

The Lecture Notes of Chapter Four of the Vimalakirti Sutra

by Khenpo Sodargye's translation team

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Lecture 22

The Proper Attitude for Attending Dharma Classes

Before starting the lecture, Khenpo again reminds the audience to exercise mindfulness and awareness when in class. But really, he should not have to frequently remind the audience of this if everyone is serious about learning. Unfortunately there have been overt signs of distraction, thus Khenpo has no choice but to repeat himself.

Except for having grave excuses, as much as possible, we should try not to skip class. In the past, it took Khenpo four years to complete the teaching on the *Ornament of the Great Vehicle Sutras*, and two-plus years for the *Lotus Sutra*. For the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, originally it was a two-year syllabus, although Khenpo is not sure if it will go as planned.

In any case, be persistent about attending class, do not give rein to the undisciplined mind, otherwise one will become utterly distracted. Should Khenpo allow this to happen to him, he might opt not to teach altogether. As he said during the teaching, “As the lecturer I shoulder much greater pressure than you, the audience, which is akin to going through an oral examination. Those who have been through it know how demanding it is and can certainly empathize with me. Moreover, this live lecture series is under the scrutiny of thousands watchful eyes and ears; should I deliver it a bit unsatisfactorily, fingers will soon be pointing at the “mistakes” I allegedly made; on the other hand, even if I teach quite satisfactorily, it might be taken for granted by many others.”

Therefore, teaching Dharma is not easy. Khenpo takes on great responsibility to provide this learning opportunity to all, without regard to his own fatigue and overwhelming schedule. It’s all because he regards this task as most meaningful, and he hopes the audiences will likewise persevere in learning this sutra in its entirety.

Quite often, at the onset of a teaching series, a large crowd swarms in the class, but as time goes on, many disappear one after the other, and eventually only a handful may stay till the end. Khenpo is not too pleased by those who are forgetful and come to the class only occasionally. For them, some self–reflection may be needed. Please ask yourself: “Why do I have a million excuses not to attend a Dharma class? In contrast, why do I act most promptly to attend to mundane affairs? Is my root of goodness so weak?”

Really, we must work hard to earn every opportunity of studying the Dharma, otherwise our situation will prove to be like what Sakya Pandita said that one is a fool in this life due to neglect of study in previous lives. His *Ordinary Wisdom* says,

*Having seen that one is a fool in this life
Due to neglect of study in previous lives,
Fearing birth as a fool in future lives,
One studies hard in this life, even if difficult.*

Should we continue the trend of inconsistent Dharma classes, we might soon find ourselves reborn in the lower realms.

Also, attending a class is to be followed up with reviewing lecture notes alongside with the sutra text. If taking good notes is a problem, be thankful that volunteers have been working hard to prepare full lecture transcripts and posting them on the web, there is simply no excuse not to review and study what has been taught!

Khenpo says that during his old schooling days at Larung Gar, he and other students always placed great importance in reviewing the teachings right after receiving them, as well as preparing well for upcoming lessons. Nowadays, many consider attending classes a burden; they fall into dullness and drowsiness when the lecture is going on, but the moment the class ends, they become alert and clever right away. To prevent sleepiness in the evening class, Khenpo's advice is to avoid overeating beforehand and better yet, to observe no food intake after noontime all together. Khenpo doesn't think his lecture is long-winded and he tries to keep it lively. When noticing people nodding off, he'll crack a joke or two to wake them up. Perhaps with limited success, but he tried!

All in all, it is of vital importance that we study ceaselessly the Buddha's teachings and pith instructions of lineage masters, and meanwhile, pray constantly to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Particularly, when we are under the sway of wrong views, we shall invoke the protection of the Three Roots, buddhas and bodhisattvas—it certainly works wonders! As Khenpo said, "To relegate prayer as an antiquated formality that has to be discarded in the 21st century of technology is certainly wrong; please steer clear of this notion by all means."

Meanwhile, the attitude of making cross-references between the views of science and Buddhism is also needed for both monastics and laypersons alike. It would be a shame if the

monastics want nothing to do with science, saying, “I just want to study the classic scriptures, I have no interest in science at all,” or if laypeople care not a bit about actual Dharma practice. Khenpo himself has edited and published a few books on exploring the mysteries of the universe from both the perspectives of Buddhism and science, which have been well received. He looks forward to investigating in more depth the comparison between science and Buddhism, and to composing more creative and groundbreaking articles. He believes this is an indispensable task that the modern Buddhists should take.

Who is Maitreya?

In the fourth chapter of *Bodhisattvas*, the Buddha asked his bodhisattva disciples to visit Vimalakirti and inquire about his illness, but even the bodhisattvas felt intimidated by this request. Given what is described in the previous chapter that the Shravakas are no match to Vimalakirti’s unfathomable state of wisdom, the main theme of this chapter is that the Bodhisattvas also fall far behind in this regard. In the Tibetan version, the chapter of *Disciples* and of *Bodhisattvas* are a single chapter, called *The Disciples’ and the Bodhisattvas’ Reluctance to Visit Vimalakirti*.

For us, it’s easy to comprehend the stories of Shravakas in the earlier chapter, since their encounters with Vimalakirti strike a chord in us. The current chapter, on the other hand, deals with bodhisattva’s level of realization of “extinguishing the characteristics of all phenomena” and the like, which may seem less accessible to us. Hence, we need to apply our sharpest intelligence to cut through the seemingly abstruse words and phrases.

The first character is Maitreya, who is one birth from becoming fully enlightened and is the next buddha to come after Buddha Shakyamuni. But Vimalakirti also appeared to have admonished Maitreya, so Maitreya dare not visit Vimalakirti. Who is superior in realization—Maitreya or Vimalakirti? A number of commentaries composed by great masters in Han Buddhism raised this question. They proposed that perhaps Maitreya and Vimalakirti were just acting out a scene in order to highlight the special qualities of bodhisattvas for the Mahayana Buddhist followers.

At any rate, the sutra records their interactions in detail, but the meaning between the lines is too elusive for us beginners to fully grasp. Generally, we have no qualms reading that certain

eminent individuals are inferior to Vimalakirti in realization, but what about Maitreya? Isn't he the next buddha-to-be? For now, he appears as a member of Buddha Shakyamuni's retinue; later, he'll ascend to Tushita Heaven and come back to this world as the fifth buddha of this eon. Therefore, should Maitreya be inferior to Vimalakirti in actual realization, it would be quite unfathomable!

In both Han and Tibetan Buddhism, Maitreya is one of the eight well-known great bodhisattvas. In the entrance of Han Buddhist temples often there is a big-bellied statue greeting visitors with a wide, amicable smile. This statue is the famous Monk Budai (the "monk with a hempen sack"), a manifestation of Maitreya. Seeing this statue and paying respect to it will certainly plant an auspicious connection to Maitreya and his teachings.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Maitreya is typically portrayed seated on a throne, with both feet either on the ground or crossed at the ankles. Many Tibetan monasteries house a special shrine hall in honor of Maitreya. This is quite prominent in the Gelugpa School, which reflects its close ties with Tushita Heaven where Je Tsongkhapa took rebirth. In Han China, there are also many great masters, such as Master Tanxu and his chief disciples of the Tiantai School, who vowed to take birth in the Tushita heaven.

Once there were seventeen disciples who sought refuge in Buddha Shakyamuni and undertook serious practices. All the sixteen attained Arhatship according to their wishes. Maitreya, on the other hand, vowed otherwise, saying, "Attaining Arhatship is not my goal, I want only the realization of Buddhahood!" He then generated the supreme bodhichitta in front of the Buddha, who later bestowed the prediction that Maitreya would become the fifth buddha. Many other stories on Maitreya can be found in the chapter *The Biography of Maitreya in A Garland of Jewels*¹.

According the Tibetan Buddhist record, Asanga went to Tushita Heaven where Maitreya presented him the *Five Treatises of Maitreya*, namely, *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, *The Sublime Continuum*, *Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes*, and *Distinguishing Dharma and Dharmata*. Afterward, Asanga returned to the human world and propagated these five treatises widely.

¹ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Eight_great_bodhisattvas

In Han Buddhist history, it is said that Asanga met Maitreya in meditative pure vision, during which Maitreya transmitted to him the *Yogacarabhumi*. So *Yogacarabhumi* was preached by Maitreya, recorded by Asanga, and translated into Chinese by Xuanzang. However, the Tibetan tradition considers it to have been composed by Asanga. Regardless of the discrepancies, Khenpo says that so long as one has made a connection with Maitreya, one will, at least, become one of his premier disciples when he comes to this world to turn the Dharma wheel. Of course, a huge time gap awaits the arrival of Maitreya Buddha into the human realm, which, according to Master Chin Kung, is about 5.6 billion years away. Such a timespan is incomprehensible by the human concept of time.

The literal meaning of Maitreya, or his Tibetan name Jampa, is loving-kindness. There are a number of explanations on the origin of his name. *The Mahayana Sutra of Mental Contemplation* says it is because Maitreya's vow of abstaining from eating meat out of compassion. Master Jizang says that Maitreya had studied with a bhikkhu who endeavored in practicing loving-kindness, and Maitreya was moved to vow that he would eternally be loving and compassionate to all sentient beings. In short, it is believed that by hearing the name of Maitreya, or by learning the doctrines related to Maitreya, loving-kindness and compassion will naturally dawn in one's mindstream.

The Story of Maitreya

At this point the Buddha addressed Maitreya Bodhisattva, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Maitreya addressed the Buddha, "World-Honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past when I was explaining the practice of the stage of irreversibility for the heavenly king of the Tushita Heaven and his subordinates. At the time Vimalakirti came and said to me,

"Maitreya, the World-Honored One has bestowed on your noble person the prediction that you will achieve *anuttara samyaksambodhi* in a single lifetime. What lifetime will you use to experience this prediction, past, future, or present?"

The stage of irreversibility is an advanced realization attained by bodhisattvas with the level from the first bhumi to the eighth bhumi. Tushita Heaven is also called the “Joyous Realm”, meaning a place full of joy.

When Maitreya was expounding the Dharma to heavenly beings, Vimalakirti showed up and questioned him on which life he received the Buddha’s prophecy. Is it past, future, or present life? Actually, Vimalakirti posed this question from the perspective of ultimate reality, from the aspect of suchness, as well as from the view that sentient beings and buddhas are ultimately equal. All phenomena entail the modes of both conventional appearance and ultimate reality, and their essence is beyond their simple appearances. Therefore, giving an answer based solely on the aspect of appearance will definitely be off-target.

If a past life, then the past life is already extinguished. If a future life, then the future life has not arrived. If the present life, then the present life is nonabiding. It is as the Buddha has explained, “O bhikkhus, you are in this immediate present born, aged, and extinguished.”

Vimalakirti continued his reasoning: “If the prophecy concerns a past life, then it is already extinguished, for what happened in the past has long gone without a trace, just like last night’s dream; if it is in a future life, then since the future has not arrived yet, it does not exist at all, like the son of a barren woman; and if it is in the present life, then it does not truly exist either, for the present moment cannot abide. As the Buddha taught, a present moment already encompasses birth, aging, and death simultaneously. In the Tibetan version this teaching has two more processes, transmigration and reappearance, meaning at any single moment, there occur the stages of birth, aging, death, transmigration and reappearance, all at once. Therefore, being examined at the subtlest level, a single moment is unobtainable as well.

So we may ponder when this so called I being produced? If it is a past birth, then this past birth has already passed into extinction. If it is a future birth, that future birth has not arrived yet. And if it is a present birth, this present birth does not truly exist at all. By so contemplating, we may catch a glimpse of what the *Diamond Sutra* says: “*Past thought cannot be got at, present thought cannot be got at, and future thought cannot be got at.*” Although past, present, and future are seemingly perceivable, they are not truly existent. The reality of all phenomena is that they are all unattainable. The above is the observation of the Buddha’s prophecy to Maitreya from the aspect of the three times.

“If you experience this prediction with birthlessness, then the birthless is the primary status [of Hinayanist² enlightenment]. Yet within that primary status there is no receiving the prediction, and also no attainment of *anuttara samyaksambodhi*.

“How, Maitreya, did you receive the prediction of [buddhahood in] a single lifetime?

If there is a prediction at all, it can only be experienced either in a state of birth or in a state of birthlessness; there is no other way besides these two. Previously, it says that in any birth of past, present, or future, no prophecy can be received; then what is left is the state of birthlessness. However, birthlessness is none other than the state that all phenomena are in their ultimate, empty essence, in which nothing can exist, whether it be prophecy or the attainment of full enlightenment.

Fortunately, it's Maitreya, the next buddha, who is confronted with this pointed question; if it is us ordinary folks, we would be totally dumbfounded. Here is how the argument unfolds. First, a question is posed to Maitreya: “Did you receive the prediction of buddhahood in a single lifetime?” The answer yes then leads to analysis of the time frames of past, present, and future. When these possibilities are negated, then, might the prophecy concern birthlessness? This is even less likely because birthlessness is exactly the ultimate truth of all phenomena, how can anything be ever affirmed in it?

We must understand that Vimalakirti does not mean to refute the prophecy in the mode of relative truth. Even though some people may consider such a prophecy solid and real, however, in no circumstance is it actually graspable. All phenomena, whether receiving prophecies, becoming bodhisattvas, or attaining Buddhahood, are similar to dream images and illusions that have no basis whatsoever. By remaining in a relaxed, lucid, and pristine state of Great Perfection, their essence can then be realized where nothing has any true existence.

Mipham Rinpoche says in the *Commentary on the Adornment of the Middle Way*:

If, of all the things that may be known, there were but one existing truly,

No object of cognition could we ever see.

But since no knowledge-object—no, not even one—has such a true existence,

² Here Birthless refers to the ultimate nature of emptiness, not necessarily Hinayanist enlightenment.

A bright, unbounded world of things appears as objects to be known.

If there were really anything permanent or concrete about phenomena, then there could be no appearances at all. It is precisely because there is nothing solidly existing that everything can arise. Like images arising continuously in a mirror or the moon being reflected on the surface of water, a myriad of appearances and possibilities manifest to us in all their varieties. It's important to know how things appear in this way.

Did you receive the prediction from the generation of suchness, or did you receive the prediction from the extinction of suchness?

“If you received the prediction by the generation of suchness, then [understand that] suchness is without generation. If you received the prediction by the extinction of suchness, then [understand that] suchness is without extinction.

“All sentient beings are entirely suchlike, and all *dharmas* are also entirely suchlike. The assembly of sages and wise ones are also suchlike. Even you, Maitreya, are suchlike.

From the aspect of its appearance, Vimalakirti had argued that a prophecy cannot be received in a manner of birth or birthlessness. Now the issue is probed from the aspect of suchness, the ultimate nature of a prophecy. Vimalakirti asked Maitreya: “Did you receive the prophecy from the generation of suchness or from the extinction of suchness?” Here the point is that neither the generation nor the extinction of suchness would allow the receiving of a prediction. Vimalakirti is pressing on Maitreya relentlessly!

In fact, Vimalakirti is asking questions that really warrant good answers. However, sometimes asking a question is less about curiosity and more about showing off, and some questions may be purposefully designed to embarrass the speaker. Some Dharma teachers may fear such kind of question-and-answer session. Khenpo himself is no stranger to such awkward moments, but many times he replied knowingly and effectively, disarming the audience's premeditated attempt of beating him.

Vimalakirti analyzed: If you were given this prophecy because of the generation of suchness, you should know that suchness is never born, like empty space; and if you were given this prophecy because of the cessation of suchness, you should know that suchness is never extinguished. The suchness of all phenomena, including both sentient beings and materials, is

neither being born nor being extinguished. The same goes to the suchness of sages and wise like you Maitreya. Therefore, it is impossible for you to receive the Buddha's prophecy in the mode of suchness. So, Maitreya, isn't something wrong here?

If you received the prediction [of future Buddhahood], all sentient beings should also receive it. Why? Suchness is nondual and nondifferentiated. If Maitreya attains *anuttara samyaksambodhi*, then all sentient beings should also all attain it. Why? All sentient beings are the characteristic of *bodhi*. If Maitreya attains extinction, then all sentient beings should also all [attain] extinction. Why? The buddhas understand that all sentient beings are ultimately extinguished, which is the characteristic of nirvana, and cannot again be extinguished.

