

**KHENPO  
SODARGYE'S**  
*Commentary on*



**ORIGINAL VOWS OF  
KSITIGARBHA  
BODHISATTVA  
SUTRA**

**1<sup>st</sup>**  
of 4 books  
2023 Edition

ORIGINAL VOWS OF  
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA  
SUTRA

1<sup>st</sup> of 4 books

Commented by Khenpo Sodargye

2023 Edition



Dedicated to

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche in deep gratitude and love

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



**Khenpo  
Sodargye**

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# Chapter One

*Spiritual Penetration*

*in the Trayastrimsa Heaven*



Because Ksitigarbha possesses such inconceivable power and aspirations, if anyone upon hearing his name venerates him through any means such as reciting his name, praising him, paying homage to him, making prostration to him, making offerings to him with flower, incense and lamps, this person will be reborn in the Trayastrimsa Heaven one hundred times and never fall into the three lower realms—the hell realm, hungry ghost realm, and animal realm.

—Khenpo Sodargye

# Lecture One

July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## WHY AM I TEACHING THIS SUTRA?

On the Tibetan calendar, today (Jul 11th, 2020) is the 21st day of the fifth month, a day blessed by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Whatever virtuous deeds we do on this day, the merits generated will increase hundreds of millions of times. Normally I won't give Dharma teaching on a Saturday, but on this auspicious coincidence, it is indeed wonderful for us to begin the study of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*.

This time, I am not going to comprehensively elaborate on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and I also won't provide many logical or scriptural references because this sutra is not about theory or logic. Instead, it is a very practical sutra that can be directly applied to life. If I had wanted to showcase quotations from sutras and shastras or to exhibit evidence and proofs, the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* would not be a good choice. Also, in Han Buddhism, there are already a great number of extensive teachings and commentaries on this sutra, such as the teaching given by Master Hsuan Hua, Master Chin Kung, and Master Meng Can. Therefore, many of you may already



be very familiar with its content and chant the sutra as part of your daily practice. Although it may not have been necessary for me to give an extensive teaching on it, I do have a few reasons to still teach this sutra.

## **Give the Transmission of the Tibetan Translation of *Ksitigarbha Sutra***

The first reason has to do with my Tibetan translation of this sutra. In Han Buddhism, there are three well-known sutras of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, namely, *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*, *Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions* and *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Although the Tibetan Tripitaka is as vast as the ocean, among these three, only *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha* is available in Tibetan. Given the fact that Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is so powerful and has vowed to help sentient beings in this degenerate age, I decided to first translate the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* into Tibetan so that modern Tibetans can make a deeper connection to Ksitigarbha by reading and studying this sutra.

I had originally planned to start the translation at the end of 2019 and spend two years to complete the project. Then unexpectedly, the pandemic broke out in the winter of 2019, and like many people, I was locked down during the winter and most of my activities had to be cancelled. So I formally started the translation around

January of 2020. Since there was a regimented schedule for us every day during the lockdown, the whole translation process went through quite smoothly. After a couple of months, before I was able to come back to Larung Gar this spring, I finished the draft translation. I do feel this was a special gift of transforming my negativities into a positive practice.

I'd like to give the teaching on this sutra this summer and use it as an opportunity to proofread my Tibetan translation. As many of you here understand both Tibetan and Chinese, you can help me check if there is any error or inconsistency with the original Chinese. This is one of the purposes in giving this teaching.

In Tibetan Buddhism tradition, it is a general practice that once a master has composed a shastra, he or she would first expound upon it to some of his or her close disciples. For example, when Ju Mipham Rinpoche completed the commentary on *The Adornment of the Middle Way*, he spent 21 days explaining it to his eight disciples, and moderately revised the text as he was teaching it. This was mentioned in the epilogue of his commentary.

In my case, of course it is a Chinese-Tibetan translation. In the past couple of decades, I have taught you many Tibetan shastras right after I translated them into Chinese. However, with regards to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it would be difficult for me to teach it

directly in Tibetan. Therefore, we would just use the original Chinese text. But I'm still hoping to give you the transmission of my Tibetan translation and meanwhile to do some proofreading at the beginning of every lecture.

A few years ago, I translated the *Sutra on the Contemplation of Buddha Amitayus* from Chinese to Tibetan. Later on, some khenpos requested me to give its teaching to Tibetan monastics and lay practitioners. They provided a lot of resources to support an auspicious start for the spreading of this sutra in Tibetan, however, the teaching is still pending on my waiting list, I am not sure when the time would be good to do it.

I haven't given scripture teaching to a large audience in Tibetan for many years. So it would be for the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, I don't think I would schedule a Tibetan teaching on it in the near future. I will just take this opportunity to read it in Tibetan while explaining it in Chinese to create an auspicious connection of this sutra with the Tibetan community, as well as with all living beings in the world.

## **Create the Auspicious Conditions for Propagating the Practice of Ksitigarbha**

The second reason, also the most important one, is to propagate the practice of Ksitigarbha, and to let Ksitigarbha's blessing reach



everywhere in the world and enter into the hearts of all living beings in the present and the future.

The qualities and blessings of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is extraordinary. When H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, he often extolled the merit of Ksitigarbha and established the tradition among the sangha to collectively pray to Ksitigarbha. This tradition continues after His Holiness passed into nirvana. Every year before and after the auspicious anniversary of the Buddha's first turning of the Dharma Wheel, we hold an eight-day Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly during which we'll primarily chant the name of Ksitigarbha and his long mantra recorded in the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*. The importance of this practice has always been recognized.

