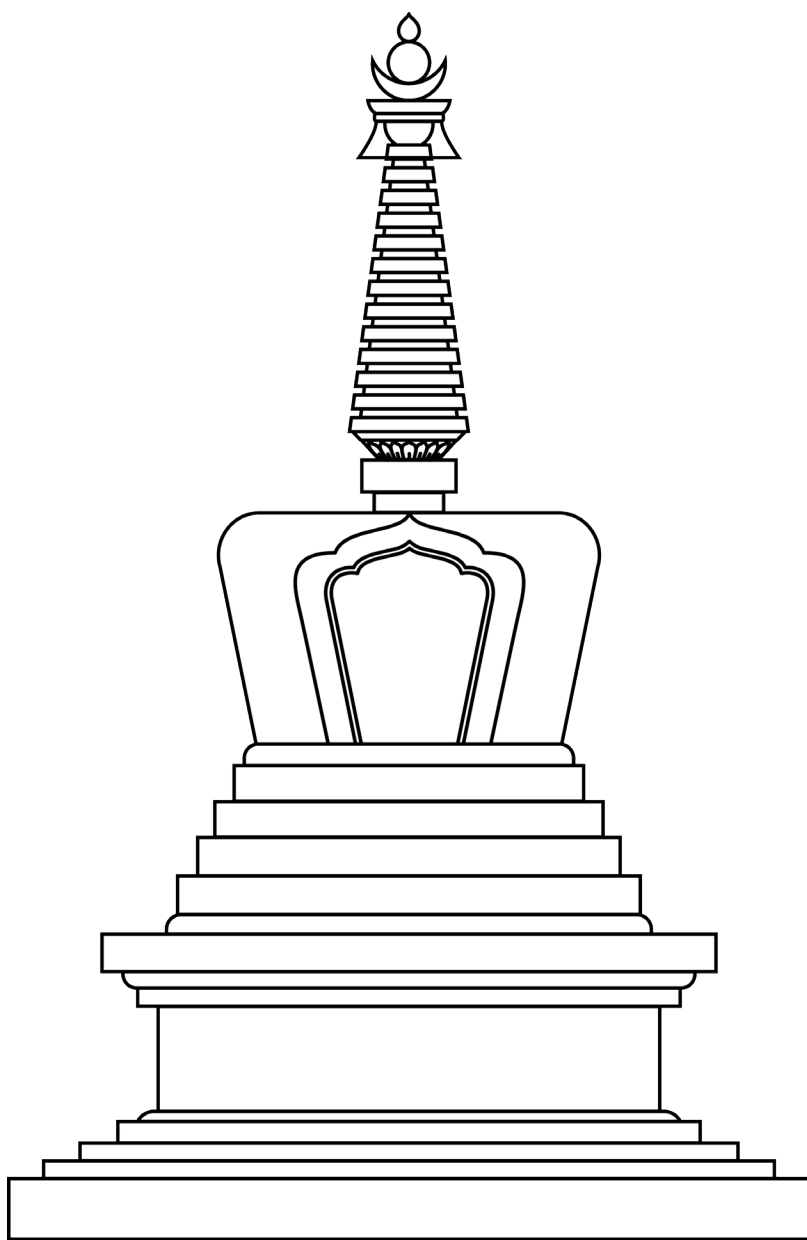


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KHENPO SODARGYE was born in 1962 into a nomadic family in a small valley of the Tibetan region of Kham. He was ordained in 1985 and went on to become a lineage holder of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition, as well as a preeminent practitioner and scholar at Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in Sertar. Khenpo Sodargye was the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's chief Tibetan-to-Chinese translator. He has traveled extensively in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia to offer teachings at Dharma centers and universities. For more information, please visit www.khenposodargye.org.

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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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