Now it goes to the third point that sentient beings and buddhas are ultimately equal. If Maitreya's enlightenment can be prophesied in such a way that pertains to suchness, so can that of all living beings. Why? Because suchness knows neither duality nor differentiation. It can never be said that only this person is endowed with suchness and that person is not, or that only Maitreya pertains to suchness but not others. In fact, suchness is pervasive in all sentient beings, just like space pervades all over the world. The scripture says that buddha nature is already present in all sentient beings. Then it follows that if Maitreya has been given a prophecy to attain Buddhahood in the mode of suchness, then all living beings would be prophesied likewise. However, that isn't the case.

If Maitreya realizes supreme enlightenment, so should all living beings likewise realize it. Why? It is because all living beings are endowed with the characteristic of Bodhi, the supreme full enlightenment. The sutra says, "Sentient beings are buddhas"; and the tantra's motto, "Affliction is but Bodhi", reiterates that sentient beings differ not a bit from buddhas. At the level of suchness, sentient beings and buddhas are essentially identical, in the way that they all bear the characteristic of Bodhi.

If Maitreya is able to attain extinction, the state of nirvana, then all living beings should likewise be able to attain extinction. Why? Because all living beings have the nature of ultimate extinction, and in this regard Maitreya and sentient beings are exactly the same. Endowed with the wisdom of knowing all things, the Buddha sees clearly that the ultimate reality of all beings is already the peace of nirvana. In Longchenpa's *The Treasure of Dharmadhatu*, there are many scriptural citations from sutras, such as those from *Sutra of Treasure Chest*, "All phenomena

are no other than the Tathagata,” and, *“All phenomena are ultimately extinguished.”* Therefore, all living beings are already in a state of extinction, which is the characteristic of nirvana. They cannot be extinguished anew from a state of non-extinction.

Here we are expounding the unmistakable view of the natural state, which may seem obscure and hard to contend with. But this is the way to go if we really aspire to comprehend the most profound ultimate reality. If we rely on the flimsy tools of conventional truth to investigate the illusory appearances we are experiencing, we will never attain a satisfactory and definitive answer. After all, all phenomena have no true existence; they are merely mental fabrications and designations.

Only through an investigation conducted from the way things actually are can an ultimate conclusion be reached. Phenomena are illusory and dreamlike, appearing yet devoid of essence, liable to crumble at any moment. If they are analyzed with lesser means, no posit so established can be deemed reliable. In short, should anything exist for real, it must remain existent in ultimate truth, which is how the prophecy concerning Maitreya must be scrutinized. Thus Vimalakirti is asking the question from the perspective of ultimate truth.

Some people may disagree and would rather say: “On the relative level of appearances, yes, Maitreya received a prophecy. On the absolute level, however, there is no such prophecy, since ultimately there is no birth nor cessation.” This statement is rather easy to repeat, and Maitreya was also able to answer in this way. However, the main focus here is to ask the question: Is there an entity, down to the tiniest particles, that is truly existent? If yes, then everything is valid. If no, then all claims on the conventional level would be false and delusory, since they are established by mental fabrications and designations.

Ordinary beings mistakenly believe that outer phenomenal appearances being perceived are permanent and substantial, and inner mental activities being experienced are also real and true. Yet, none of them has any substantial existence; they are all illusions. For instance, something we admire as beautiful, if examined, can be reduced to as countless particles being assembled in pleasing shapes and forms; a delicious food we savor, likewise, is the assemblage of atoms into flavors pleasing our taste buds. Hence, our sense organs are capable of manufacturing all kinds of artifices and delusions; and we do need to penetrate through their illusory appearances and understand their ultimate reality.

For instance, an old man is unlikely to become upset when moon reflections disappear from the surface of water or beautiful bubbles burst. He would know better about the evanescence and fragility of these things. Children, however, prize sandcastles or brilliant bubbles they have painstakingly made. When their creations collapse, they cry out and need to be consoled. But all worldly phenomena, our most cherished bodies included, are all conditioned entities that are as ephemeral as bubbles.

Therefore, we should not to be overly obsessed with the phenomena of this world, be it fame, talent, gain, loss, or whatever, understanding that they are merely appearances without intrinsic essence. They come about due to interdependent arising of individual causes and conditions, and will disperse and vanish as their causal conditions shift. At that time, we let out a sigh, “Oh well, this is but the law of nature!”

The *Shurangama Sutra* records a conversation between the Buddha and King Prasenajit. At that time, King Prasenajit was sixty-two years old and he lamented sadly that his body was aging and his face wrinkling. The Buddha asked him, “Great King, when did you see the Ganges River for the first time? Is it same with what you see now?” The king answered, “My mother took me to bank of the Ganges River when I was three years old, that’s the first time I saw it. Now I am sixty-two, the Ganges River stays the same to me.”

Here the Buddha meant to tell him the two aspects of all phenomena, changing and unchanging. On the one hand, the physical body of the king was changing. The king was a toddler when he first saw the Ganges River; he then went through life’s passages of youth and middle age and finally arrived at the age of sixty-two. His body undeniably had undergone tremendous changes during those years. On the other hand, there is something that remains always unchanging. In this dialogue, the Buddha showed the king that the essential nature of being able to see has never changed. In conclusion, the appearance of all phenomena is impermanent and remains changing moment by moment; however, their essential nature, suchness, is not subject to deterioration or decline, without birth or death, coming or going. This view of the ultimate truth needs to be established through our study of the profound Mahayana teaching.

“Therefore, Maitreya, do not inspire the gods with this teaching.

“Truly, there is no one who generates the intention to achieve *anuttara samyaksambodhi*, and there is no one who retrogresses. Maitreya, you should have these gods forsake this discriminative view of *bodhi*. Why?

Now comes Vimalakirti's conclusion: Maitreya, do not mislead these gods, tempting them with your so-called practice of the stage of irreversibility, since in true reality there is neither the intention of achieving supreme enlightenment nor retrogression from it. Originally, those celestial beings from the Tushita Heaven were infatuated with Maitreya's status of "the destined one to achieve buddhahood in a lifetime" and "the regent of the Buddha". In order to crush their clinging to these conceptual constructions, Vimalakirti pointed out that there is nothing attainable in the ultimate reality, including the prediction for Maitreya, so that these gods should be able to abandon their discriminative views concerning Bodhi.

As the Chan master Huangbo Xiyun said,

All phenomena are essentially not existent,

So do not hold the view of nonexistence.

All phenomena are essentially not nonexistent,

So do hold the view of existence.

The views of both existence and nonexistence are perceptions of a deluded mind,

Which are like hallucinations or experiences of a jaundice sufferer.

This is in line with what Je Tsongkhapa elucidates in the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* that appearances dispel the extreme of existence, while the extreme of nothingness is eliminated by emptiness. Existence and nonexistence are both one-sided perceptions, just like the sights of a jaundice sufferer that are distorted and untrue.

Indeed, we must establish the essential view that all phenomena do not exist in true reality. This teaching is profound and not easily understandable in the first place. Thus some Dharma teachers tend to sidestep it and instead teach some other simpler topics. However, the merit of imparting the doctrine on emptiness is unparalleled, even if there is a risk of causing wrongs views in the audience. Khenpo explains this with a story of Manjushri described in *The Mahayana Sutra of Manjushri's Abode*, which is included in the *Biography of Manjushri in A Garland of Jewels*. Similar accounts can be found in the *Sutra of Manjushri's Deeds* that is collected in the Chinese Tripitaka.

One early morning, in a big assembly of many bhikkhus together with Buddha Shakyamuni, Manjushri purposely discussed the proper way of meditating with Shariputra, since he had observed Shariputra's deep concentration in the previous night. During the discussion, Manjushri expounded the truth of no attainment, no abiding and so forth. In Shravakas' training,

they always identify with the karmic principle of cause and effect, thus what Manjushri said about “all things are unattainable” just blew their minds. As a result, there were five hundred bhikkhus in the assembly started panicking and generated wrong views. So they stood up and decided to leave, saying in one voice: “We will never see Manjushri’s body, never hear Manjushri’s name, and never stay wherever Manjushri stays.”

Manjushri, instead of feeling offended, replied, “Excellent! Excellent! What you said is absolutely correct! Manjushri does not truly exist, so nobody can really see him or hear his name. The places where Manjushri stays also do not truly exist, so nobody can either stay in nor leave those places.” Struck by the oddness of Manjushri’s utterance, the five hundred bhikkhus returned and asked, “What are you talking about? What do you mean?” Manjushri then explicated more sublime teachings to them, and consequently, four hundred of them realized the deep meaning and attained enlightenment. The remaining one hundred, however, were overcome with heavily wrong views and fell immediately into the hell.

Shariputra became extremely anxious, “Oh Manjushri, why don’t you give them proper teachings? What a shame that so many bhikkhus fell into the hell realm!” Then the Buddha immediately told Shariputra, “What Manjushri did is indeed excellent. Had they not heard about the profound teaching from Manjushri, those one hundred bhikkhus would undergo tremendous suffering in the hell for an entire eon. Now they will only suffer for a single moment and then take rebirth in the Tushita Heaven and attain liberation when Maitreya becomes buddha. It is to Manjushri’s credit that by bestowing them the doctrine of emptiness, their negative karma is purified and they step on the highway to liberation.” Hearing the Buddha’s affirmation, Shariputra rejoiced greatly in Manjushri’s wisdom and benevolence.

Khenpo himself at times worries that some students may generate wrong views when receiving teachings on emptiness, and others may even fall into lower realms when hearing tantric instructions. On the whole, most of the listeners have faith in these profound teachings, but inevitably there are a few who would violate their vows and entertain wrong views. The story above shows that imparting emptiness to less-qualified students is still meaningful and its consequences can’t be all bad. Thus, spreading the doctrine of emptiness should be highly recommended.

“*Bodhi* cannot be attained with the body, and it cannot be attained with the mind.

Vimalakirti continued to give the reason: Bodhi is not something that can be acquired with the five faculties of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body, or be acquired with a discriminative mind. *The Utmost King of the Great Vehicle Sutra* says:

*Discerning the bodhi conceptually,
Is not called as seeking the true bodhi.
In the pursuit of realizing the bodhi,
One should be devoid of any concept.*

Any conceptual or behavioral clinging to the characteristic of bodhi or to the pursuit of it will render the bodhi as false. On the ultimate level, the states of “bodhi” or “bodhisattva” are devoid of intrinsic existence. Such an assertion is not confined to religious context only; it is easily provable by intelligent reasoning or scientific investigation. Khenpo urges the audience to study assiduously the philosophy of the Middle Way, which will bring forth a genuine conviction in the doctrine of emptiness in due time. This kind of conviction is steadfast and won’t be swayed by outer circumstances, things, or people. It is far from the superficial faith that is aroused merely out of blind worship toward some guru’s looks or bearing, and the like. With the enamored faithful constantly calling, “Lama Chin! Lama Chin! Lama Chin,” this trite “faith” is as depressing as it is ludicrous.

Khenpo personally prefers a faith that goes a long way like a slow but perpetually running stream, rather than a massive outburst of faith that evaporates in no time. Indeed, often some newly initiated Buddhists are bubbling with great faith at the outset that, unfortunately, fizzles out rapidly and only to be replaced by lots of wrong views. What Khenpo likes to see is that, although you may have some reservation about Buddhism at first, as time goes on, you start to gain conviction and over years and decades, your faith keeps on growing.

Of course, people differ in their temperaments and there is nothing wrong about showing a little passion. However, such a display needs to be polished and refined. In public, performing a Buddhist ritual is done in a solemn manner, but what is demanded may vary in other types of gatherings. Hence, modern Buddhists need to strike a balance between being too stiff and being too showy or pompous, and act as appropriate.

“Extinction is *bodhi*, because of the extinction of the characteristics.

The following text gives the definition of bodhi in detail. In the Tibetan version, the sentence pattern is a little bit different, which instead of using “because of”, just directly tells what is bodhi. For example, the above sentence is stated as “Bodhi is the extinction of the characteristics.”

When all conceptual elaborations such as existence and nonexistence have been extinguished, that is the state of bodhi, the extinction of all characteristics. The *Diamond Sutra* says:

Wherever there are material characteristics there is delusion, but whoever perceives that all characteristics are in fact no-characteristics, perceives the Tathagata.

Many people nowadays like to quote the first half of the above teaching, while neglecting the latter half. Actually, the latter is quite important: Only after one sees that all characteristics are in fact extinguished, then one beholds the true Tathagata.

It is vital to understand the nature of characteristics. A well-known sutra in Han Buddhism, *Sutra of Jewel Bestowing's Bodhisattva Way of Life*, says:

*Fundamentally there were no characteristics of sentient beings,
And all phenomena are devoid of intrinsic qualities.
The grasping that there is characteristic of bodhi,
Is not the right view but the delusion of sentient beings.*

Sentient beings by nature have no characteristics, and the same goes to all phenomena. If someone insists that there is any characteristic of bodhi, then that person is a fool.

“Non-contemplation is *bodhi*, because it transcends the conditions.

Contemplation needs an object, for instance, the contemplation on an image of the Buddha, the contemplation on the impurities of the human body, and so on. But in bodhi, there is nobody contemplating nor anything being contemplated. Non-contemplation is bodhi, for it is divorced from all subjects and objects.

“Non-practice is *bodhi*, because it is without recollection.

The elimination of all conceptual thoughts and mental activities is bodhi, because there is no trace of recollection or conceptualization in bodhi.

“Eradication is *bodhi*, because of renouncing the views. Transcendence is *bodhi*, because of the transcendence of false concepts.

The stereotype thinking of “eradication” relates to nihilism or mere void, which is kind of grim. Actually, eradication is *bodhi*, because *bodhi* entails the annihilation of all afflictive obstructions and cognitive obstructions. In *bodhi*, all extremes of conceptual elaboration such as existence and nonexistence, negation and affirmation, are nowhere to be found. Similarly, transcendence or removal is *bodhi*, because in *bodhi* all attachments, delusions, and confusions are completely removed.

“Hindrances are *bodhi*, because of the hindrance of the vows.

We often hear someone saying, “I have encountered hindrance in my practice.” In true reality, hindrances are *bodhi*, because they hinder the arising of any vow or aspiration. *Bodhi* is free from the attachment to any vow or aspiration, which just abides in the ultimate truth of emptiness.

“Non-entry is *bodhi*, because of the absence of lustful attachment. Accordance is *bodhi*, because of accordance with suchness.

Non-entry can also be understood as non-involvement, non-acceptance, for *bodhi* is without greediness and hankering. *Bodhi* is not involved in any commitments and is constantly free from desire.

Accordance is *bodhi* because of accordance with suchness. The word “accordance” does not mean the ordinary accordance that complies with conditioned phenomena. Rather, it is in accordance with the ultimate truth, the nature of reality, and the suchness of all phenomena.

“Abiding is *bodhi*, because of abiding [in the] Dharma-nature.

Abiding in the inconceivable nature of reality is *bodhi*, in which the natural state of all things is utterly unfabricated.

“Approach is *bodhi*, because of the approach to the reality-limit.

Approach means arrival, arriving at the reality-limit or the other shore—the ultimate truth—is *bodhi*.

“Nonduality is *bodhi*, because of the transcendence of mind and *dharmas*.

Nonduality is bodhi, for in bodhi there is neither conscious mind nor outer appearances. Bodhi is removed from thoughts and thought objects.

“Universal sameness is *bodhi*, because of universal sameness with space.

Universal sameness is bodhi, for in bodhi all is equally empty, like the infinite space. Space finds no the slightest obstruction or characteristics, so does the nature of the bodhi.

“The unconditioned is *bodhi*, because of the absence of generation, abiding, and extinction.

The unconditioned is bodhi, because bodhi knows no generation, abiding, or extinction. It is only in the conditioned phenomena there are generation, abiding, and extinction.

“Understanding is *bodhi*, because of the comprehension of the mental processes of sentient beings.

“Understanding” means knowledge. The wisdom of complete knowledge is bodhi. Such wisdom knows all sentient beings’ minds, activities, inclinations, and so on, in all their multiplicities. We have to know that bodhi is not an empty vacuity of nothingness; rather, it encompasses a self-arising limpid clarity that is not explained in the Shravakayana teaching. *The Diamond Sutra* says:

Therefore, Subhuti, the Bodhisattva, the great being, should produce an unsupported thought, i.e., a thought which is nowhere supported, a thought unsupported by sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or mind-objects.

There is nothing whatsoever that abides in emptiness, yet from emptiness it arises a dynamic cognizance, a vivid awareness that is not found in inanimate or non-sentient entities.

“Non-assembly is *bodhi*, because of the non-assembly of the entrances (ayatanas, i.e., sensory capacities).