Back to 1986, as Buddhism started to revive in Tibetan areas after having been suppressed for several decades, H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche made a trip to visit many monasteries that needed his help. For every holy mountain he arrived, His Holiness would first purify the mountain by performing a ceremony of the Vajravidarana Dharani practice, and then asked the sangha members to chant the name of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and Ju Mipham Rinpoche's prayer of Ksitigarbha, *Beautiful Adornment of the Earth: In Praise of Ksitigarbha*. By doing so, all the contamination

and inauspiciousness created by any non-believers, or any vow breakers would be purified.

Personally, I believe H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had uncommon connection with Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and the supreme blessing of Ksitigarbha had never been separated from him. Thanks to the blessings of His Holiness, I also have a strong devotion to Ksitigarbha, feeling that as the lineage disciples of His Holiness, we all would have an uncommon connection with this great bodhisattva. A few years ago, I translated Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *Biographies of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas* into Chinese, which effectively introduced the qualities of Ksitigarbha.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to propagate the practice of Ksitigarbha to the entire world. In the future, most of you will have a chance to teach the Dharma in various places, and I am sure that you will bring great benefits to your students if you can instruct them in the practice of Ksitigarbha. This is why I've decided to give you the teaching on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* even though it only exists in the Chinese Tripitaka and I don't even have its transmission.

I do believe the teaching of this sutra can give rise to an auspicious cause for people all over the world to establish a deep connection

with Ksitigarbha and to receive his extraordinary blessing, something that is desperately needed in this increasingly degenerate age. When I was doing this translation, my fervent hope was to encourage everyone to study the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, pray to Ksitigarbha and engage in the practice of Ksitigarbha. If people can make Ksitigarbha statues, print and spread the *Ksitigarbha sutra*, and recite his name and mantra as often as possible, they will certainly accumulate immense merits for their present life and all future lives, and also bring peace and happiness to the whole world.

## **Transform Natural and Man-Made Disasters in the World**

The third reason is to bring peace and happiness to the world. As we know, the year of 2020 has been a difficult year and many have suffered from unexpected, or even unprecedented calamities. Up to now, more than half a million people have died from Covid-19. The newly infected number in the tens of thousands daily in countries like the US and India. That is terrifying for the whole world.

In addition, quite a few natural disasters have occurred in different parts of the world. Bubonic plague, a dreadful disease that can kill within a few days of exposure, was recently founded in Mongolia. Just a few days ago, Mongolia has quarantined an entire region

after identifying two people with symptoms of bubonic plague. Inner Mongolia, a northern province of China, is threatened by bubonic plague, while severe floods have threatened the lives and homes of people in 27 provinces across Central and Southern China. The catastrophic flooding is said to be the worst in the past 60 years, and to date, of 70 billion RMB in losses, and over 100 deaths can be attributed to it.

Aside from these natural disasters, international relations are also not positive. Political tensions among many countries have intensified dramatically during the pandemic. With all of these events, the three lesser calamities stated in sutras, namely, pestilence, famine, and warfare seem to be already with us. Indeed, all natural and man-made calamities are related to our collective karma. In this modern age, people are committing too many unwholesome deeds. With the aid of modern technology, killing has become particularly easy and more brutal than ever. As a result, people's merit has declined sharply and many are receiving the karmic retribution of their severe negative actions even in this present life.

Those of us who live in this remote valley may not have too much of a sense of the external world. In reality, however, people in many countries have experienced dramatic changes in their lives during this half year and some may even feel that they have been cast into hell from heaven. As a matter of fact, when one's negative

karma matures into fruition, one can hardly escape from one's own suffering. Impermanence can be counted on to express itself. In no time, enjoyment and privilege are gone without a trace or become the source of suffering. When unexpected changes occur, for example, business goes bust, mortgages and car loans can't be paid off, some people cannot face up to it and choose to leave the world. Some others, although they won't end their lives, find it hopeless in getting a way out of their troubles and suffering, no matter whom they turn to or wherever they go because people around them are equally helpless. Learning about these sorrows and frustrations, we can easily empathize with their intense suffering.

The best way to transform such negativities is to pray with a strong devotion to Ksitigarbha. As one of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, Ksitigarbha is well known for his supreme strength and aspiration to fulfill wishes of all sentient beings. More specifically, he has uncommon connection to suffering beings in the degenerate age and thus will take care of us with extraordinary compassion. Therefore, it is important for us to rely on the power and blessings of Ksitigarbha and to propagate the Ksitigarbha practice.

In the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*, it states, "Many eons of multifaceted veneration and supplication to Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Maitreya, Samantabhadra and other numerous supreme

bodhisattvas, such as taking refuge in them, reciting their names, paying homage and making offerings to them, is not as quickly effective as doing the same to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva for a single instant in fulfilling one's wishes. Why so? Because Ksitigarbha is pre-eminent in bringing peace and happiness to sentient beings and he is able to swiftly grant everything that sentient beings wish for. He is like a wish-fulfilling jewel and a hidden treasury because of his strong aspiration and vast compassion, as well as his courage and diligence in practicing his vows for countless eons."

From this, we know Ksitigarbha is really a wish-fulfilling bodhisattva that we should pray to. When one is praying to worldly spirits and earth gods, they may support us with their merit and strength some of the time. However, there is no such uncertainty with Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva who had vowed "not to achieve buddhahood until all hells are emptied". With such a comprehensive vow, he will for sure swiftly grant us his blessing and fulfill our wishes as long as we pray to him.