The word “assembly” refers to “engagement” or “making contact”. The word “entrances” means ayatanas, the twelve sense fields, which are the six senses and six objects. When six sense organs engage with their objects, six consciousnesses arise. Non-assembly is bodhi

because the nature of the six senses and six objects are without intrinsic nature, thus they cannot really engage or get in contact with one another.

“Non-aggregation is *bodhi*, because of the transcendence of the latent influences of the afflictions.

Bodhi is unadulterated and untangled, since it has freed itself from all mental afflictions and subtle habitual tendencies.

“The non-locative is *bodhi*, because of formlessness.

The word “non-locative” is neither somewhere nor nowhere. Bodhi is non-dwelling, lacking shape or form, that is why the Tathagata cannot be perceived by any characteristics.

“Provisional names are *bodhi*, because names are empty.

Bodhi is merely a provisional name, because both names and words are empty. In *The Platform Sutra*, the Six Patriarch Hui Neng says:

*Bodhi is fundamentally without any tree;
The bright mirror is also not a stand.
Fundamentally there is not a single thing—
Where could any dust be attracted?”*

Initially, Master Hui Neng fell short of reaching the most exalted state of realization; later after the Fifth Patriarch bestowed him with instructions he was able to truly see the nature of the mind.

“The [activities of the] conversion of suchness are *bodhi*, because of the nonexistence of grasping and forsaking.”

The display of phantom-like phenomena is bodhi, for it neither accepting nor rejecting.

“The non-turbulent is *bodhi*, because of permanent composure.

The word “turbulent” does not mean distraction or chaos in the usual sense; instead, it refers to any fabrication that does not conform to the ultimate truth. The non-turbulent is bodhi, for it is always serene and pure by itself.

“Good serenity is *bodhi*, because of the purity of the natures.

“Good serenity” refers a kind of sublime tranquility that surpasses the nirvana of arhat. Such serenity is bodhi, for it is pure in nature.

“Non-grasping is *bodhi*, because of the transcendence of objectified mentation.

Non-grasping is bodhi, for it is removed from distracting causes and does not grasp to any phenomena.

“Nondifferentiation is *bodhi*, because of the universal sameness of the *dharmas*.

Non-differentiation is bodhi because all phenomena are equal in nature.

“Non-comparison is *bodhi*, because of the impossibility of analogy.

Non-comparison or non-analogy is bodhi. Unlike conditioned phenomena, bodhi cannot be known with references. Even the universal metaphor of space to bodhi is a pale and partial description. The natural state of all things is indescribable and incomparable; it can only be realized by seeing one’s own nature by oneself.

“The subtle is *bodhi*, because of the difficulty of understanding the *dharmas*.’

Here the word “subtle” is translated as “delicate” in the Tibetan version. Being extremely delicate is bodhi, because it is difficult to understand and realize. At the moment of his enlightenment, Buddha Shakyamuni uttered,

I have found a nectar-like dharma,

Profound, peaceful, free from reference points, luminous, and unconditioned.

Whoever I would teach it to could not understand it.

Thus, I shall just stay silent in the middle of the forest.

Why so? Because bodhi is beyond the reach of concept or a distracted mind, and can only be penetrated by the keenest and finest wisdom.

In both the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s translations, another sentence is here saying that the bodhi is all-pervasive, as it has the nature of infinite space. And the Tibetan version says more: “The bodhi cannot be realized, either physically or mentally. Why? The body is like grass, trees,

walls, paths, and optical illusions. And the mind is immaterial, invisible, baseless, and unconscious.” None of the Japanese, Sanskrit, Xuanzang, or Zhiqian’s translations contains this additional paragraph. It’s likely that the source of the Tibetan version is a different Sanskrit text.

When comparing various translation versions, do not harbor a judgmental mind. Historically, it is by councils of arhats who recited Buddha’s teachings from memory that the sutras were compiled, and variations among versions are inevitable. Already we’ve seen different Sanskrit versions of *Lotus Sutra*. Even today, notes of a teaching taken simultaneously by a number of students would not be exactly the same. All in all, we must refrain from concluding hastily “this is the authentic version, not that one,” based on slight variations in content.

Another example is the *Bodhicharyavatara*: When Shantideva was reciting its original verses, he rose up higher and higher into the air and disappeared. A few panditas with extraordinary memory wrote down the teaching as they had recalled it, but when they tried to compare their notes, there were different opinions on what was said. It was only some time later that Shantideva himself settled their disagreement about the text and affirmed the standard version. However, Shantideva didn’t say that other recordings are something wrong. In this fashion, it is fair to say that all versions, be it the short version or the long version, are authentic nonetheless.

When we study a sutra, comparing its different translations side by side is an excellent way to cross-reference. However, it’s not proper to deem one version more faithful or better than the other, and take the liberty to “make corrections” of others. This is an important point we must be careful about.

“World-honored One, when Vimalakirti explained this Dharma, two hundred gods achieved the forbearance of the non-arising of *dharmas*. Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

At the end, Maitreya concluded, “Vimalakirti’s teaching inspired two hundred gods in the assembly to achieve the forbearance of the non-arising of *dharmas*, and for me, I was rendered speechless.” Therefore, he declined the Buddha’s request to go inquire about his illness.

Lecture 23

A Few Words before the Teaching

a. The Management of the BSA

As more and more people in different places join the group study in the BSA (Bodhi Study Association), either locally or virtually, Khenpo reminds that everyone should persist in dharma study and practice. The curriculum offered at the BSA usually takes five or six years, and once selecting a certain course to study, students should have the determination to commit fully to the completion of their studies. Given that the BSA community is growing bigger and bigger, tiny frictions are sometimes unavoidable among so many people. But, these conflicts should not bring negative impacts to the majority's study and practice. Khenpo and his team are working on the BSA management rules to meet the demands that come with a growing organization, but it certainly requires more discussion and improvement. Khenpo stated that as trouble-makers are far less than 1% within the whole community, and urges everyone to follow the BSA regulations, the 6th edition of which will be published at the end of this year (2018).

The instructors and administrators in Khenpo's team always spare no effort in working on various situations to meet the constant changing needs. They are not looking for fame or wealth or have other intentions, but perform these duties totally out of altruism. This pure motivation of benefiting others should not be contaminated by worldly concerns, and what they are doing just reflects typical Mahayana altruistic behavior. However, if their management is unsatisfactory or conducted in an improper way, it is necessary for the team to apologize in front of the whole community.

Generally speaking, the BSA community has developed into a good shape and has also moved in a good direction. Meanwhile, the administration team faces the growing pressure on management due to the expansion of the community. Khenpo thinks that the BSA should not be aggressively expanded like enterprises, but rather be maintained at a manageable scale to make sure that everyone in the community receives proper training and guidance. With the completion of the curriculum which takes five or six years, many people will graduate and the number of the BSA members may probably decrease. This is not a bad thing, as Khenpo

mentioned, “less people, better quality” will be the overall trend of the future development of the BSA.

b. Course Recommendation

For the upcoming courses, Khenpo recommends his university talks as some supporting study materials for the BSA members. Since 2011, Khenpo has been giving talks to college students and faculties at more than 100 universities across the world. Certainly, it is not Khenpo’s intention to promote his works, but these talks are inspiring to a general audience, both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, to develop an altruistic mind and a conviction on the karmic principle of cause and effect.

Khenpo believes that in this modern age, it is necessary to educate professionals in Buddhism who not only master the deep meaning of Buddhist doctrine, but more importantly, are also proficient in interacting and communicating with people of various backgrounds. By understanding their thoughts and preferences, we can relate the Buddhist philosophy to modern people’s mindset and concept. In particular, college students and professors represent a well-educated group in this world, and their understanding and acceptance of the Buddhist philosophy would bring noticeable influence to many others. So, a fruitful interaction and exchange with them are indeed a skillful practice of carrying out the activities of bodhisattvas in this modern age.

Some traditional monastics and practitioners might think such efforts have nothing to do with their own liberation from samsara. But this could be a very narrow mind of individualism. In order to promote the spirit of altruism and compassion in this materialistic world, it is indispensable for every Mahayana Buddhist, including very senior monastics such as khenpos and khenmos, to learn how to find a common ground and communicate with modern people of various backgrounds.

c. Cherish the Mahayana Teaching

Khenpo asks everyone to arouse the supreme bodhichitta and listen attentively as the chance of receiving the Dharma teaching is so rare. As in many sutras, the Buddha had such a similar teaching:

Born as a human is rare, but I am;

*The opportunity of hearing the Dharma teaching is rare, but I have;
Encountering a spiritual master to guide the spiritual path is rare, but I have.*

Given the fact that the human rebirth is rare to obtain, the Dharma teaching is rare to hear, and the spiritual teacher is rare to encounter, when we possess all these precious conditions, it is unreasonable for us to waste such a wonderful opportunity and not engage in the spiritual practice.

Indeed, one's life will become significant after one encounters, studies and practices the Mahayana teaching. As Khenpo said, "I consider myself a genuine Buddhist only after arriving at Larung Gar and meeting my spiritual teacher, because I received precious teachings from him and since then, I have been spending all my efforts on Dharma activities, including both personal practice and the Dharma teaching to others. Since I whole-heartedly dedicate myself to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma and the wellbeing of sentient beings, although my inner realization cannot measure up to those of great masters in the past, I will not have any regret whenever I leave this world."

Khenpo feels that the same goes for each of us. In our lives, we have pursued our own dreams, and truly enjoy what we have obtained. But concerning its far-reaching impact life after life, it is only after we encounter the Mahayana teaching that this human existence is empowered with great value. Different people have different experiences in following Buddhism. Even for non-believers, the exposure to the Buddhist philosophy could be a wonderful and remarkable experience in their lives. Although each lecture of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* only lasts for about an hour, this seemingly ordinary experience will unfold its extraordinary impact by planting the seeds of liberation in our all-ground consciousness. Of course, it takes time for the seeds to sprout and blossom in next or future lives, just like a harvest requires sowing in the spring and reaping in the autumn. But truly speaking, its fruit is already there in our mind streams.

The Story of Radiance Ornament Youth

The Buddha told Radiance Ornament Youth, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Radiance Ornament Youth addressed the Buddha, "World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past,

when I was coming out of the great city of Vaisali just as Vimalakirti was entering the city. I immediately bowed and asked, ‘Retired scholar, from where are you coming?’

“He answered me, ‘I have come from the place of enlightenment.’

“I asked, ‘Where is the place of enlightenment?’

The previous dialogue between Vimalakirti and Maitreya is from the aspect of fruition stage, while the conversation between Vimalakirti and Radiance Ornament Youth is about the Dharma practice at the causal stage, and Vimalakirti explained the comprehensive meaning of “the place of enlightenment”. One possible reason of this difference is that Maitreya appeared as a monk who already received the prophecy of full enlightenment from Buddha Shakyamuni, while Radiance Ornament Youth appeared as a lay person who just embarked on his Buddha path and was about to leave the city and look for the place of enlightenment.

Here “youth” does not necessarily mean “juvenility” or “child”. Like the Youthful Manjushri, the Youthful Sudhana, it means the attainment of the vigorous, unfading and perpetual wisdom. Sometimes Manjushri is described as a 16-year-old young man, its real meaning refers to his unconditioned wisdom, compassion and the ability of benefiting sentient beings. Such an energetic youth as Manjushri will never get old. We ordinary practitioners should desire for this admirable quality, maintain and uplift our motivations of Dharma practice and always keep our aspirations fresh.

When Radiance Ornament Youth encountered Vimalakirti, he first respectfully bowed to Vimalakirti, the most influential and wisest householder of extraordinary inner realization in the city of Vaisali, and asked where he came from. And since Radiance Ornament Youth was looking for a place of enlightenment, so he continued to ask Vimalakirti where the place of enlightenment was.

The place of enlightenment, or *Bodhimaṇḍa* in Sanskrit, refers to a location where one achieves supreme enlightenment. In Tibetan it is called *changchub nyingpo*, meaning the essence of enlightenment. Xuanzang translated it into “sublime enlightenment”. So in this dialogue, Vimalakirti explained the place of enlightenment with very profound meanings, and its connotation is not just limited as an outside place.

Generally speaking, every religion or spiritual tradition has specific places for their followers' practice. For example, in Confucianism it is called Confucius school; in Daoism it is called Daoist temple; in Buddhism it is called monastery or Vihara; in Christianity it is called church; in Islam it is called Mosque; and in Judaism it is called Synagogue. All these places can be generalized as the place of enlightenment.

Being established less than forty years, Larung Institute is much younger than many other monasteries in the Tibetan region, some of which are hundreds or thousands of years old. Yet it is now an attractive place of enlightenment, which accommodates tens of thousands of people for their Dharma practice. Without such kind of places, it will be very difficult for many dharma practitioners to persevere in their study and practice.

For this reason, on the conventional level, the efforts to establishing or building Dharma centers can bring forth great merit. Khenpo suggests those who have such abilities set up at least one Dharma center in their lives. If the conditions are allowable, Dharma centers should be established in different places to provide convenience for lay practitioners. For example, in the western countries people usually set up Dharma centers in a family style. A local Dharma center can bring much more meaningful impacts to the community than a virtual center in cyber space.

When Buddha Shakyamuni was going to establish a place of enlightenment in India, some disciples asked him, "What if this place was destroyed by the natural disasters?" The Buddha answered, "Even if it exists for only one night, it is worthwhile for us to set it up." In 1990 when His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche came back from India, he started the plan to build a big shrine hall for the entire Sangha. At that time, His Holiness quoted the Buddha's words above, saying, "Even if this shrine hall could exist for a year or two, it is worth our best efforts to build it up!" Then very quickly, the shrine hall was well built through the Sangha's joint efforts and was used for many years.

In the teaching below, however, the place of enlightenment refers to the four kinds of mind, the six paramitas, and the skillful means of guiding sentient beings onto the path, etc., all of which can be cultivated within our minds. In this sense, no matter where we are, we are always within the place of enlightenment.

“He answered,

“Sincerity is the place of enlightenment, because of the absence of falsity. The generation of practice is the place of enlightenment, because it is able to discriminate things³. Profound mind is the place of enlightenment, because of the increase in merit. The mind of *bodhi* (*bodhicitta*) is the place of enlightenment, because of the absence of error.

1. Sincerity is an unadulterated and pure mind, devoid of any falsity and impurity. As Mipham Rinpoche said in his *Treatise on the Codes of Mundane and Transmundane*,

*Being fair and upright leads to the path of humans and gods,
Yet being hypocritical and deceitful leads to the path of demons.*

The place of enlightenment needs to be founded on the purity and integrity of one’s mind. In *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, it says,

*If a sentient being’s mind is steep and crooked,
then the buddha is [hidden] within the sentient being.
If a single moment of thought is level and direct,
then the sentient being becomes a buddha.*

Even if one looks like a buddha, if he has a devious and insincere mind, he is indeed a deluded being; if one has realized the nature of mind and completely eradicated afflictions, he becomes the buddha although still looking like an ordinary being.

Sincerity doesn’t mean the unguarded talks or irresponsible remarks, as loose lips sink ships. Mipham Rinpoche once said that sometimes you don’t need to speak your mind, and sometimes if you carelessly speak out your thoughts, you don’t need to take action. This is an important pitch instruction that we need to bear in mind.

2. On the basis of sincerity, we need to implement our wishes, just as we need to cultivate the bodhicitta in action once we have the bodhicitta in aspiration. Action is essential because empty words lead to nothing. Only when we translate our ideas into concrete actions will we have the place of enlightenment. If no action is taken, nothing will be accomplished, so for the sake of both ourselves and others we need practical actions.

³ It should be **accomplish things**

Speaking of “generation of practice”, Khenpo asks us to be mindful that just paying lip service could result the loss of many good opportunities. Our personal matters can be put aside, but the activities for the welfare of beings must be prioritized and carried out so long as there are favorable conditions. Khenpo hopes that we will not be tired of this duty and not fear the negative comments or misunderstandings of others. As long as we have a pure and selfless motivation and can truly benefit others, we should do it without the least hesitation.

3. A profound mind is a firm conviction in the Dharma teaching and the practice of altruism. It is the place of enlightenment because it will multiply merits. Everybody needs to develop such a profound mind, because without it the spiritual practice will become superficial and unsuccessful. It will be a huge pity if one is just wandering on the path of empty words and fails to engage in deep study and sincere practice of the Dharma. Gradually, this kind of people will generate wrong views and stray from the Dharma path. Without a profound mind, even Dharma instructors who teach the Dharma for decades would be laden with afflictions, not to mention making progress and accumulating merits.