Considering the unceasing calamities currently occurring around the world, no one can say for certain whether we would be alive or not next year. In order to bring good health, peace and happiness, and to attain our well-being and prosperity for not only our friends and families but all sentient beings in this world, we should sincerely study the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and pray to Ksitigarbha

together. The present moment is a good time for me to teach the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* to you all.

Although we are presently unable to live stream the teaching and the number of listeners are more limited, our collective supplication to Ksitigarbha can still bring incredible benefit to the whole world. I believe many of you have established a close connection to Ksitigarbha and have received his blessing. As long as we pray to this great bodhisattva with sincere faith and devotion, his miraculous powers will certainly lead to huge changes to this world. So during each lecture, we will chant the name of Ksitigarbha together to fervently wish that all natural and man-made misfortunes and calamities in the world be swiftly dispelled, and if there has to be any loss, may the loss be reduced to a minimum. Every time, we will chant the name of Ksitigarbha in this way:

*Boddhisatva, great Boddhisatva Ksitigarbha, to you I pay homage!*

*To you I make offerings! In you I take refuge! (7 times)*

*Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, you generate great aspirations,*

*With great wisdom, compassion and ability, you accomplish  
all activities,*

*With supreme wisdom, you manifest boundless qualities.*

*To you I pay homage, may you grant the same accomplishments  
to us all!*

## LIBRARY AT LARUNG GAR

Speaking of the commentaries of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, they are all available in our new library for nuns, the Larung Lotus Continent Library. It is so great that now we have a library at Larung Gar to support the study of all nuns here. I'm planning to build another one for monks. I sincerely appreciate our volunteer staff's hard work to manage such a wonderful library. If there was such a library at the time when I was young, I would be so elated because as a young monk, I mainly focused on Dharma studies. If I had such a good resource with all kinds of sutras and shastras available, I could have found whatever I needed to answer my questions and deepen my understanding. Also, I could have learned valuable insights in other fields that could have broadened my vision and to benefit from other great beings' wisdom. As now I have become older, my deteriorating eyesight and other responsibilities have made it really difficult for me to read everything that I would like to read.



I also have plans to build a library in my hometown. We worked on this project last year, but unexpectedly we had to suspend the project temporarily. We will try to renew the project as soon as we are able. This library will collect books of various subjects in both religious and secular fields.

It is my wish to build several libraries during my lifetime. With so many precious books collected, a library can be a wonderful treasure to serve those who are seeking valued knowledge and great wisdom. As I've visited many universities overseas, whenever I saw their libraries, I thought how nice it would be if Larung Gar and my hometown had similar kind of libraries to provide the necessary support for the students' studies. At Harvard University, the libraries are full of busy students and scholars day and night. I truly admire such environment for studying.

With the blessings of my guru and the Three Jewels, and the convergence of many favorable causes and conditions, we now have the Lotus Continent Library for nuns. Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro and I went to the library the other day, and we were very happy that in such a short time everything had been settled and well arranged. We are still trying to collect more books of different languages, particularly Buddhist sutras and shastras, from various sources. Though there were twists and turns during the whole process in completing this project, the result was excellent and I appreciated

everyone's hard work. Being able to contribute to the sangha members' journey of seeking wisdom is truly meaningful. With such a pure motivation, all those involved have also accumulated great merit.

## THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE *Ksitigarbha Sutra*

It is worth pointing out that some scholars have thought that the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* was apocryphal. If it were an apocryphal sutra, there would be no meaning to translate it into Tibetan because it would be of no benefit for later generation to rely on a fake Dharma teaching for their practice. But I am full of confidence that this sutra is exactly the Buddha's teaching and during my translation, I have also read many related comments on this sutra given by several great Han masters, such as Master Ouyi, Master Lianchi, Master Yinguang, and Master Hong Yi. Their words have further strengthened my belief in this sutra. Still, in order to remove any doubt for those who want to rely on this sutra to engage in the Ksitigarbha practice, I want to address a couple of points to explain the sutra's authenticity.

## Not Included in Siksánanda's Translation List

Some people question the authenticity of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* because they think it was not translated by Siksánanda(652-710). They support this view by the evidence that this sutra is not included in Siksánanda's translation list. To me this is not valid evidence because the translation list that they refer to may not be the complete one.

Siksánanda was from Khotan, current Hetian in Xin Jiang Uygur autonomous region, which was a country back in the Tang Dynasty, as mentioned both in Xuanzang's *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, and Faxian's *A Record of the Buddhist Countries*. In Faxian's record, he narrated how Buddhism was flourishing when he arrived in Khotan: "There were tens of thousands of monastics, most of whom were Mahayana practitioners. Each household had a stupa in front of its door, which is used for travelling monks from everywhere to stay, with all kinds of stuff well prepared for them." However, because of historical changes, most residents there are now practicing different religions or having no religion at all.

Siksánanda was a Tripitaka Master, an ordained monk, and also an eminent translator of his time. He was highly respected by Empress Wu Zetian. The empress had made great contributions to the translation of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit to Chinese. Given

her sincere devotion and incredible efforts on inviting Mahayana Buddhism to China, she could really be considered as a Dharma king in the history of Han Buddhism. At that time, the version of *Avatamsaka Sutra* had only 60 volumes. Hearing that there was a more complete version in Khotan, the empress invited Siksanda to China to take charge of the translation of 80-volume *Avatamsaka Sutra*. In 695, Siksanda arrived at Luo Yang and began the translation. In 699, he finished this huge project, and thereafter he translated many more sutras, included the *Lankavatara Sutra*. Then in 704, Siksanda returned to Khotan to look after his elderly mother. A few years later, invited by Emperor Zhongzong, he returned to China and resumed his translation. Unfortunately, he died a short time after he arrived at Chang'an in 710, at the age of 59.