As stated in the *Compendium of the Teachings Sutra*,

*Without sincerity and a profound mind,
There will be no growth of any merits of Dharma.*

If the tree has a rotten root, it will have no leaves and will bear no fruit. Similarly, if we don't have sincerity and a profound mind, the other virtuous quality will not take root and sprout. Therefore, we do need to cultivate these two qualities. Sincerity is the first, and based on it we can develop profound mind. The generation of practice actually indicates a steadfast faith which is indispensable for us to accomplish anything. When we have these three kinds of mind, i.e., sincerity, faith and profound mind, we will be able to generate bodhichitta, a mind that seeks for enlightenment.

4. The mind of bodhi refers to an altruistic mind to benefit others, or the realization of the nature of mind. In the Tibetan version, it is said that bodhichitta does not neglect anything because the moment this altruistic mind of bodhichitta is aroused, it will never be forgotten, lost or fallible. Or we can say that since bodhichitta is the mind of perceiving the ultimate truth of all phenomena, it is the lack of any error or misconception.

One thing we should know is that the more we study and practice the Dharma, the less sufferings and afflictions we should have. As Khenpo humbly said about his own experience, “Probably because I’m getting old, my afflictive emotions are far less than before. When hearing others’ negative comments on me, I might get a little upset at that moment, but such feelings would be gone quickly. On the other hand, my confidence in the Dharma and the devotion to my guru has become much stronger and unmovable.” Indeed, what Khenpo described is exactly the embodiment of his sincerity and profound mind.

So Dharma practitioners should gradually make progress on their spiritual path. If not, one should carefully check for the reasons, and also piously pray to the Three Jewels. Some people were very devoted and enthusiastic at the beginning, but after a period of time they tended to feel tired and make no efforts at all. It is not good to behave like this. As Khenpo said, “Even if our wisdom cannot grow with age, we at least should keep our faith and devotion till the end and do not discourage others by showing the opposite.”

His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was an excellent exemplar for us. When he was about to enter parinirvana in his seventies, he was still very vigorous when giving the Dharma teachings and generated a lively atmosphere during his teaching. Such a scene is quite fresh in Khenpo’s memory. As practitioners, we should not look dull and clumsy in the prime of our lives, or become indifferent and unfeeling when we are supposed to be energetic.

“Charity is the place of enlightenment, because of not seeking after retribution (i.e., reward). Morality is the place of enlightenment, because of the fulfillment of vows. Forbearance is the place of enlightenment, because of the absence of any mental hindrance regarding sentient beings. Exertion is the place of enlightenment, because of not retrogressing. Meditation is the place of enlightenment, because of the pliable disciplining of the mind. Wisdom is the place of enlightenment, because of the manifest perception of the *dharmas*.

According to Master Kuiji’s commentary, the previous paragraph is about four kinds of minds that set us on the Buddha path. Now it is about the minds of six paramitas, which are the main practices of bodhisattvas. Since in Tibetan the place of enlightenment is called “the essence of enlightenment”, so this paragraph mainly talks about the essence of six paramitas.

1. The essence of generosity is to seek no karmic rewards. Or, charity is the place of enlightenment, because the transcendent and perfect generosity does not wish for any worldly

reward. This is called the paramita of generosity. Ordinary beings usually yearn for personal happiness as payback for their act of giving, which is certainly not the transcendent generosity.

2. The essence of morality is the fulfillment of all vows. Or, morality is the place of enlightenment, because upholding precepts leads to the accomplishment of all commitments.

The Way of the Bodhisattva says

Where, indeed, could beings, fishes, and the rest

Be placed, to shield them from suffering?

Deciding to refrain from harming them

Is said to be perfection of morality.

Refraining from harming others can be regarded as the perfection of morality. So to maintain pure precepts is to fulfill the vows of abandoning vicious intentions. Just as the earth is the base for all that is still or moving, discipline is said to be the foundation of all virtues. *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* says

For those who keep pure precepts,

All their wishes will be fulfilled.

Upholding pure precepts brings great benefits,

And attaining bodhi becomes not difficult at all.

3. Forbearance is the place of enlightenment for it is devoid of resentment towards sentient beings. In the *Ten Wheels Sutra of Ksitigarbha*, it is taught,

Knowing that all beings possess the same characteristic,

Phenomena is empty with tranquil extinction,

Thus one's mind is devoid of all attachments,

Such is the utmost patience with supreme benefit.

The essence of forbearance is without any attachment or hindrance regarding sentient beings, and this brings supreme benefit to both self and others. Hence, we should harbor no resentment towards any beings including those who harm us. Geshe Dromtonpa once asked Lord Atisha, “What if someone hits me?” “You should practice patience.” answered Lord Atisha. “What if someone wants to kill me?” “That is also fine.”

Such a goal could be out of our reach at the present stage. Sometimes we are not tolerant enough to listen to other's criticism, but it is always beneficial for us to be open to positive or negative feedback and be aware of our own faults. Calm and rational thinking is indispensable for our self-reflection, so that we can improve ourselves in our spiritual practice.

Once when Geshe Ben Gungyal was in a householder's home and put his hand into the tea bag to fetch the tea, he immediately realized that he was stealing and shouted loudly, "A thief here. Stop him!" This is a good example for us to keep watching our minds with mindfulness and alertness, and to correct our wrongdoing as soon as we notice it. If we keep this up, a dramatic change will take place.

4. Exertion is the place of enlightenment for it is devoid of laziness and retrogression. According to *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, bodhisattvas should remove the four major obstacles to their practice, which are laziness, lack of faith, arrogance and aggression. With the presence of these barriers, practitioners will fail to progress on their spiritual practice.

5. Meditation is the place of enlightenment, because it makes the mind tame and gentle. In *The Mindfulness of the True Dharma* it says

*He who has a tender heart,
being adorned with compassion,
Is protected by all forces,
And praised by all beings.*

With a tender and compassionate heart, one will be protected by the forces of gods and demons and praised by everyone; however, with a stubborn and rude heart, this person will displease all others. Some practitioners do have a gentle heart, and although sometimes they are disturbed by their mental afflictions, they can still appear to be peaceful. Actually, this shows their ability of meditation, through which their hearts are disciplined and tamed.

6. Wisdom is the place of enlightenment, for it sees all phenomena exactly as they are. Above are the minds of six paramitas, and the following part is about eight skillful means to ripen the mind streams of sentient beings.

“Sympathy is the place of enlightenment, because of the universal sameness of sentient beings. Compassion is the place of enlightenment, because of the forbearance of suffering. Joy is the place of enlightenment, because of taking pleasure in the Dharma. Equanimity is the place of enlightenment, because of the eradication of repugnance and affection.

This and next paragraph talk about eight skillful means of ripening sentient beings' minds.

1. Sympathy or lovingkindness is the wish that all living beings may have happiness and its causes.
2. Compassion is the wish that all living beings may be free from suffering and its causes. In order to save all beings from suffering, bodhisattvas can endure all kinds of hardship without any tiredness.
3. Joy is the great pleasure in the Dharma, because it can lead all living beings to liberation.
4. Equanimity is a peaceful and even-minded attitude towards all sentient beings because it abandons affection and aversion.

“The numinous penetrations are the place of enlightenment, because of the achievement of the six penetrations (i.e., supernatural abilities). Emancipation is the place of enlightenment, because of the ability to forsake. Skillful means are the place of enlightenment, because of the salvation of sentient beings. The four means of attraction are the place of enlightenment, because of the attraction (i.e., conversion) of sentient beings.

5. The numinous penetrations are the place of enlightenment, because of the achievement of the mundane and transmundane supernatural abilities, i.e., divine eye and divine ear, knowing the minds of others, knowing one's own and others' past lives, exhausting defilements, as well as performing miracles.
6. Eight emancipations are the place of enlightenment for they are free from all conceptual thoughts.
7. skillful means are the place of enlightenment for their ability to enlighten and awaken sentient beings.

8. The four means of attraction are the place of enlightenment for they can be used to attract sentient beings. According to Kumarajiva's explanations, each of the four means of attraction can be subdivided into two kinds:

1) generosity can be divided into the ordinary giving of material goods and the supreme giving of the Dharma;

2) pleasant language can be the ordinary kind words or the supreme Dharma words;

3) teaching each individual according to that person's needs can be through the worldly approach to bring them temporal benefits, or through the transmundane approach to bring them spiritual benefits;

4) acting in conformity with what one teaches also has two scenarios, i.e. sometimes consorting with villains in order to plant virtuous seed in their mind and guide them to practice virtues, just like Manjushri visiting the brothel to convert people by skillful means, and sometimes accompanying good people to do good and let their merit increase.

All in all, it is important to use skillful means to guide sentient beings onto the path of liberation. Because the capacities and intentions of different beings vary a lot, a single method cannot be applied to all. It is with his deep consideration that the Buddha taught us to apply the four means of attraction to our Dharma practices and the activities of benefiting others.

Erudition is the place of enlightenment, because of practice according to one's knowledge. Mental control is the place of enlightenment, because of the correct contemplation of the dharmas.

These two are about the cultivation of virtuous roots.

1. Erudition means learning the Dharma extensively, and it is the place of enlightenment, as quoted by Master Kuiji in his commentary,

Listening to the Dharma extensively brings about joyfulness,

Amasses various virtues,

Abandons the meaningless,

And leads one to the attainment of nirvana.

The key point is that after listening, we need to carry out what we have learned. As Kumarajiva said in his commentary, “Just listening to the Dharma while not practicing, it is no different from animals’ listening.”

2. Mental control means to tame one’s mind by proper discrimination. The source of discrimination can be based on the reasoning or facts. For example, we can tame our mind by contemplating the thought of impermanence based on learning the theories and observing all phenomena around us. By doing so, we can abandon the confused thought of permanence. Mental control is the place of enlightenment, because our mind can be disciplined by proper guidance, and as a result, all non-virtuous thought will be forsaken.

Reflections on the Dharma teaching is an important meditative practice. Many westerners think that meditation only refers to sitting meditation. Indeed, thinking over and over about the Dharma teachings is another type of mediation, which is called analytical meditation. For example, if we can keep thinking about altruism, bodhichitta, emptiness and so on in our daily life, this kind of contemplation is also the meditative practice of the Dharma.

In Tibetan, meditation is called *sgom*, meaning thinking, contemplating and cultivating, the same as in Chinese. In English, meditation is derived from a Latin verb, also means to think and reflect. So we should understand that sitting meditation is just one type of meditation, more likely a preliminary practice for beginners. Sometimes it is necessary for us to close our eyes and stay away from the chaotic environment. But a good practitioner should also intentionally join the crowd or the harsh environment to examine and enhance his or her realization.

Khenpo is very grateful to H.H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. He said, “If my guru hadn’t put me in a complicated environment, I might now be fragile and weak when facing some setbacks, or could even desperately hide myself behind the door to avoid any confrontations. On the contrary, thanks to my guru’s kindness and wisdom, I can now embrace any possibilities at ease.” Therefore, a complicated environment is a necessity for one’s improvement. Especially for Mahayana practitioners, we should make connections with different beings as much as possible, this kind of practice is more crucial than just sitting meditation.

The thirty-seven factors of enlightenment are the place of enlightenment, because of forsaking the conditioned *dharmas*. The truth is the place of enlightenment, because of not misleading the world.

“Conditioned generation is the place of enlightenment, because ignorance and so forth through old age and death, are all unexhausted. The afflictions are *bodhi*, because of understanding according to actuality.

“Sentient beings are the place of enlightenment, because of understanding no-self.

“All *dharmas* are the place of enlightenment, because of understanding the emptiness of the *dharmas*.

According to Master Kuiji, this part is about the six ways of upholding the authentic Dharma.

1. The thirty-seven factors of enlightenment are the place of enlightenment, because they forsake the conditioned phenomena. In the Tibetan and Sanskrit versions, the essence of the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment is to abandon both conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, which also makes sense because the final stage of Buddhahood transcends the dualistic mode completely.

2. The two truths, i.e., the relative truth and ultimate truth, or the Four Noble Truths, are the place of enlightenment because they expound the true reality of all phenomena without any error and will not mislead any sentient beings.

3. Conditioned generation refers to the twelve links of dependent origination. According to the Tibetan and Sanskrit versions, they are the place of enlightenment because ignorance and so forth through old age and death, are all exhausted through the realization of these twelve links. But in both Kumarajiva and Xuanzang’s versions it is said that the twelve links are unexhausted, which could be explained in the way that bodhisattvas clearly know that sentient beings are endless and samsara never comes to an end.

The *Heart Sutra* says, “There is no ignorance, there is no extinction of ignorance, and so on up to no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death.” On the ultimate level, the twelve links of dependent origination are all nonexistent, but their appearances will not be completely gone in the phenomenal world because the perfect union of interdependence and emptiness is the ultimate truth.

4. The afflictions are the place of enlightenment, because through them we know the nature of true reality. The Tibetan and Xuanzang’s version says, “The elimination of afflictions is

bodhi,” which also makes sense because through the elimination of afflictions, one is perfectly enlightened about the nature of reality.

5. Sentient beings are the place of enlightenment, because in true reality there is no self, no person and no sentient beings. “Self” is a fabricated concept and ultimately speaking all living beings are lack of any intrinsic identity.

6. All phenomena are the place of enlightenment because the ultimate truth is that all phenomena are equally extinguished and empty. As Yongming Yanshou says in his *Mirror that Reflects Our Mind*,

Each and every phenomenon,

Each and every thought,

Just the moment it appears, it is extinguished,

Just the place it appears, it is enlightenment.

All external phenomena and internal thoughts are empty in nature, so they are the place of enlightenment.

Subjugation of the Maras is the place of enlightenment, because of not being swayed. The triple world is the place of enlightenment, because of the absence of destinations. The lion’s roar is the place of enlightenment, because of the absence of fear. The [ten] powers, [four] fearlessnesses, and [eighteen] exclusive attributes are the place of enlightenment, because of the absence of transgressions. The three illuminations are the place of enlightenment, because of the absence of remaining hindrances. To understand all the *dharmas* in a single moment of thought is the place of enlightenment, because of the accomplishment of omniscience.

This part is about the six ways of making offerings to the Tathagatas.

1. Subjugation of the Maras is the place of enlightenment, because those who can subjugate the Maras, cannot be swayed by the Maras and their spiritual realization is steadfast. Indeed, being unflinching and unshakable is the best way to subjugate the Maras. If one complains about the adverse conditions, gives up one’s practice and generates wrong views, then that person has already been swayed by the Maras.

Especially in a Dharma center or within a Buddhist community, if there are some difficulties or demonic obstacles happening, it is crucial for the members to remain unswayed. No matter what kind of adversity we encounter, we should keep our faith and devotion to the teaching and the teacher firm and immovable. When great masters of the past, such as His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and many others, carried out their Dharma activities, they also encountered many setbacks. Living in such a chaotic world, it is common to have various unfavorable conditions and challenges. If we can keep a steadfast faith, we will be able to subdue all the Maras and make achievements in our Dharma practices. This is of vital importance to every Buddhist.

In recent years there are some disputes in different Dharma centers around the world. In certain case some disciples even sued and tried to put their lama into jail and as a result many people lose the opportunity to make any connection to the lama. Certainly this could be a karmic result for everyone involved. Sometimes a person didn't commit any crime, but due to his karma in previous life, this person could be convicted. Or sometimes a real criminal might not be punished due to the lack of karmic conditions at that time. Back to the case of teacher and disciple, one possible reason could be the disciples' poor Dharma study and practice. If they failed to delve into the deep study of the Dharma and their practices remained superficial, then consequently their faith was unstable and swinging, and in the long term, they will not have a promising future.

On the other side, great masters with high spiritual realization would not regard the life in jail necessarily as a bad thing. For example, Yangthang Rinpoche had stayed in jail for more than 20 years. One day when he passed by his jail, he pointed at that place and told the driver lightly, "That was the place where I finished my college." Then the driver truly believed Rinpoche's words and later told Khenpo Sodargye seriously about it, making Khenpo laugh a lot.

For a Dharma practitioner, whether one's mind will be easily swayed or not depends on how good one's Dharma study and practice are. The essence of subjugating the Maras is to maintain an unshakable faith in the Dharma. Even in this degenerate time, those who have been immersed in a systematic study of the Dharma and developed a firm and solid understanding of the Buddhist philosophy will not be easily impacted by any perverted worldly views, because they have cultivated an immovable faith in the Three Jewels.