Historically, some great masters lived a long life while others passed away at an earlier age. Generally speaking, it was quite unusual for someone to live past eighty years. I often think I would be satisfied if I could live to seventy years old, but we can never tell because impermanence may strike anytime, which is invisible yet scary. Some of you may think you would be able to live a long life but it is really hard to be certain. I hope you all can be well prepared for impermanence so that when it strikes, whether to your health, wealth, or abode, you would not be left in despair or

feel regretful and guilty of anything. If you have been practicing well, you will be able to handle impermanence with exceptional ease.

As we can see, Siksanda lived a short life and spent about ten years translating sutras in China. The statement that there is no *Ksitigarbha Sutra* in Siksanda's translation list is mainly based on the fact that this sutra was missing in the *Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Texts* compiled by the monk Zhisheng in 730. But this is certainly not sufficient evidence to prove that Siksanda didn't translate this sutra. One thing should be noted in Zhisheng's catalogue. It said that Siksanda had translated 19 scriptures, but Zhisheng didn't provide all the names of the 19 scriptures in his catalogue. As Master Lianchi said, "The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* was indeed translated by Siksanda. Someone claimed that it was done by others but failed to provide any reliable information about the alternative translators. This is really groundless and not trustworthy."

It is not uncommon for one or two works to be missing from a great master's writing list. For instance, some works of Mipham Rinpoche were not originally included in the list of his complete works. The same happened to Rongzom Mahapandita and Dorje Dechen Lingpa. As a great Tertön, many termas revealed by Dechen Lingpa

were found in different places while missing in an earlier catalogue of his works. Therefore, not being included in Siksanda's translation list is not sufficient to claim that the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is apocryphal.

Actually, when we consider the translation style of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it is quite consistent with Siksanda's translation of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Generally, a translator would have his or her own unique style of translating certain terms and phrases, for example, the way of addressing a buddha or a bodhisattva. So before starting my translation, I spent a lot of time comparing the translation style of the 80-volume version of *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, especially focusing on the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas used in these two sutras, as well as the way different Pure Lands were called and the literary style as a whole. Through this analysis, I was convinced that the two sutras were translated by the same person.

## **No Sanskrit Version Being Found**

Some scholars suspected that the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* was apocryphal because its Sanskrit version was not found. This reason is again not sufficient. Being not found does not mean it had never existed. Not every sutra's original Sanskrit version is available today, this is the case for several widely recognized scriptures. Nevertheless,

the discovery of the Tangut script of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* in the Dunhuang Manuscripts in 1989 provided strong evidence proving its authenticity. Different from the Tangut version of this sutra found by Paul Pelliot back in 1908, which some have deemed as a translation from Siksanda's Chinese version, the script found in 1989 contains mantras transliterated from Sanskrit that were missing in Siksanda's Chinese version. So it would suggest that the 1989 Tangut version was actually translated from Sanskrit and then preserved in Dunhuang during the Western Xia Dynasty. This conclusion is supported by many historians and archeologists and I feel that there is no doubt about the authenticity of this sutra.

## Necessity of Clearing up Doubts

But why do some still suspect that the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is an apocryphal sutra? The fact is that the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is not alone in this situation. Many widely acknowledged sutras have received the same kind of controversy in academic research. As we discussed during the *Shurangama Sutra* teaching, while it is great that more and more Buddhist scriptures have received high academic interest, some researchers often draw arbitrary conclusions on a certain sutra without sufficient study. For instance, if they are not familiar with the style of a typical sutra, or the sutra's content is beyond their normal understanding of Buddhism, or they cannot interpret the sutra with their established academic approach, they would



sometimes make a hasty conclusion that the sutra is apocryphal. Since some of them may even be well-known scholars, their unjustified statements were widely accepted by many others. In the end, these statements become seemingly trustworthy conclusions and thus create incredibly negative influence for both academic researcher and Buddhist practitioners.

While they clearly understand the pros and cons of academic research, senior Dharma practitioners who have been studying and contemplating the Dharma for many years would certainly not be easily misled by such arbitrary statements. However, for those who have received little training in Buddhist philosophy and have a strong infinity to academic research, they could be easily led to a hasty and subjective conclusion without noting its inadequate logical reasoning. As a matter of fact, both the scholar who claims an authentic sutra to be apocryphal and his or her followers who firmly believe that conclusion have committed serious negative karma for slandering and abandoning the Dharma, something difficult to be purified in this and future lives.

Therefore, it is essential for senior Buddhists to clarify matters and correct wrong views. Otherwise, their negative influence would continue to exist and cause bad karma to many beings. In the case of *The Shurangama Sutra*, the mistaken opinions of some scholars in the past have caused doubt about the sutra for many people even

today with some still holding the view that this sutra is apocryphal. It is indeed a great pity that so many people have accumulated serious negative karma due to their lack of proper discrimination and intelligence.

As Mahayana Buddhists, we need to understand when we should let our voices be heard and when we should practice silence. If we don't practice patience on proper occasions such as being with our fellow Dharma practitioners, but instead exercise unnecessary patience when others slander the Dharma unreasonably, feeling that we'd better keep quiet and do not get involved in those arguments, it indeed demonstrates our cowardliness and ignorance. Instead, we should speak out and do whatever is necessary to protect and uphold the noble Dharma, and also to prevent those beings from creating negative karma that would cause them to fall into the lower realms.