2. The triple world is the place of enlightenment, because it has no destinations and no place to go.
3. The lion's roar refers to the teaching of emptiness, and it is the place of enlightenment for it fears no heretics.
4. The ten powers, four fearlessnesses, and eighteen exclusive attributes are all the Buddha's qualities, and they are the place of enlightenment, because no matter how these qualities are being examined, they are devoid of any fault.
5. The three illuminations are the supercognition of one's own and others' past lives, the supercognition of the divine eye and the supercognition of the exhaustion of the defilements. With these abilities, one is able to perfectly know the past, the future, and the nature of all afflictive emotions without any hindrance, so they are the place of enlightenment.
6. In the path of Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, one needs to go through 34 moments incessantly to achieve the final wisdom which pacifies all afflictions and obscurations. While in the Mahayana path, it is just within one moment that one can achieve full enlightenment and gain the wisdom of omniscience, i.e., the wisdom of directly perceiving the nature of all phenomena. Therefore, understanding all things in a single moment is the place of enlightenment, because of the accomplishment of omniscience.

“Thus, my good man, should the bodhisattva teach sentient beings according to the perfections. In all that is done, [down to every] lifting or placing of one's foot, you should understand that all these come from the place of enlightenment and abide in the Buddha-Dharma.’

At the end Vimalakirti concluded, a bodhisattva should teach and convert sentient beings according to the six paramitas. In Xuangzang's translation, it summarizes all the teaching above: Bodhisattvas should apply themselves to 1) the four kinds of mind, 2) the six paramitas, 3) the eight skillful means of ripening sentient beings' minds, 4) the two ways of cultivating all virtuous roots, 5) the six aspects of upholding the authentic Dharma, and 6) the six ways of making offerings to the Tathagatas. In this way, their every action and deed, as small as every lifting of a foot or every placing of a foot, are indeed coming from the place of enlightenment and abiding in the Buddha-Dharma.

This is an important pith instruction. Lacking these conditions, no matter how splendid a Dharma center or a monastery is, it may not be beneficial to living beings. Nowadays many monasteries are grand and luxurious yet there are only few monastics living inside. Without regular Dharma teachings and practices, we can't tell whether they are the real places of enlightenment or not. Even if one gets ordained and stays in a nice temple it could still be meaningless due to a lack of inner qualities that accords to the Dharma. Therefore, in order to truly establish the place of enlightenment, our priority is to cultivate these qualities mentioned above through systematic study and practice.

“When [Vimalakirti] explained the Dharma five hundred gods and humans all generated the intention to achieve *anuttara samyaksambodhi*. Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

Then Radiance Ornament Youth told the Buddha that he dared not go to visit him as he was refuted by Vimalakirti on the topic of the place of enlightenment. Vimalakirti was so adept in adopting skillful means that even he was meeting people on the street, he could elaborate the Dharma teaching like this. We should be also flexible when teaching the Dharma to others.

Lecture 24

About Time Management and Priority Setting

Khenpo's teaching schedule is always fully packed in each semester at Larung Gar. For example, in a normal week of the 2018 summer, Monday and Tuesday were for *Vimalakirti Sutra*; Wednesday and Saturday, *The Classic of Filial Piety*; Thursday and Friday, tantric teachings. Sometimes on Sunday, he would also give teachings on certain specific topics as well as the oral transmissions of some short treatises. Some students may feel overwhelmed and wish for a little break, but Khenpo maintains his perseverance to forge ahead. He urges the audience to exercise a firm control over their time schedules, and not to allow indolence to creep in. Otherwise, both the lecturer and the audiences might choose to skip all the classes.

The *Vimalakirti Sutra*, in particular, is hard to comprehend and some of its content may not align well with modern issues. For some people, who would rather focus on the present life's entanglements and entertainments and have little faith and understanding in Buddhism, it is understandable that they are beset by trying to attend classes over a long period of time. However, in the pursuit of both worldly and spiritual goals, the quality of perseverance and maintaining great passion is highly advocated, which drives one to work hard despite various hurdles that may come along the way. This personality trait of "grit" is recognized as a vital element for success in business, politics, medicine, academics, and many other endeavors. Shouldn't we, the Mahayana practitioners, exercise more of such an indomitable spirit? Indeed, enthusiastic perseverance is an indispensable ingredient in spiritual training. Therefore, Khenpo encourages everyone to follow through steadfastly, unless there are extenuating circumstances.

For many Buddhists, this sutra holds extraordinary significance. Firstly, it illuminates straightforwardly the profound teachings in sutras and tantras; secondly, it contains excellent explanations and essential instructions that help one to deal with specific problems and afflictive emotions. These teachings imparted by Vimalakirti had gained high approval and praise from the Buddha. It is highly recommended that each of us, including both lay practitioners and monastics, has an in-depth study of this sutra, and after gaining proficiency in it, we should feel a sense of calling and, with a pure intention, share its profound wisdom with others as much as we can.

In terms of spreading the Dharma, monastics are somewhat limited as to how far and how wide they can reach worldwide. This is because of the small number of ordained monastics to begin with; on top of that, it's not easy for monastics to mingle well with the masses at certain occasions or places. Their ordained robes (in red, yellow, or grey) always make them stand out in the crowd, which may invite looks of respect, disrespect, curiosity, or prejudice. For example, the red robes that the Sangha members don at Larung Gar are a dignified adornment for the monastics, yet once when Khenpo went out to give a public talk, somehow he was asked if he could cover up his robes with an overcoat!

Therefore, lay Buddhists have an advantage in that it is more convenient for them to reach out to the mundane society, thus it is crucial for them to shoulder the responsibility of propagating the Dharma widely in this world. Actually this is also another reason that Khenpo determined to give teaching on this sutra. He wishes that everyone who has received the transmission of this sutra would follow the footsteps of Vimalakirti and take it as a mission to promote the teaching as much as they can. Of course Khenpo is not suggesting that monastics change into laypeople's outfits to give teachings. Actually, spreading the Dharma in the capacity of monastics is all proper and pristine if problems can be overcome. On the other hand, lay Buddhists should stay as they are and refrain from pretending to be monastics in order to cheat others.

The Story of Maintains the World Bodhisattva

The Buddha told Maintains the World Bodhisattva, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Maintains the World Bodhisattva addressed the Buddha, "World-Honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness." Why?

"I remember once in the past when I was residing in a meditation chamber, Mara the Evil One, attended by twelve thousand goddesses and in a manner like Indra with his drum, music, and song, proceeded to where I was. He and his subordinates bowed their heads to my feet, held their palms together reverentially, and stood to one side.

The previous text tells how the Buddha requested his leading Shravaka disciples and bodhisattvas to visit Vimalakirti, only to be declined and told stories of how Vimalakirti had

admonished them and had given them teachings. Today's episode concerns another bodhisattva, Bodhisattva Maintains the World, a fully-ordained bodhisattva who was highly adept in meditation but remained somewhat obscured in his post-meditation.

It is known that Mara the Evil One is the evil lord residing in the highest heaven of the desire realm, the Heaven of Controlling Others' Emanations, and often inflicts harm and creates obstacles to practitioners who are engaging in serious retreats. In this story, even Bodhisattva Maintains the World was not spared. Mara the Evil One pretended to be the Lord Indra of the Trayastrimsha Heaven (the Heaven of the Thirty-Three) and tried to seduce Bodhisattva Maintains the World with twelve thousand heavenly maidens. Mara succeeded in tricking the bodhisattva initially, but Vimalakirti immediately saw through Mara's artifice and dismantled Mara's magical prowess. Vimalakirti then preached the Dharma to Mara and his maidens, and sent them back to their palace.

Mara the Evil One is called "Mara Papiyas" in Sanskrit, and Papiyas means evil spirit. There are three grades of "evil": The first pertains "common evil" that retaliates an eye for an eye; the second is "great evil" that purposely harms others who have not inflicted harm in the first place; the third is "diabolical evil" that returns evil for good and benevolence, which is the worst kind and is what Mara the Evil One perpetrates.

In a sutra called *The Buddha Speaks of the Harassment of Mara*, Manjushri was asked: "Where does Mara perform his deeds?" Manjushri replied: "Mara performs his deeds to those with diligence." Why? Manjushri explained that Mara would like to disturb those diligent Dharma practitioners and create obstacles to their Dharma practice; on the other hand, Mara regards lazy and slothful people as his retinue and would care less about bothering them.

With this teaching, Khenpo reminds us that difficulties that we encounter in our Dharma practices could be signs that our diligence has attracted Mara's wrath. Therefore, we need not to faint at the first sign of hindrances, and to lose faith in Dharma practices or in related Dharma activities. As a matter of fact, Mara is not necessarily an obviously heinous demon with claws and gaping bloody mouth ready to devour us; instead, it is precisely one's own evil intentions that drive away virtues and plunge the mind into dark abyss.

"Thinking it was Indra, I said to him, 'Welcome, Kausika! Although [you enjoy] blessings you should not be self-indulgent. You should contemplate the impermanence of the five

desires and seek for the foundation of goodness, cultivating the perduring *dharmas* with regard to your body, life, and wealth.'

The Lord Indra in a previous life was an Indian Brahmana who engaged in the practice of virtues diligently and as a result, became the Lord Indra this life. The Buddha usually called him Kausika because this was his family name in his previous life. Mistaking Mara for the Lord Indra, Bodhisattva Maintains the World didn't like his pompous way of showing up with music and dancing. He admonished Indra: "Kausika, although you have merits to live with abundant followers and wealth in the Trayastrimsha Heaven, you should contemplate the impermanence of the five desires and seek the foundation of goodness, so that you will cultivate the indestructible essence with regard to your body, life, and wealth."

In the spiritual training, it is essential to realize the fleeting and empty nature of sensory pleasures, and to transform the composite body into the indestructible Dharmakaya, transform the impermanent life into the unconditioned wisdom, and transform the worldly wealth into the seven noble riches⁴. Only by so doing will the transient riches of this life become inexhaustible treasures. This is the meaning of cultivating "perduring Dharma".

Such accomplishments must be founded upon the understanding and acceptance of rebirth. Only with this acknowledgment will one diligently perform the virtuous actions in this life because one knows that all the accumulated merits will not be wasted, but rather bring benefits to their future lifetimes. If there were only one life to live and everything were to become naught at death, it would be fair to seize the day and night and indulge in every way. But the reality speaks the opposite. Animals may only look for today's food and have few thoughts about any long-term plan. As creatures of high intelligence, if not considering their future lives at all, human beings may as well live like animals. Upon death, having no idea about what will happen next, and without any preparation for the future life, a human existence is indeed full of regrets, be it lived as a brilliant scientist, an erudite philosopher, or a national leader having made great contributions to the world.

"He then said to me, 'O good sir, [please] receive these twelve thousand goddesses to clean and wash [for you].'

⁴ Faith, discipline, learning, generosity, shame, decency and wisdom

“I said, ‘Kausika, as a *shramana* and son of Shakyamuni I have no need for improper things such as this. This would not be appropriate for me.’

“Good Sir” is a respectful form of address, meaning wise man or great being. The fake Indra tried to seduce the bodhisattva by offering him the twelve thousand divine maidens. The number of twelve thousand could be a real number or an exaggeration. In history we read that Chinese emperors used to keep thousands of beautiful consorts and concubines in their imperial harems. The same goes for ancient Indian emperors. Sometimes people prefer to using hyperbole, which is particularly common in ancient India. So it is customary to use big numbers in Buddhism; sometimes they are hyperboles while other times are not.

Generally speaking, Mara will employ all kinds of tactics—providing beautiful women, wealth, status, fame, praise, honor, and whatnot, to tempt spiritual practitioners. Gullible practitioners, hardly realizing these as obstructions in disguise, may misperceive them as favorable conditions and go astray until it is too late. In this modern world, many so-called famous masters highly revered and adored by their followers may deceive themselves as being special. They start to behave loosely and improperly and end up falling from grace, and all perceived favorable conditions turn into adversities. So practitioners in good times must be extra vigilant to maintain a pure and humble heart. This is vital.

As a monastic observing strict precepts and practicing in solitude, Bodhisattva Maintains the World would definitely decline this extravagant offering of twelve thousand goddesses. Master Kuiji says in his commentary that it is unreasonable to introduce women or licentious objects to spiritual seekers, especially those keeping immaculate precepts, for they would disturb practitioners’ pure mind.

“Before I had even finished saying this Vimalakirti came and said to me, ‘This is not Indra. This is Mara, who has come only to ridicule you.’

“He then said to Mara, ‘You can give these women to me. If it were I, I would accept them.’

“Mara then thought in shock, ‘Vimalakirti should not be troubling me⁵!’ He wanted to become invisible and leave but he could not disappear. Even using all his numinous power he was not able to leave.

“He then heard a voice from space, saying, ‘Evil One, if you give him the women you will be able to go.’

“Because of his fear, and with eyes casting nervously about, [Mara] gave Vimalakirti the women.

Bodhisattva Maintains the World was tricked by Mara, but Vimalakirti nonetheless understood at a glance and warned him: “This man is not Indra but Mara the Evil One, who has come only to ridicule you.” It has been noted that Mara sometimes can even appear in the form of a buddha and preach the Dharma to others, which bodhisattvas of limited wisdom may fail to recognize. Likewise, practitioners with insufficient intelligence may not be aware of Mara’s plots on them.

Vimalakirti then said to Mara: “Since these heavenly maidens are not suitable for the monk, why not give them to me? I will take them.” Mara was panicking and feeling that Vimalakirti would definitely trouble him. So he wanted to make himself invisible in order to escape. However, try as he might, he remained trapped in his fake body of Indra. All his magical power escaped him; he could not vanish from sight, nor could he return to his original body of Mara.

Suddenly a mysterious voice was heard in the air, saying: “Evil One, give this wise man the maidens, and then you will be able to go.” Fearful and at his wit’s end, Mara offered all of his maidens to Vimalakirti with extreme reluctance. “With eyes casting nervously about” shows that Mara was so much terrified and looking this way and that, and finally gave away the maidens against all his will.

“Then Vimalakirti said to the women, ‘Mara has given you to me. You should now all generate the intention to achieve *anuttara samyak sambodhi*.’

“He then explained the Dharma to them in various ways and caused them to generate the intention for enlightenment.

⁵ Or **Shouldn’t Vimalakirti come to trouble me?!**

Vimalakirti then inspired the maidens to generate bodhichitta, the intention for enlightenment, by explaining the Dharma to them in various ways suitable to their individual capacities, and also made them reaffirm their aspirations. Kumarajiva commented that a woman follows her master's life trajectory, no matter what his lot is. If the maidens have Mara as their master, they tend to act in Mara's way of evil; if they have a bodhisattva as their master, they will follow the way of the bodhisattvas. This trend has a wider application beside merely these maidens. For instance, in an organization, if the commander-in-chief has religious faith, the subordinates will become religious gradually; if the boss belittles the law of causality, the subordinates will likely follow suit.

In the world, leaders can greatly influence people with their convictions and attitudes. In a country, the ideology of its president plays a key role to influence citizens, high or low; the head of a village can have a decisive impact on villagers; the abbot of a monastery can shape the conduct of monastics with his aspirations; or even in a family, the head of household can mold the value systems of family members in no small way. Therefore, whatever position we find ourselves in, whatever level of power or wealth we may come to possess, we should never underestimate our capacity of taking a leading role.

“He then said, ‘Now that you have generated the intention for enlightenment, you may amuse yourselves in the joy of the Dharma, never again taking pleasure in the five desires.’

“The goddesses asked, ‘What is the joy of the Dharma?’

It pays to recognize what is meant by true happiness. The difference between the joy of the Dharma and the worldly five desires is poles apart. People may categorically imagine that monastics lead a pitiable or lonesome life, since they have to give up much entertainment. Actually, it's beyond their comprehension that the joy of monastics far surpasses the myriad sensual pleasures of the world. In the *Sarvastivada Vinaya* it says:

One who has seen the faults of the world

Will see the true Dharma and renounce defiled pleasures.

Enlightened beings dislike the non-virtuous

While vicious beings dislike the virtuous.

That is to say, as soon as one sees the faults of the world, one will lose all interest in mundane affairs, and as a result, enlightened beings never commit evil while vicious ones repel virtue.

Clearly, people vary vastly in dispositions. For people such as butchers who take lives, even voluminous teachings on the superb Dharma joy won't make a dent in their minds, because they lack a connection that renders them receptive. On the contrary, people with fortunate karma will be born with kind predispositions and are naturally disinclined to harm others.

Using himself as example, Khenpo explained that although he's in no way a saintly figure, he does have a predilection toward Mahayana Buddhism and the monastic life, which he deems a tendency carried over from his past lives. Khenpo was brought up in a closed society devoid of a good education system, yet since he was a little boy he had a real fear of evil deeds, especially taking lives, an act that he loathes under any circumstances.

Indeed, one's urges to act in a certain way in this life is a tip off of one's temperament in past lives. This is a reasoning based on the karmic principle of "actions similar to the cause". For instance, should one like killing in this life, it is very possible that this person had committed killings in past lives; should one dislike killings in this life, this tendency likely reflects a former habit of not taking lives. Thus, speculation can be made about one's previous life without knowing its identity.

Since Vimalakirti asked the heavenly maidens to never again take pleasure in the five desires. They were wondering what the joy of the Dharma was. Here comes the most critical part of this story, which is a very important topic for many Mahayana followers. In short, any and all worldly indulgences would seem insipid when compared with the Dharma joy, and the pursuit of the latter is what attracted many aspirants to enter the monastic order or become senior Dharma practitioners. Do they suffer from giving up the fun highly regarded by the secular world? Not at all. On the contrary, had they been blocked from this path, they would feel doubly anguished.

The *Sutra of the Gathering of Father and Son* states:

Those who realize the nature of all phenomena

Would feel aversion to the five desires.

Thus they can skillfully tame their minds

And destroy all afflictions.

It says that realizing the truth of phenomena will dampen the lust for the sense pleasure and pacify the mind. With afflictive emotions of craving, hatred, and bewilderment extinguished,

one will come to appreciate the joy of the Dharma. Granted, it is commonly said that life is suffering, but suffering can be transformed into happiness through spiritual practice. Dharma practitioners are privileged to partake the transcendental joy of the Dharma that is far beyond worldly pleasures and not easily accessible to most ordinary people. As one progresses along the Dharma path, one naturally will experience greater joy as time goes on. It is certainly against the natural law to grow stronger physically while aging, but regardless of the deterioration of the body, the mind can nonetheless keep on growing with the nourishment derived from the joy of the Dharma. Therefore, Khenpo sincerely hopes that everyone will get a genuine taste of the joy of the Dharma, especially after receiving Vimalakirti's teaching below.

“He answered, ‘Joy is to always trust the Buddha. Joy is to desire to hear the Dharma. Joy is to make offerings to the assembly.

The Dharma joy is the joy of having a firm faith in the Buddha, the joy of desiring to listen to the Dharma, and the joy of making offerings to the Sangha. The appearance of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha adorned with their unexcelled accomplishments is the fountain of joy and happiness in this world. As it is said in the *Collection Sutra of the Right Practice for Merit*:

*Buddhas appear in the world,
The authentic Dharma is preached widely,
The Sangha is living in harmony,
All three of these make people happy and joyful
And lead them to cultivating the virtuous activities.*

The appearance of the Three Jewels in our world makes it possible for us to practice virtue: the Buddha took birth among us and taught the authentic Dharma; the Sangha practices the Dharma and guides us along the path to happiness. The wisdom light of the Three Jewels illuminates sentient beings as to what to do and what not to do, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and sparing the world from falling into dark kalpas. Thus, having encountered the Three Jewels and authentic spiritual teachers is sheer good luck, which people with faith and devotion would treasure as the utmost meaningful event that could ever happen in their lives. However for people devoid of faith, such a conviction may seem senseless.

Joy is to transcend the five desires. Joy is to contemplate the five *skandhas* as vengeful bandits. Joy is to contemplate the four elements as poisonous snakes. Joy is to contemplate

the interior sensory capacities as being like empty aggregations, joy is to maintain one's intention for enlightenment in all situations.

The Dharma joy is to delight in transcending the five desires. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels entails upholding pure precepts; thus a strong clinging to worldly pleasures should be cast off.

The Dharma joy is to delight in contemplating the five aggregates as ruthless burglars. Thieves and brigands rob our belongings and bring us misfortune. The five aggregates, in the same way, betray us and force us into the depth of misery.

The Dharma joy is to delight in regarding the four great elements as poisonous snakes. In Tibetan and Xuanzang's versions, the four elements are stated as the eighteen elements or dhatus in the context of five aggregates and twelve sense fields. Regardless of being the eighteen dhatus or the four elements, they are all our psychophysical makeups capable of causing suffering in us, like toxins spreading quickly throughout our body after being bitten by a venomous snake.

The Dharma joy is to delight in contemplating the interior sensory capacities as being like an empty village. "Interior sensory capacities" are the twelve sense fields, i.e., the six sense faculties of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, and the six sense objects of form, sound, smell, taste, touch and mental formations. If examined for what they are, they do not possess any intrinsic existence, just like an empty village, not worthy of clinging to at all.

The Dharma joy is to delight in guarding the spirit of enlightenment in all situations. It is important to always stay true to our initial motivation and always uphold the determination to attain enlightenment for the benefit of sentient beings. If we enthusiastically embarked on the Dharma path with a pure mind and pure outlook, but ended up in relinquishing the path due to surging wrong views and afflictions, wouldn't that be most unfortunate!

So we must first become adept in protecting our mind. Gaining clairvoyance or not is frivolous; the crux of the matter is to hold our Buddhist ground of firmly believing in the Three Jewels and upholding pure precepts until the last breath. Khenpo reminds us that since we all have taken the initiative to choose the Buddhist path, we are obliged to safeguard our minds and never backslide. May we maintain our precious aspiration until the last minutes of our lives, keeping it as fresh as the first moment when we started. Honestly, we only have a limited number of days, so we'd better not waste time acting out various characters of different types,

of high or low status like kings or beggars; but should instead always protect and nurture the spirit of enlightenment.

Joy is to benefit sentient beings. Joy is to revere teachers. Joy is the extensive practice of charity. Joy is the firm maintenance of the precepts. Joy is forbearance and pliability. Joy is the vigorous accumulation of good roots. Joy is the lack of disturbance in meditation. Joy is to transcend all defilements in wisdom.

The Dharma joy is to delight in helping sentient beings, in following and honoring teachers most respectfully. The Dharma joy is to delight in practicing generosity of the six paramitas, and in strictly observing the pure precepts.

Precepts are the foundation of all virtues. Many people, especially Westerners, consider any form of edict as a hassle, saying, “Precepts are binding ropes, what is the use of taking the refuge vows or the five precepts? We follow only liberalism!” However, contrary to what they believe, observing precepts can actually ensure abundant happiness. Monastics, who uphold strictly many precepts, are always at ease and composed; this argues against the notion that precepts are iron chains imposing pain and restricting growth.

The Buddha Speaks of the Cause and Effect for Sanghapala Sutra declaims:

*Maintaining pure precepts brings the greatest joy—
Being free from all physical afflictions,
Enjoying the peace and happiness of good sleep,
And feeling joyful in mind after awakening.*

Holders of pure precepts, be they lay people or monastics, do not attract bandits or enemies, and enjoy sound sleep. They are fearless, open-minded, easygoing, and stress-free. Moreover, they can deal with difficulties insurmountable by worldly people, and eventually, they come to savor the bliss of realization. Those who denigrate precepts, on the other hand, will have experiences opposite to the above.

Precepts are disciplines. To train in them, it necessarily takes some effort, which may appear to be a painful process. Nonetheless, in our society today there are also many rules or disciplines to follow in various settings and organizations. For one, entrepreneurs have their

company regulations; even five-star hotels have a long list of “disclaimers” for their patrons to heed. Thus, it’s important to establish a right view on precepts in order to keep them.

The Dharma joy is to delight in forbearance, humility and harmony, speaking gently and doing things considerately. The Dharma joy is to delight in diligence, vigorously accumulating all virtues. The Dharma joy is to delight in meditation, keeping the mind in a state of purity and tranquility. The Dharma joy is to delight in wisdom, transcending all defilements and realizing the wisdom of the twofold emptiness, i.e., the emptiness of persons and the emptiness of all phenomena.

Joy is to disseminate *bodhicitta*. Joy is the subjugation of the host of Maras. Joy is the eradication of the afflictions. Joy is purification of the countries of the buddha.

The Dharma joy is to delight in expanding the mind of enlightenment, in conquering all Maras, in destroying all afflictions, and in purifying buddha lands. This part corresponds very well with the verse in *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, which His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche always asked his disciples to chant in pilgrimages:

*May I purify the power of karma;
Destroy the power of harmful emotions;
Render negativity utterly powerless;
And perfect the power of Good Actions!*

Here negativity refers to the power of all Maras, and harmful emotions refer to all afflictions. Khenpo also advises us to recite this stanza in addition to chanting the full length of *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, for example, when circumambulating stupas or mandalas, as the merits so incurred would be incalculable.

Joy is the accomplishment of [thirty-two primary] characteristics and [eighty subsidiary] marks, based on the cultivation of merits. Joy is the ornament of the place of enlightenment. Joy is to hear the profound Dharma without fear. Joy is the three emancipations and not to take the pleasure [of ultimate enlightenment]⁶ at an inappropriate time.

⁶ Here does not refer to ultimate enlightenment, but the enlightenment of Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas.

The Dharma joy is to delight in cultivating merits so that one will attain the excellent thirty-two primary characteristics and eighty subsidiary marks of the body. The Dharma joy is to delight in adorning the place of enlightenment.

The Dharma joy is to delight in hearing the profound Dharma without fear. This is an important trait that we should joyfully receive the profound teachings, for example, on the Middle Way or Vajrayana without fear, never regard them unacceptable and slander them.

A keen and joyous commitment to learn the Dharma always pervades Larung Gar. Khenpo himself has witnessed time and again how many Dharma teachers are devoting themselves in teaching or tutoring to captivated students. Also, group study is a powerful format of learning. It allows for the exchange of knowledge and ideas from a variety of people, leading members to deeper insights and spiritual transformation. With mutual encouragement and collectively enhanced merit, one's devotion in the Dharma will grow steadfastly and even become irreversible.

The Dharma joy is to delight in the three emancipations, i.e., the three gateways to liberation of emptiness, absence of characteristics, and absence of expectancy. The Dharma joy is not to delight in untimely teachings and untimely nirvana, meaning the nirvana of Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas. In the Xuanzang's translation, there is an additional statement—the Dharma joy is to delight in parinirvana and the way of parinirvana.

Joy is to associate with fellow trainees. Joy is for one's mind to be without hindrance in the midst of those [who are] not one's fellow trainees. Joy is to defend against evil friends. Joy is to associate closely with good friends. Joy is to be happy and pure in mind. Joy is to cultivate the immeasurable factors of enlightenment.

The Dharma joy is to delight in associating closely with Dharma friends of like learning, and to always meet and be accompanied by like-minded people. The Dharma joy is to delight in freely getting along with those of unlike learning, or those who do not share the same vision, faith, or actions, without any hindrance and resentment. It is important to keep our mind free from anger or hostility toward people of different factions, temples, religions, and so on.

The Dharma joy is to delight in defending against evil friends, not being swayed by negative people and protecting oneself from bad influences. The Dharma joy is to delight in associating

closely with good friends. In Dharma study and practice, it is essential to rely on spiritual teachers. However, many people nowadays lack a proper understanding in this aspect.

Finally, the Dharma joy is to delight in generating a state of purity and delight in the Dharma, and in diligently practicing immeasurable factors, or the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment.

“These are the bodhisattva’s joy in the Dharma.”

The heavenly maidens who did not know all this joy of the Dharma before, had now learned about them from Vimalakirti. This teaching offers a practical way to find happiness—the joy the Dharma brings forth. Having learned about the joy of the Dharma, we should know better that worldly pleasures are fleeting and unreliable. The *Mindfulness of the True Dharma* gives a wonderful teaching:

*The sensory pleasure, which is as transient as an instant,
Has neither the quality of joy nor of permanence,
And will cause tremendous suffering very quickly,
Thus should be the object of abandonment.*

Desirous satisfactions are momentary; they are not true or permanent happiness, but instead will turn into immense sufferings before long. Of course, ordinary beings must rely on the Dharma teachings to understand this real situation of mundane pleasures. Also, in order to taste the joy of the Dharma, one has to comprehend the profound meaning of the Dharma. In this procedure, the guidance of spiritual teachers is indispensable. As *Avatamsaka Sutra* says:

*The Dharma, so profound and subtle,
Without being preached,
The wise in the world cannot understand
Even the simplest.*

Without the explication of a teacher, even very smart individuals in the world are unable to perceive the true meaning of the Dharma. On the other hand, by relying on a learned and qualified teacher full of wisdom and compassion, it is possible to penetrate the profound doctrines very swiftly. And that was what happened to the maidens when Vimalakirti turned the excellent Dharma wheel to them so skillfully.

Khenpo asks us students to reflect deeply on the above teachings to see if we have truly tasted the joy of the Dharma. Examine what is exciting: Is it to practice the six paramitas; or is it to indulge in distraction, indolence, and other Mara's tricks of "freedom?" If it were the latter, then one would qualify as Mara's "star pupil" and definitely not a real practitioner.

"At this Mara the Evil One announced to the women, 'I want to return with you to the heavenly palace.'

"The women said, 'You already gave us to this retired scholar. We are extremely joyful in the joy of the Dharma, and will never again take pleasure in the five desires.'

"Mara said, 'If the retired scholar is able to forsake these women, and everything that exists is given to him, then he is a bodhisattva.'

"Vimalakirti said, 'I have already forsaken them. You may take them away, but you must make all sentient beings attain fulfillment of their vows in the Dharma⁷.'

Mara asked all the heavenly maidens to return to the heavenly palace with him, but was refused by them, as they had learned the joy of the Dharma and no longer wanted to delight in the worldly pleasures of the five desires. Mara, at the end of his wits, could only turn to Vimalakirti and pleaded, "Since it is said that he who gives away everything to others is a true bodhisattva, wouldn't you, the great bodhisattva, relinquish these women and return them back to me?"

Vimalakirti replied: "I've never needed these maidens and have long forsaken them. I only wish to teach them the Dharma path, which now has been accomplished, so they can go with you. Through this connection, may the wishes of all sentient beings be realized! May sentient beings be happy and satisfied!"

"At this the women asked Vimalakirti, 'How should we reside in Mara's palace?'

"Vimalakirti said, 'Sisters, there is a Dharma called "inexhaustible lamp." You should study it. The inexhaustible lamp is like a lamp that ignites a hundred thousand lamps, illuminating all darkness with an illumination that is never exhausted. Thus, sisters, if a single bodhisattva guides a hundred thousand sentient beings, causing them to generate

⁷ The proper translation should be **You may take them away. May all sentient beings attain fulfillment of their desire for the Dharma.** According to Kumarajiva, this last sentence is the aspiration of Vimalakirti himself.

the intention to achieve *anuttara samyak sambodhi*, that bodhisattva's intention to achieve enlightenment will also never be extinguished.

“With each teaching of the Dharma all the good *dharma*s are naturally increased. This is what is called the “inexhaustible lamp”.

Although you reside in Mara's palace, with this inexhaustible lamp you can cause innumerable gods and goddesses to generate the intention to achieve *anuttara samyak sambodhi*. Thereby you will repay the Buddha's kindness and also greatly benefit all sentient beings.'

Then the heavenly maidens asked Vimalakirti how to live at Mara's palace. Since they had become Buddhists and generated bodhichitta, won't it be painful and difficult to go back to Mara's palace and live in the old way? Then Vimalakirti gave them another teaching pertaining to bodhichitta, called the “inexhaustible lamp”.

A single lamp can light up hundreds of thousands of lamps and dispel all darkness, without itself being diminished. Using this lamp as a metaphor, now all the heavenly maidens generated the intention to achieve full and supreme enlightenment, just like holding a lamp in the heart of each of them. After returning to their palace, they can kindle the light of enlightenment in other living beings and benefit them. In this way, the Dharma aspiration of all these heavenly maidens will not be weakened, but rather increase ever more.

Having heard Vimalakirti's teaching, the maidens gained unwavering faith and conviction in the Dharma, thus they were inspired to spread the sacred Dharma widely and rapidly in Mara's palace, touching countless heavenly beings and benefiting them. In this way, by setting others' minds on attaining enlightenment, they were able to repay the kindness of the Buddha and at the same time bring great benefit to all living beings.

Khenpo notices that some practitioners would rather stay inside their monasteries instead of making contact with the mundane world to preach the Dharma. This attitude is quite wrong. Of course, the premise of guiding others is to establish a firm realization in oneself in the first place, otherwise one is liable to be “guided” by others in wrong directions. But if the maidens could be so undaunted in the treacherous abode of Mara, there is no reason that we Buddhists in the human realm, that is much more friendly than theirs, could not do our share.