As we live in this chaotic world with all kinds of degeneration, we should not be vulnerable and weak, giving others the impression that Buddhists are always silent and have no powerful impact. If we appear to be so incompetent that we cannot even express our view properly, then people can hardly respect and revere the Buddha's teaching. Therefore, while we should remain humble and modest in our daily life and practice, we needn't be fragile and

timid. Instead, we should be strong, firm, resilient and determined, making our voices heard and taking actions when necessary.

Having said that, we will now focus on the study of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Since it has such powerful and pervasive blessing, we should sincerely cherish this precious opportunity to study it together and always remain diligent in praying to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and contemplating on the teaching.

## THE TITLE OF THE SUTRA

The full name of this sutra is called *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra*. The Sanskrit word Ksitigarbha is literally translated as Earth Treasury, which can be interpreted in many different ways. For instance, it indicates this great bodhisattva's vows of liberating and benefiting sentient beings are as firm as the earth; or just as the earth is the basis of all things, the bodhisattva is like a great earth treasury that contains all kinds of worldly and transcendental qualities; also, because the bodhisattva can fulfill all wishes of sentient beings like a wish fulfilling treasury, so he is called the "Earth Treasury".

As one of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, this sutra explains Ksitigarbha's original vows and his vast activities of releasing sentient beings from suffering. The vows of Ksitigarbha can be summarized as "only after all beings have been guided to awakening will I myself attain bodhi; as long as the hells are not empty, I shall not become a buddha." Though it is not the original quote from the

*Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it is the essence of Ksitigarbha's vows which is later included in the Han Buddhism ritual of smoke offering.

The *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha* also speaks of the fundamental vows of Ksitigarbha. By the power of his aspirations, sentient beings can be saved from all kinds of suffering, particularly wars, diseases and famine that will happen in the very degenerate and evil age. This sutra says,

*Because of sentient beings' past negative karma,  
They have to experience wars, diseases, and famine.  
Wherever they are tormented by these sufferings,  
Ksitigarbha can free them all.*

Due to their destructive emotions of greed, anger and ignorance, sentient beings have created all kinds of negative karma since the beginningless time. When their negative karma ripens, they have to experience the fruit of unbearable suffering. For example, the karma of killing leads to wars and conflicts among countries, as well as fights and killing among people. Diseases and pandemic will consequently appear around the world, such as the bird flu, swine flu, and the Coronavirus that we've encountered recently. Following wars and diseases, famine could strike on a large scale. These three are the features of the degenerate age that are well described in sutras.

Although the development of many countries has advanced and their economies have gradually grown, massive negative karma such as killing has accumulated day by day. It is hard to know what will happen next but given this situation, we should pray to Ksitigarbha to save us from all crises of wars, famine and diseases.

*The Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha continues,*

*Living beings keep reincarnating in the five realms,*

*Afflicted and tormented by various sufferings.*

*By taking refuge in and revering Ksitigarbha,*

*All sufferings can be eliminated.*

This explains Ksitigarbha's vows from another respect. As sentient beings are entrapped in samsara and have to reincarnate in the forms of devas, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings, they are afflicted and tormented by various sufferings, both physically and mentally. However, as long as they revere, take refuge in, make offering and pray to Ksitigarbha wholeheartedly, they can be saved from all these samsaric sufferings. As a whole, no matter if the suffering is caused by natural and man-made disasters in this human world, or any unimaginable suffering in the five realms, by relying on Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, all of them can be dispelled. As Mahayana practitioners, we do need to engage in the practice of

Ksitigarbha to clear away all sentient beings' distress and suffering in this day and age.

In addition, in the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva states that by reciting the Ksitigarbha mantra, he can extend sentient beings' life expectancy, bring them good health and wealth, help them maintain pure precepts, better understand more Dharma teachings, develop wisdom and compassion, and so on and so forth. There are many benefits that Ksitigarbha can grant us if we practice his mantra. Whether we wish for worldly merits such as good fortune, fame, peace, and health, or spiritual progress and attainment such as good learning, pure precepts, deep concentration, and non-dual wisdom, all of these can be bestowed by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva thanks to his profound and vast vows that he made in his previous lives. This is the main content that we are going to study in this sutra, the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra*.

# WHAT HAPPENED IN THE TRAYASTRIMSA HEAVEN?

## Chapter One

### Spiritual Penetration in the Trayastrimsa Heaven

Thus have I heard. At one time, the Buddha was in the Trayastrimsa Heaven expounding Dharma for his mother. At that time, from measureless worlds of the ten directions, all Buddhas and great Bodhisattva–Mahasattvas, inexpressibly-inexpressibly [many], all came and assembled there. They praised how Sakya-muni Buddha was able to manifest inconceivable, great wisdom and supernatural powers to regulate and train obstinate living beings in the evil age of the five degenerations, so that beings would come to understand suffering and happiness. Each of them sent his attendant to inquire after the World-Honored One.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This English version of the sutra is translated by Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center. <https://www.fgsitc.org/the-original-vows-of-ksitigarbha-bodhisattva-sutra>





After seven days the Buddha was born, his mother Lady Maya died and took rebirth in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas, the Trayastrimsa Heaven. Before the Buddha was about to pass into nirvana, he went to the Trayastrimsa Heaven to expound the Dharma for his mother. After the Buddha finished the teaching, he returned to the human world on 22nd day of the ninth month of the Tibetan calendar which is commemorated as the Descending Day of the Lord Buddha. So the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* was taught by the Buddha in the Trayastrimsa Heaven for his mother in order to repay her kindness.