As we have learned, attaining enlightenment is not for personal gain, but rather for the welfare of sentient beings. Also, *the Sutra of Uncommon Causes* says that if we could benefit even just one person with the Dharma teaching, it would be counted as having repaid the Buddha's kindness, as well as having repaid our teachers' benevolence. So, the sure way to requite kindness is to help sentient beings. We can do this do by first helping our family, friends, neighbors and so on, and eventually reaching as many beings as our capabilities allow. It's crucial to take action in this way.

“At that time the goddesses bowed their heads to Vimalakirti's feet in worship and suddenly disappeared to return to Mara's palace.

“World-Honored One, Vimalakirti's autonomy, numinous power, wisdom, and eloquence are like this. Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

Thus, all the heavenly maidens bowed at Vimalakirti respectfully and departed in the company of Mara, vanishing suddenly from sight. Xuanzang's translation also added a detail that Mara finally was able to move about when Vimalakirti recalled his power spell on him.

Bodhisattva Maintains the World told the Buddha as a conclusion: “Vimalakirti possesses such superb wisdom and eloquence, and his freely commanded supernatural powers still lingers in my mind and shocks me. Therefore, I am not qualified to call on him to inquire after his health.”

Lecture 25

The Story of Good Virtue

Good Virtue is also called Anathapindika, literally meaning one who gives alms to the poor and the unprotected. Good Virtue was a famous and generous benefactor who had offered a big park as a monastery to the Buddha. Through his practice of generosity, he had accumulated great merit. Once the king Ashoka asked an assembly of bhikkhus, “Who had practiced the biggest generosity in Buddhism?” They answered, “It was Good Virtue who had offered hundreds of millions of gold bricks.” Then Ashoka rejoiced at his great merit and aspired, “I will offer ten times as many as his gold to the Three Jewels.” So Good Virtue was such a historical figure with great fortune and merit.

This story is mainly about his practice of generosity. On the occasion of the seven-day great charity assembly held by Good Virtue, Vimalakirti came and told him that besides material things, he should also offer people the Dharma. Then regarding what is meant by the offering of the Dharma, Vimalakirti explained the meaning of the four immeasurables, the six paramitas, the four means of attraction, as well as many other teachings. Good Virtue was deeply inspired and delighted by these teachings and he, together with over two hundred Brahmins present, generated bodhichitta. Good Virtue then offered his priceless necklace to Vimalakirti, which was divided by Vimalakirti into two parts for offering and almsgiving. By doing so, even the poorest person in the city also generated bodhichitta. So from this story we can learn that the Dharma offering weighs more than material offering.

The Buddha told the elder’s son Good Virtue, “you go inquire about Vimalakirti’s illness.”

Good Virtue addressed the Buddha, “World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why?”

“I remember once in the past when I was holding a great charity assembly in my father’s house. We made offerings to all the shramanas, brahmins, those of the heterodox paths, the poor, low-class, orphans, and beggars⁸. It lasted fully seven days.

⁸ It should be translated as **all the shramanas, brahmins, those of the heterodox paths, the poor, low-class, orphans, seniors with no kids, all these kinds of beggars in need.**

During this seven-day charity assembly in his father's house, Good Virtue made offerings to all kinds of people in need, including shramanas, brahmins, heretics (not very obvious in the Tibetan version), the poor, low caste people, orphans, seniors with no children. According to the brahmin tradition in ancient India, one needs first to accumulate wealth for three years and then holds a grand event in which all the wealth in his house will be used to make offerings and almsgivings to anyone in need, basically the seven types of people mentioned above, for seven days.

As Kumarajiva said in his commentary, the word "beggar" refers to all the needy, and there are three types of beggar, which are the ordained practitioners, the noble beings, and the poor. So in Buddhism, monastics can also be called "beggars" which does not have any demeaning connotation at all, as monastics live on almsgiving and eat one meal a day according to the Buddhist doctrines.

The duration of seven days is often required in Buddhism. For example, in *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra*, it states,

Shariputra, if there is a good man or good woman who hears of Amitabha and holds his name whether for one day, two days, three, four, five days, six days, as long as seven days with one mind unconfused...

So the Dharma assembly usually takes seven days, such as the seven-day Zen retreat, Medicine Buddhas Puja, or Ksitigarbha Puja. Also, it usually takes forty-nine (seven times seven) days to chant mantras and prayers to relieve those beings from their bardo states. In fact, "seven" is a lucky number in Buddhism, for example, the seven emblems of royalty means the seven noble wealth of enlightened beings, or the seven possessions of a universal monarch. In western countries, there is also a concept of "lucky seven".

At the time Vimalakirti came into the assembly and said to me, 'Elder's son, you should not hold a great charity assembly like this. You should have an assembly of the charity of the Dharma. What use is a charity assembly of material wealth?'

On the seventh day when the charity assembly nearing a successful finish, Vimalakirti came and exhorted Good Virtue that he should have held a charity assembly for the Dharma offering, as the charity of material wealth was not as beneficial as the offering of the Dharma. He

questioned Good Virtue, “What is the use of holding such a charity gathering of mere material things?”

Of course, material offering is not meaningless all the times; on the contrary, it is quite necessary to help the needy with material things. Some people consider donations to monasteries or the offerings to gurus as meaningful, but these may not be as imperative as providing financial aid to the poor, such as those patients whose lives are threatened due to lack of money to cover their medical expenses. There are many desperate patients in impoverished areas, for example, in Africa. Khenpo visited a few African countries a couple of times, and was deeply touched by the poor situation in some remote areas. As he mentioned, “There are so many people who suffer from hunger, thirst, poverty and plague, therefore material offering is desperately needed to help them. Being there and witnessing their situations will certainly trigger compassion deep in one’s heart.”

In this story, the importance of material offering is neither emphasized nor neglected. Vimalakirti appeared on the seventh day of this great charity event and underscored the importance of Dharma offering. So we need to be aware of the necessity of material offerings, and on top of it, understand why Dharma offering is more essential to others.

In the western countries, people usually donate a certain percent of their family income to charity programs on a regular basis. At Larung Gar, it is also advocated that the sangha members voluntarily donate 1% or 2% of their earnings from attending ritual performance to support the institute in the long run. Some people may think: “It is easier for rich people to donate their money. I only earn a little so it is not my business.” However, like most monastics at Larung Gar, even a person with 500 RMB income per month can donate 1 or 2 yuan. This is a good habit to develop in order to cultivate our compassion towards others.

In this world, there are many warm-hearted people who are concerned with other’s needs and dedicate their wealth to charitable activities. If they can’t find a suitable charity program, they would run the program by themselves. Also if necessary, they would personally reach out to people in impoverished areas and engage themselves in all related activities. This is the real practice of generosity that should be advocated among Buddhists.

However, compared with material giving, the giving of the Dharma is more essential. As it is said in *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*,

*Merit accumulated by making offering with precious jewels is boundless,
Yet it cannot be compared with that of giving Dharma teachings.
Even the merit of teaching one stanza surpasses that of the former,
Not to mention the inconceivable merit of giving many Dharma teachings.*

The Dharma offering is superior to the material offering, in that the merit of giving the teaching on a single stanza already surpasses the merit of giving an abundance of seven kinds of gems, not to mention the merit of teaching a full treatise such as the *Vimalakirti Sutra* or *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

According to *Introduction to the Middle Way*, the generosity of giving the Dharma teaching should be mainly practiced by monastics while the generosity of giving material goods should be practiced by lay practitioners. Also *Maha Purusa Shastra* says,

*The fool like the giving of material goods,
While the wise like the giving of Dharma teachings.*

It means that the wise who understand the true reality of all phenomena would prefer to give the Dharma teaching, whereas ordinary people give their material wealth.

“I said, ‘Retired scholar, what is an assembly of the charity of Dharma?’

“He answered,

“An assembly of the charity of the Dharma is to make offerings to all sentient beings simultaneously, without before and after. This is called an assembly of the charity of the Dharma.

As Good Virtue was so wealthy, he focused on material offering but knew little about the Dharma offering. So he consulted Vimalakirti about an assembly of the Dharma offering. Vimalakirti explained that the charity of material wealth has to be given out in sequence, while the charity of the Dharma can be given out simultaneously to all living beings, without before and after.

There is a story in *Words of My Perfect Teacher* about Geshe Ben Gungyal, who was waiting for the offering of yogurt with the sangha. Seeing the long queue in front of him, he thought, “There will be no yogurt left for me...” But he immediately recognized this improper thought

and turned his bowl upside down. When it was his turn to get the yogurt, he declined it as self-punishment and firmly said, “This bad guy has already drunk it!” From this story we know that material offering cannot be provided to everyone simultaneously in term of time and space, but Dharma offering has no such limit. Take bodhichitta for example, if we generate bodhichitta when hearing, contemplating or practicing the Dharma, or when we preach the Dharma to others, then all sentient beings will receive immeasurable benefits at the same time.

In light of several great masters’ commentaries, there are two kinds of Dharma offering, i.e. 1) the preaching of the Dharma and 2) the generation of loving-kindness and compassion. The former enables the whole audience to enjoy the Dharma teaching simultaneously, and the latter can take all sentient beings of the three times in ten directions into consideration through the power of the mind. So there is a huge difference between material giving and Dharma giving.

It is said in the *Bodhisattva's Virtuous Precepts Sutra*,

Material offering is impure, while Dharma offering is pure. The practice of Dharma offering can be named as boundless, while the practice of material offering cannot. Material offering is easily received, whereas Dharma offering is hardly encountered.

This sutra points out many differences between material offering and Dharma offering. Generally speaking, people who can make material offering are many whereas those who can make Dharma offering are difficult to encounter. Therefore, we should cherish every Dharma teaching we’ve received and appreciate their rarity and precious value.

Khenpo asks Dharma practitioners not to consider receiving the Dharma teaching as a drudgery and feel tired of it. Of course, as ordinary people we occasionally need to relax, but we should not be taken over by our habitual tendencies, losing the ability and diligence in practicing virtues while being able to easily “accomplish” any non-virtue. In Dharma centers or monasteries, when there are big gatherings for a puja, it is quite necessary to offer the Dharma teachings to attendees so they can understand the meaning behind those ritual performances. Indeed, this is also the tradition being well maintained by many Han Buddhist masters such as Master Benhuan and Master Xuyun.

In the following text, Good Virtue requested Vimalakirti to explain in detail how to make the Dharma offering. Vimalakirti expounded it from the aspects of four immeasurables, six paramitas, three gateways to liberation, and many other Dharma practices of both ordinary and

enlightened beings. In the opinions of Master Huiyuan, these teachings are mainly focused on the benefits of oneself and others. For example, the four immeasurables are the instructions on benefiting others and the six paramitas are the teachings for one's own welfare.

“If you ask how I say this, I say that one uses *bodhi* to generate sympathy. One generates great compassion in order to save sentient beings⁹. One generates joy by maintaining the correct Dharma. One practices equanimity by mastering wisdom.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the four immeasurables. Firstly, the immeasurable mind of sympathy is the wish that all sentient beings may attain happiness. In Buddhism, there are three kinds of happiness, namely the happiness of human and god realms pursued by people with small capacities, the happiness of self-liberation sought by people with medium capacities and the happiness of unsurpassable and perfect enlightenment quested by people with the highest capacities. Generating the immeasurable mind of sympathy, in a real sense, is to wish all sentient beings to swiftly attain the happiness of enlightenment.

Secondly, generating the immeasurable mind of compassion is to wish all sentient beings to be free from samsara and suffering and to attain ultimate liberation.

Thirdly, generating the immeasurable mind of joy is to wish all sentient beings to uphold the authentic Dharma and consequently to experience the joy of the Dharma, because only the Dharma can lead all beings to true freedom.

Compendium of the Teachings Sutra says,

*The one who, with a pure mind,
is always attracted by the authentic Dharma and feel joyful with it,
Will enjoy happiness life after life;
Without the Dharma, one can never attain liberation.*

The joy of the Dharma is the real joy, and people who nurture it can enjoy happiness life after life. On the contrary, not practicing the Dharma and even deviating from it, the liberation certainly will be out of reach. Therefore, for those who want to attain liberation from samsara,

⁹ The correct translation should be **One generates great compassion by saving sentient beings.**

the only way is to resort to the sublime Dharma, and by following the Dharma path day and night, they will constantly experience the real joy.

Fourthly, generating the immeasurable mind of equanimity is to maintain an indifferent mind free from attachment and aversion by mastering the wisdom that clearly sees the empty nature of all phenomena.

“One generates *dana-paramita* (the perfection of charity) by mastering desire¹⁰. One generates *sila-paramita* (the perfection of morality) by attracting those who transgress the precepts. One generates *ksanti-paramita* (the perfection of forbearance) by the Dharma of no-self. One generates *virya-paramita* (the perfection of exertion) by transcending the characteristics of body and mind. One generates *dhyana-paramita* (the perfection of meditation) with the characteristic of *bodhi*. One generates *prajna-paramita* (the perfection of wisdom) with omniscience.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the paramita of generosity by controlling stinginess and greed. To make the Dharma offering is to generate the paramita of discipline by converting those who have violated the precepts and stopping them from committing more transgressions. Both monastics and lay Buddhists have their own precepts to observe. Besides the Mahayana and Vajrayana vows, monastics have even more rules to follow as required by the Pratimoksha precepts. People who have broken their root precepts are pathetic, and they are no longer allowed to stay in the sangha according to the Pratimoksha or Vajrayana vows in order to maintain the purity of the sangha community.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the paramita of patience by realizing no self and thus destroying anger. More often than not, one's anger and resentment are derived from self-grasping. If we can understand the truth of selflessness, then there is no way to hurt the so-called “I”, and this is the perfect way of practicing forbearance.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the paramita of diligence by transcending the characteristics of body and mind. Our laziness is due to the attachment to our body and mind. Realizing the empty nature of body and mind and thus practicing the Dharma of no

¹⁰ A better translation can be **by mastering stinginess and greed.**

characteristics, we are able to rid ourselves from any attachment to five aggregates, and this is the perfect way of practicing diligence.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the paramita of meditation by practicing meditation in the aim of attaining enlightenment and Buddhahood. This is the perfect way of stabilizing the mind and resting in a state of tranquility.

The paramitas of diligence and meditation are explained above in accord with Kumarajiva's and Xuanzang's translation. However, according to the Tibetan version and the current Sanskrit version, the illustrations on diligence and meditation should be switched, i.e., **“One generates the *virya-paramita* with the characteristic of *bodhi*. One generates *dhyana-paramita* by transcending the characteristics of body and mind.”**

Comparatively speaking, the Tibetan and Sanskrit versions are easier to be understood. Because diligence is the mind of joy in performing virtuous deeds, and the perfection of diligence is to practice diligently for the attainment of enlightenment and Buddhahood. Meditation is the meditative practice of breaking free from the dualistic clinging, so the perfection of meditation is to transcend the characteristics of body and mind. But there could be different Sanskrit versions being used in these translations.

The last one, to make the Dharma offering is to generate the paramita of wisdom in the aim of achieving the Buddha's omniscient wisdom. Bodhisattvas' wisdom can be called prajnaparamita because their practices aim for the Buddha's omniscient wisdom.

The following part is about the altruistic deeds, including the three gateways to liberation, skillful means to uphold the Dharma, and the four means of attraction. The three gateways to liberation are absence of characteristics that is applied to the path, emptiness that is applied to the basis, and wishlessness that is applied to the result.

“One teaches sentient beings and generates emptiness. Without forsaking the conditioned *dharmas*, one generates that which is without characteristic. One manifests the experience of [re]birth and generates the uncreated¹¹.

To make the Dharma offering is to realize the truth of emptiness by teaching and converting sentient beings. The study and realization of emptiness is indispensable for everyone. Master

¹¹ The literal translation of **the uncreated** should be **no action**, and it refers to wishlessness.

Kuiji commented that without any realization of emptiness, one would easily get tired of benefiting others; but those who have realized emptiness will always take delight in carrying out all kinds of activities to inspire sentient beings. Furthermore, through converting sentient beings and guiding them onto the Dharma path, bodhisattvas clearly understand the empty nature of sentient beings. *The Mahayana Sutra of Tathagata's Inconceivable Secret* says,

Despite being the great Dharma master,

One's mind does not abide in the concept of the Dharma.

Although liberating each and every sentient being,

One's mind does not abide in the concept of sentient beings.

Being the great Dharma masters, they don't have any attachment to the concept of "great teacher" or "the sublime Dharma". Although they keep busy with enlightening sentient beings day and night, they eradicate the false notions of a personality, a being and a life, and have no intention to promote themselves for what they have accomplished.

Therefore, the realization of emptiness is vital for those who want to benefit sentient beings, without which their activities would be a short-lived show and their passion would soon fade. Or even if they can persist for a while, their teachings could be shallow and not touch the essence of the Dharma. The lack of profundity can be easily noticed by those who have immersed themselves in the Dharma study for a long period, particularly in such an era that people are so good at judging and commenting on others. Hence, the importance of the wisdom of emptiness cannot be stressed enough.

To make the Dharma offering is to realize the absence of their characteristics by not abandoning the conditioned phenomena. Understanding that all phenomena are dependently arising and neither stable nor reliable, one can realize the absence of characteristics of all things and meanwhile not forsake their appearance.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate no actions, or to abide in the practice of wishlessness, by manifesting all kinds of birth in samsara. Be it a birth from a womb or an egg, bodhisattvas have no clinging to their manifestations at all. Just like entering one garden from another, they are free from the attachment to any form or characteristic, so will not have any karmic actions. This is the exhibition of wishlessness.

“One defends the correct Dharma and generates the power of skillful means. One generates the four means of attraction by saving sentient beings.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the power of skillful means by upholding the authentic Dharma. Upholding the Dharma means that we not only engage ourselves in studying and practicing the Dharma, but also guide other beings to do the same. In doing so, we will acquire the power of skillful means. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, it says,

Abiding in the realization that all phenomena are illusory,

(The king) manifests desire and anger,

As well as all different images, to tame the evildoers

So as to lead them toward the Buddha path.

It means that those who abide in the realization that all phenomena are illusory and dreamlike, can pretend to have mental afflictions of desire, anger and ignorance, and by using these skillful means they are able to tame evil beings and guide them onto the path of enlightenment.

Having tasted the benefits of the Dharma, some people can't wait to try every means to convert those who they love. However, they must pay attention to the fact that people's backgrounds, karmic connections with Buddhism, as well as habitual tendencies are all different. If a person's virtuous root is not mature, it would be in vain to force them to turn to Buddhism; and if one's virtuous root becomes mature, no one can prevent them from following the Dharma. Therefore, we need to observe different situations and uphold the authentic Dharma skillfully.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the four means of attraction through liberating sentient beings, namely, pleasant language, generosity, teaching each individual according to that person's needs and acting in conformity with what one teaches. These are the most important and requisite skillful means to benefit sentient beings. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra* it is said,

With the four means of attracting sentient beings,

Bodhisattvas can bring them immeasurable benefits.

Many great masters of the past and present are good at the four means of attraction, with which they provided enormous benefits to sentient beings. On the contrary, suppose that we know little about the four means of attraction, it will be hard for us to fulfill the wish of benefiting

living beings. For instance, if someone has a good heart but his words are unpleasant, he could offend everyone around him. Moreover, if he does not want to make any material and Dharma offerings, has no altruistic mind at all, and his behaviors are also questionable, how can he help others?

The next part talks about how to practice the Dharma by oneself, which can be subdivided into two phases, i.e., the casual stage and the fruition stage. The casual stage refers to the practices of ordinary practitioners, including the elimination of arrogance, the three perduring dharmas, the six mindfulness, the six types of harmonious respect and pure livelihood. The fruition stage refers to the practices of enlightened bodhisattvas from the first to tenth bhumi.

One generates the elimination of conceit by reverencing all¹². One generates the three perduring *dharmas* with regard to body, life and wealth. One generates the contemplation of the *dharmas* within the six mindfulnesses. One generates sincerity with regard to six types of considerate esteem. One generates pure livelihood with correct practice of the good *dharmas*.

To make the Dharma offering is to eliminate arrogance by respecting and serving all beings. We should regard ourselves as the servants or disciples of sentient beings and sincerely respect them in order to eliminate our arrogance.

To make the Dharma offering is to transform body, life and wealth into the three perduring dharmas. If our body, life and wealth are not employed to practice virtues, they are just fragile and unreliable. But if we can practice the Dharma diligently with the aspiration of bodhichitta, our body, life and wealth can be transformed into the perduring dharmas, and we will enjoy happiness life after life.

Generally speaking, Buddhists value future lives more than the present one. Through accumulating merits, practicing virtues and observing precepts, our body, life and wealth can become perduring dharmas. But if our body is not engaged in virtuous deeds, our wealth is not used to practice generosity, and our life is not well cherished, then we will lose everything at the time of death.

¹² **by reverencing all should be by reverencing and serving all.**

To make the Dharma offering is to have six mindfulnesses, in other words, to engage in thoughtful meditation on the six objects of reverence: the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, precepts, generosity, and deities.

Nowadays some people only show their respect to the Buddha and the Dharma, but not the Sangha. They may say, “Certain monastics do not behave properly, so I only believe in the Two Jewels, not the Three Jewels.” This attitude is not so wise since the Three Jewels are actually inseparable. Particularly in the Mahayana teaching, the Jewel of the Sangha refers to great bodhisattvas such as Manjushri and Maitreya. In the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, it says,

*If you love and respect the Buddha,
You should harbor the same toward the Sangha.
Do not hold different attitudes,
As both of them are the precious jewels.*

Some people tend to reject the whole group based on some individuals’ improper behaviors. This over-generalization is quite unreasonable, just like rejecting to drink milk because one milk factory is disqualified, or rejecting a type of product because of a single flawed one. Buddhists should develop steadfast faith in the Three Jewels, otherwise with a shakable faith, one’s Dharma practice can be destroyed at any time.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate sincerity with the six types of considerate esteem, or harmonious respect, i.e., being compassionate regarding body, speech and mind, and sharing the same precepts, views and benefits.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate pure livelihood by performing virtuous deeds and renouncing improper sustenance.

One becomes close to the wise and sagely with purification of the mind in joy. One generates a disciplined mind by not having aversion for bad people. One generates the profound mind with the *dharma* of leaving home.

Now, the sutra addresses the practices of enlightened beings at the fruition stage. To make the Dharma offering is to become close to the wise and sagely with purification of the mind in joy. This describes the quality of bodhisattvas on the first bhumi, known as the ground of Perfect

Joy. On this stage, their mind is purified, and they continue to follow spiritual teachers with great joy. *The Mahayana Sutra Asked by the Elder Tremendous Strength* says,

When a person's root of virtue becomes mature, this person will naturally be willing to approach good spiritual friends, train the mind constantly, and engage in activities of benefiting self and others.

The matured root of virtue will prompt sentient beings, whether they be enlightened or ordinary beings, to get close to spiritual teachers, to practice the Dharma constantly, and to engage in altruistic deeds.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate a disciplined and profound mind by not having aversion for bad people and meanwhile following the monastic rules. It is the quality of bodhisattvas on the second bhumi, known as the ground of Immaculate. First, unlike ordinary people who tend to approach good people and avoid or hate bad ones, bodhisattvas do not harbor aversion or resentment toward evildoers, but rather maintain a disciplined mind. Second, they are eager to get ordained. Being a monastic is not just about shaving head or wearing a monastic robe. The true meaning of leaving home is to delve into the study of Buddhist scriptures and particularly the study of Vinaya in great depth.

Khenpo does not encourage people to get ordained quickly, as it should be a deliberate determination. At Larung Gar, those who want to receive ordination will be observed for at least four months in order to determine whether they are well prepared or not. In *The Mahayana Mahaparanirvana Sutra*, the Buddha gave a good teaching on this:

After I enter into Nirvana, if there is any tirthika who intends to be in the Sangha, you should not give permission right after the plea. Rather, ask them to recite and study sutras for four months, to test their resolve being false or true. Seeing their mind sincere and pliable, and they are indeed absorbed and take delight in the Dharma, then you can allow them to be in the Sangha.

So the rules at Larung Gar are in conformity with this teaching. One really needs such a careful observation for one's monastic life.

One generates erudition by practicing according to the explanation. One generates the locus of empty repose with the *dharma* of noncontention. In approaching buddha wisdom one generates sitting in repose.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate erudition, the locus of empty repose and sitting in repose, which correspond to the wisdom of listening, reflection and meditation respectively. This is the quality of bodhisattvas on the third bhumi, known as the ground of Illuminating.

First, one needs to become erudite in the Dharma study through constantly listening to the Dharma teaching. The wisdom of listening is the prerequisite for practicing or actualizing the Dharma, without which one's practice cannot be successful.

Second, one needs to deeply reflect on the Dharma teaching in a peaceful and uncrowded place where there is no contention, so that one can develop the wisdom of reflection. This is quite essential for beginners.

Third, one needs to one-pointedly meditate on the Dharma teaching in order to approach the Buddha's wisdom, and this is the way to develop the wisdom of meditation. In sutras it is taught that the Buddha's wisdom cannot be attained from anywhere else but the ocean of meditative concentration. Without practicing meditation, we can barely achieve any level of realization, not to mention the fruition of Buddhahood.

In releasing the bonds of sentient beings one generates the stages of cultivation.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate the stages of cultivation by releasing the bonds of sentient beings. This refers to the quality of bodhisattvas from fourth to seventh bhumi, i.e., the ground of Radiant, Hard to Keep, Clearly Manifest and Far Progressed. Liberating sentient beings from the bondage of mental afflictions and dualistic clinging is the fundamental practice of bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism.

“By becoming replete in the [thirty-two primary] characteristics and [eighty subsidiary] marks and by purifying a buddha land one generates meritorious karma. Understanding the thoughts of all sentient beings and how one should explain the Dharma to them, one generates the karma of wisdom.

To make the Dharma offering is to accumulate merit by acquiring auspicious appearance and purifying a buddha land. This is the quality of bodhisattvas on the eighth bhumi, known as the

ground of Immovable. The external material world of a bodhisattva on this bhumi has become a pure land, and the bodhisattva also shows a dignified appearance. In the procedure of purifying the land into a perfect buddha land, and acquiring his appearance to be replete with the thirty-two primary characteristics and eighty subsidiary marks which the Buddha has, the bodhisattva pursues actions that bring blessing and good fortune.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate wisdom, or the perfect discrimination, by understanding the minds and thoughts of all sentient beings and explaining the Dharma to them in an appropriate manner. This is the quality of bodhisattvas on the ninth bhumi, known as the ground of Perfect Intellect. On this stage, the Bodhisattvas are able to perfectly know the thoughts and actions of all beings and teach the Dharma to them accordingly. This give rise of the wisdom of perfect discrimination.

Understanding all the *dharmas*, one neither grasps nor forsakes. Entering the gate of the single characteristic, one generates the karma of sagacity. Eradicating all the afflictions, all the hindrances, and all the non-good *dharmas*, one generates all good karma.

“By attaining omniscience and all the good *dharmas*, one universally generates the *dharmas* that assist one’s buddhahood.

To make the Dharma offering is to generate sagacity, all virtues, and all the assistance to full enlightenment. These are the qualities of bodhisattvas on the tenth bhumi, known as the ground of Cloud of Dharma. First, understanding the very nature of all phenomena, the bodhisattvas neither grasp nor forsake them but rather enter the gate of the single ultimate truth. This is the bodhisattvas’ supreme wisdom of entering into the true reality of all phenomena. Second, the bodhisattvas eliminate all afflictive and cognitive obscurations, as well as all non-virtuous phenomena, thus they attain all virtues. Third, in the realization of the omniscient wisdom and in accomplishment of all virtues, the bodhisattvas naturally possess all the assisting factors for attaining Buddhahood.

The above teachings tell us how to make the Dharma offering, or how to practice the Dharma in a proper manner. Great masters of the past such as Master Huiyuan and Kuiji explained them in a slightly different way, and Khenpo also made some references on their commentaries during his teaching.

In addition, it is of vital importance to practice the Dharma persistently. As recounted in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*,

*Thus all bodhisattvas have been
In countless eons
Engaging in diligent practices
And cultivating all roots of virtue.*

We should emulate bodhisattvas who have been practicing virtues diligently in numerous eons. When accumulating worldly merits such as chanting mantras or freeing lives, or cultivating transcendent qualities such as meditating on emptiness of both self and phenomena, we should do it diligently without slacking off. The spirit of grit and persistence is always crucial for each practitioner to make progress on their Dharma path.

Thus, good man, is the assembly of the charity of the Dharma. If a bodhisattva resides in this assembly of the charity of the Dharma he will be a great donor. He will also be a field of blessings for the entire world.'

Vimalakirti concludes that the above teachings are about how to make the Dharma offering, and a bodhisattva who follows this way is a great donor and a field of blessings for the entire world. A field of blessings means by receiving the blessing of this field, the merit of those sentient beings will naturally grow. In Buddhism there are terms like the field of blessings, the field of compassion and the field of kindness, etc. As such, people who practice the giving of the Dharma in this way are called the great donors or the fields of blessings.

“World-honored One, when Vimalakirti explained this Dharma, two hundred people in the congregation of brahmans all generated the intention to achieve *anuttara samyaksambodhi*.

“At the time my own mind attained a purity which I exclaimed to be unprecedented, and I bowed my head to Vimalakirti’s feet in worship. Unfastening my necklace, a hundred thousand [coins] in value, I gave it to him but he did not accept it. I said, ‘Please, retired scholar, you must accept this and give it to whomever you please.’

Vimalakirti then accepted the necklace and divided it into two parts. Taking one part, he gave it to the lowliest beggars in the assembly. Taking the other part, he offered it to the

Tathagata Difficult to Overcome. The entire assembly saw the Radiant Illumination country and Difficult to Overcome Tathagata. They also saw the necklace on that Buddha change into a four-pillared jewel-laden platform, with mutually noninterfering ornamentation on the four sides.

Good Virtue was a benefactor with great fortune. When he took off his priceless necklace and offered it to Vimalakirti, Vimalakirti declined at first. Since Good Virtue insisted on making this offering and also allowed Vimalakirti to give it to whomever he wanted, Vimalakirti accepted the necklace and divided it into two parts, one for the poorest beggars in the assembly, and the other for the Tathagata Difficult to Overcome who abides in another buddha land called Radiant Illumination country. Xuanzang translated the name of the buddha land as Mirage country, indicating its appearance devoid of inherent existence.

Through Vimalakirti's miraculous powers all people present were able to see the buddha land. The necklace was transformed into a four-pillared jewel-laden platform, which was decorated with jewels and could be seen from all directions. This was a special manifestation of the Buddha's blessing and miraculous power. The Tibetan version says it is a four-pillared pavilion decorated with strings of pearls and resting on four bases.

“Having manifested these numinous transformations, Vimalakirti then said, ‘If a donor with an attitude of universal sameness gives to the lowliest beggars, this is to be like the characteristic of the Tathagata's field of blessings, with no distinction, and to be equivalent to great compassion without seeking any reward. This is called “to be replete in the charity of the Dharma.””

“The lowliest beggars in the city witnessed this numinous power and heard his explanation, and they all generated the intention to achieve *anuttara samyaksambodhi*.

“Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

Having manifested these miraculous displays, Vimalakirti concludes that if a patron can make offerings and almsgivings with an attitude of equanimity, with no distinction between the lowliest beggars and the supreme Tathagata's field of blessings, and if one can exercise great compassion in equal measure without seeking reward or recompense, he is replete with the charity of the Dharma. Or in other words, he makes the perfect offering of the Dharma. Some

masters commented that by giving the necklace to the beggars and the Buddha, Vimalakirti transformed Good Virtue's material offering into the Dharma offering.

So what is the genuine Dharma offering? It is to make offering or almsgiving imbued with the mind of equanimity and emptiness, which is a state that is free from the three conceptions, i.e., subject, object and action. If Buddhists devote their whole life to charity work yet know nothing about emptiness or how to dedicate merits in a way free from the three conceptions, then they are no different to those ordinary philanthropists. This is far from enough to be a Buddhist.

Khenpo hopes that everyone will value the practice of making offering and giving alms. We can follow the example of Vimalakirti who divided the necklace into two parts, one for the Buddha and the other for the beggars. Some people of today only make offerings to the Three Jewels while others only give alms to the poor. Both cases are improper because we are supposed to exercise equanimity in our spiritual practices. It doesn't matter how much we donate, the important thing is to do it with a mind of equanimity and guided by the view of emptiness. This profound teaching lying behind the content of material offering and Dharma offering is not so common in other sutras, and can be regarded as a special feature of this sutra.

In similar fashion all of the bodhisattvas explained their original encounters and related what Vimalakirti had said, and each said he was unable to accept [the Buddha's instruction] to go inquire about his illness.

At the beginning of the first chapter it says that there are 32,000 bodhisattvas and 8,000 shravakas, so it is hard to recount all their stories. This chapter just repeats four stories and the following chapters will be focused on the wonderful dialogue between Manjushri and Vimalakirti.