Among the assembly who came for the teaching, there were very few human beings, and most of them were celestial beings, dragons, ghosts and devas from different worlds. Because without supernatural power, ordinary people cannot go to the celestial heaven. More remarkably, all buddhas and great bodhisattvas from the ten directions gathered in the Trayastrimsa Heaven to attend the teaching and also to praise Shakyamuni Buddha. Here “inexpressibly-inexpressibly many” suggests the number is too huge to describe by the normal language. Nowadays when a great Tulku is going to give empowerment or a particular teaching, people from all over the world would try all means to participate, imagine how many would be present when the Buddha was going to turn the Dharma Wheel for his mother.

## **The Buddha's Great Aspirations**

Why did all buddhas and bodhisattvas come to praise Shakyamuni Buddha? Because he is the greatest and most marvelous one among all buddhas of the ten directions. Like a white lotus, he is able to demonstrate inconceivable, great wisdom and supernatural powers to regulate and train living beings in the evil age of the five degenerations. As it is said in Ju Mipham Rinpoche's liturgy of Buddha Shakyamuni, *The Treasury of Blessings*,

*With your great compassion, you embraced this turbulent and degenerate world,  
And made five hundred mighty aspirations.  
You are as exalted as the white lotus; whoever hears your name shall  
never return to samsara—  
Most compassionate teacher, to you I pay homage!*

Unlike most other buddhas, Shakyamuni Buddha had made five hundred great aspirations to benefit sentient beings specifically in the turbulent and degenerate age. This is the most extraordinary quality of the Buddha, which is recorded in the *Compassionate Lotus Sutra* as well as Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *The Extensive Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*. In one of his previous lives when the Buddha was called Ocean-Atom (pinyin: Hai Cheng) Brahman, as he saw many bodhisattvas choose to stay in pure buddha lands, he decided to take care of poor beings in the evil age of the five degenerations. He said, "I should give the noble Dharma teaching to the living beings in the degenerate age. I should be persevering and brave. I should make virtuous vows like a Lion's Roar." Thus out of his strong and uncommon compassion, he made the five hundred great aspirations to benefit and guide poor living beings like us in this degenerate age.

If the Buddha hadn't vowed to benefit us in this turbulent world, and if our lineage masters hadn't come to guide us, it is hard to

imagine how long it will take before we are able to encounter the Dharma and embark on the path of awakening. Maybe it will take forever. So whenever we think of the supreme qualities and loving-kindness of Shakyamuni Buddha and our Buddha-like lineage teachers, we should be sincerely grateful to them.

## The Five Degenerations

In terms of the five degenerations, the *Yogacarabhumi Shastra* has very unique explanations for them. The first one is the degeneration of life span. People in the past could live as long as hundreds or up to tens of thousands of years. However, due to the decline of our merits, modern people's life span is very short. A normal person can seldom live a hundred years. As I've mentioned earlier, it will be good enough if I can live to sixty or seventy, or perhaps that's just wishful thinking, because life is too transient in this degenerate age.

The second is the degeneration of sentient beings. It means that people in this age are inclined to commit evil acts as their good virtue declines. They have natural propensities for non-virtues and are skilled at conducting unwholesome deeds such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying. When it comes to wholesome activities, however, they find it as difficult as climbing a huge mountain.

The third is the degeneration of disturbing emotions. It means that people hold increasingly strong emotions in their minds, such as desire, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and jealousy.

The fourth is the degeneration of views, meaning that sentient beings possess more and more wrong views. Why do people like to enumerate others' faults these days? The main reason is their negative views. Through their biased and subjective lenses, nobody and nothing is perfect, and instead, they are full of faults. For example, when they come to a shrine, they may only focus on some tiny flaws and ignore its majesty. Or, when interacting with someone, they would only see the other person's faults while ignoring his virtuous qualities. They tend to behave like a policeman who would readily suspect everyone of committing a crime. Some policemen, even when they are out of uniform, could still be easily recognized because of how they behave, always suspecting others of wrong doings. When we only see others' negativities but not their virtues and qualities, it is a sign that our views are degenerating. Buddhas and bodhisattvas and those noble ones will always focus on the positive side of other beings instead of criticizing their faults.

The fifth one is the degeneration of time, which is related to the environment where sentient beings live. This degeneration indicates that wars, famines, diseases and pandemics will frequently emerge in the world and cause dramatic sufferings to all beings.

## **We Are Beings in the Degenerate Age**

Shakyamuni Buddha aspired to awaken living beings to recognize these five degenerations and that we are deeply immersed in them. Our planet has unceasing wars, famines and diseases; our views seldom recognize the true reality and are easily misled by externalism, nihilism or any other deviant and evil views; our afflictive emotions are intensely strong; and we often find it difficult to act virtuously in our short and transient life. It is only Shakyamuni Buddha who can guide us and save us from suffering with his great love and compassion. So all buddhas and bodhisattvas from the ten directions came to praise Shakyamuni Buddha for his great wisdom, inconceivable skills and means, and the miraculous powers demonstrated in the evil age of the five degenerations. They all sent their attendants to inquire after the Buddha. Some might think that Shakyamuni Buddha would be tired from receiving all these greetings from the innumerable buddhas one by one. Although it is beyond our understanding, in his state of realization, this is not something undoable or tedious for Shakyamuni.

The fact is that sentient beings like us can be quite obstinate and even the Buddha himself would have difficulty taming us. Even after the Buddha had turned the Dharma Wheel three times in this world and so many great masters had untiringly and earnestly encouraged and guided us, we could still be trapped by our own mental afflictions and cannot achieve any spiritual freedom. Sometimes even if we appear to have tamed our wild and violent minds a bit, we would regress to where we started from after only a short time. It is similar to someone suffering from certain mental illness: sometimes one would appear to be normal, but not before long, his mental illness returns and shows its effect again.

In this degenerate age and under the control of negative karma and mental afflictions, it is very difficult to have any virtuous disposition, right views, and right actions. We can only rely on the Buddha's teaching to understand how to avoid suffering and how to attain happiness, and eventually to achieve full enlightenment and free ourselves from ignorance. Therefore, authentic Buddhists seldom venerate the Buddha merely out of blind faith. Through systematic learning and practice, they connect with the Buddha's inconceivable wisdom and miraculous power. They know that by putting the Buddha's teaching into practice, they will attain ultimate happiness and freedom.

After tasting the nectar of the Buddha's teaching, our most crucial responsibility is to help save and guide the stubborn beings in this turbulent world. Some Dharma teachers are particularly reluctant, fearing that it would be too difficult to tame the minds of the stubborn ones. At times like this, we should remember the Buddha's kindness and compassion, and make all our efforts to follow in his footsteps to help and benefit sentient beings.



# Lecture Two

July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## HAVE FAITH IN THE Ksitigarbha PRACTICE

The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is a supreme scripture endowed with great blessing. We can glimpse its incredible power from a great number of stories recorded in Han Buddhism. These stories tell of numerous Han Chinese in the past who had been blessed by Ksitigarbha and received inconceivable benefits through the learning and chanting of this sutra. I will recount some of these stories during the teaching so that we can cultivate a deeper faith in its supreme blessing. Just like when I was teaching the *Diamond Sutra*, I presented many stories on its efficacy in order for you to generate a firm conviction on the power of the Sunyata teaching. I also translated these stories of Ksitigarbha into Tibetan during my translation of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Since there are too many, I just selected a few interesting ones for my translation.

When we are trying to learn a scripture, it is not enough to just listen to the teaching. We should refer to its commentaries as

many as possible to deepen our understanding. If we do not listen attentively during the teaching, and neither review nor expand the teaching by reading the related materials afterward, we are just planting a virtuous seed in our minds but we may not gain any further benefit. During the study, we need to maintain a keen interest in the teaching. Such enthusiasm is crucial because without it, it is unlikely that we would share this teaching with others and use it to benefit sentient beings in the future.

If we want to benefit sentient beings with the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* in the future, we need to first develop a strong devotion and enthusiasm for it. Having interest in something is an expression in the worldly context, such as having interest in arts, in science, in Buddhism, in a historical figure, or in Ksitigarbha and Avalokiteshvara. In the Buddhist context, such an interest is called faith and devotion, an indispensable element for all Dharma practitioners. However, one's faith in the Dharma has to do with one's karma in previous lives as well as one's effort on the Dharma study and practice in the present life. For instance, the level of our compassion towards sentient beings and that of our affinity towards buddhas and bodhisattvas are partially due to the Buddhist training we have received in this lifetime, and partially due to our previous connections with the Dharma as well as our virtuous and non-virtuous karma accumulated in the past. Those who had wholesome connections

with the Dharma in past lives will have faith and devotion in every Dharma practice.

As I mentioned the other day, I do not have an oral transmission of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* but relying on the special blessing of Ksitigarbha inherited from H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, I have developed a strong faith in all Ksitigarbha practices including this sutra. If you listen to this teaching with strong faith, you will also receive the special blessing and thus can gain more insightful understanding of and higher respect for this sutra. Consequently, sharing this teaching and propagating this practice will become something very natural and easy for you and you will become more adept in communicating it. That said, if conditions permit, we should try to benefit all sentient beings with the Ksitigarbha practice as often as possible.

## REPAY YOUR PARENTS' KINDNESS

We know that the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is a sutra that Shakyamuni Buddha spoke in order to repay the kindness of his mother. The Buddha also spoke a sutra to repay the kindness of his father titled *Meeting of the Father and the Son*, which was spoken in the form of dialogues in Kapilavastu after the Buddha achieved enlightenment. In Han Buddhism, the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is therefore lauded as a sutra of filial piety. Great masters and practitioners in the past would recite, study, or teach this sutra as a way to repay the kindness of their parents and all sentient beings who had been their parents in their past lives. Likewise, by generating faith in this sutra, reciting it, learning it, or propagating it, we can also repay the kindness of our parents who brought us into this world and raised us, for which we should be deeply grateful.

In the *Sutra of the Difficulty of Repaying the Kindness of Parents*, it says that guiding one's parents to perform the five virtuous actions is the best way to repay their kindness. The five virtuous actions are: 1) to generate faith in the Dharma, 2) to observe precepts, 3) to follow

the Dharma, 4) to practice generosity, and 5) to cultivate wisdom. Unlike the usual secular way of pleasing parents as they age by providing a full house of offsprings and wealth, the Buddhist way to repay the love and kindness of our parents is to spiritually benefit them in this present and all future lives, even though it may not be evident immediately.

As monastics who spend most of our lives in monasteries, we may not be able to accompany our parents as they age and fall into poor health. Lay Buddhists who are busy with their learning and practice may not spend enough time with their parents either. Nevertheless, as long as we sincerely dedicate our merit to our parents and guide them gradually into the Dharma by, for instance, encouraging them to recite the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* even once, we are actually repaying their kindness in the best way.

While I was translating this sutra, although I did not write it down in the epilogue of my Tibetan translation, I took it as a way for me to repay the profound kindness of my parents. I still hold this intention as I teach this sutra. Likewise, no matter if you are just listening to this sutra now or reciting it in the future, you should aspire to dedicate your merit to your parents in this present life, and also to all sentient beings who had been your parents in your past lives, wishing them to attain happiness and freedom from suffering. Although such an aspiration will not bring visible benefit

to your parents immediately and they may be more pleased if you had given them money, its eventual results in their future lifetimes are truly incredible.

# IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING ENVIRONMENT CLEAN

## The Magnificence of the Trayastrimsa Heaven

The audiences varied a lot depending on the location where the Buddha taught a sutra. Some sutras were expounded in the human world so among the assembly there were many human beings. Some were taught in the Naga King's palaces so the majority were nagas. Some were taught in the celestial realm, for instance, the teaching of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* took place in the Trayastrimsa Heaven, where a few human arhats attended the teaching and most of the audience were celestial beings from the six heavens of the desire realm, the seventeen heavens of the form realm, and the four types of perception spheres of the formless realm. There were also numerous bodhisattvas, nagas, ghosts and spirits coming for the Dharma assembly from all different worlds. It is just like when a Dharma teacher gives a teaching in the East or the West, the majority of the audiences must be the locals while there are also



a few people coming all the way from other places since they are deeply connected with the teacher.

Given the fact that the attendees in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* were inconceivably massive, some may wonder whether it is possible for the Trayastrimsa Heaven to accommodate such a massive number of beings? Actually we need not worry about this. In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, it was described that the elder Vimalakirti's small room can contain eight thousand bodhisattvas, five hundreds shravakas and hundreds of celestial beings, and so it would not have been a problem for the Trayastrimsa Heaven to accommodate a massive number of beings.

According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma* or Longchenpa's *Wish Fulfilling Treasury*, the Trayastrimsa Heaven is extraordinarily spectacular where the entire outer world including the palaces, gardens, fountains as well as roads is naturally manifested through the celestial beings' merit. As we learn more about the Trayastrimsa Heaven, we can see the enormous difference between the heaven and the human world. The latter is filled with dirt and filth and no matter how beautiful it seems to look at the moment, it will most certainly decay and become unpleasant one day.

When I accompanied H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche to the West and Southeast Asia for Dharma trips in the 90s, we admired the

modernity and beauty of places such as New York and Tokyo, feeling they must be like heaven on earth. Now, the overall environment of many of these places is no longer as beautiful and tidy as they were before, illustrating that all man-made objects are impermanent, like a dream, a hallucination, a bubble and a phantom.

## **Internal and External Environments Are Equally Important**

The worsening of the environment in some places certainly have something to do with their lack of proper management. Here at Larung Gar, in order to create a better environment for all Dharma practitioners, we need to work together and make improvements in aspects of environment management, landscaping, hygiene and sanitation. After all, Larung Gar is not a celestial world nor the Pure Land of Bliss where everything would appear spontaneously in a pure and magnificent way. Although in general it is much better than before, there is still room for improvement. At the meeting with khenpos and khenmos today, we agreed to have a sanitation team of the Han Sangha in place who is responsible for the whole environment. Larung Gar is regarded as a Buddhist city by many people, and we should manage this place properly to make it worthy of the name.

I will list three areas as examples that would need improvements. The first one is to improve the deployment of proper signage. Signs leading to places such as restaurants, hotels, shrine halls, shops and hospital are not adequate and sufficiently clear. When I visited one of these places last time, I almost tripped over the front doorsteps twice. I am not a clumsy person but if I were to find it difficult to cross a threshold, imagine those who are more elderly and less mobile and how their risks for falls would increase. Therefore, at places where they are uneven and slippery, appropriate signage should be posted in Tibetan and Chinese.

The design for the signs, including the colors and shapes to be used, and the locations where they would be placed should be well considered. Do not scatter them everywhere. In many developed cities, you will notice that signs are always placed at places where they are most needed and easily seen. Since we have many residents here, and more and more tourists and visitors are also visiting, we should put more efforts on such details to make sure that we can make things more convenient, comfortable, and safe for them.

Secondly, try to make the exterior and the surrounding areas around your cabins cleaner, tidier and more dignified. I notice some practitioners have their cabins decorated beautifully inside, but their yards and surroundings are a little bit messy. This is improper because people today attach great importance to outer

appearance which usually represent the image of a person or a place. In Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*, it says

*One who internally has all good qualities,  
Yet is outwardly unkempt is scorned by all.*

I believe a lot of you practitioners here are replete with the merit of the three higher trainings of discipline, meditation and wisdom. However, if your outward appearance is unkempt or your cabin is covered with all kinds of messy hangings, people will likely look down on you because of your appearance even if you are about to achieve the rainbow body.

It is the same with our shrine halls and classrooms which we should also keep tidy and clean. Last year I purposely went to some monk's and nun's classrooms. Some classrooms were filled with disorderly piles, flowers and oil lamps here and there, a mixed collection of things without any sense of aesthetics. Whereas some classrooms looked very clean and dignified with Thangkas and buddha statues being arranged properly. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, when Patrul Rinpoche explains the seven branches offering, he says that although buddhas and bodhisattvas have no concepts of clean or dirty, whatever offering we make, seven bowls of water for example, we should make it beautiful, clean and pleasing, because in doing so we will accumulate a vast amount of merit.

Thirdly, the sidewalks are for pedestrians. Just like in cities, the roads here at Larung Gar have sidewalks paved with a lane for the blind. However, unlike the unimpeded sidewalks in cities, big dumpsters are placed randomly and tractors and cars are parked here and there on the sidewalks, making them impassable for both the sighted and the blind. That's why I told the facility management the other day that they should manage this place properly, e.g., find or build places to properly locate those dumpsters.

## **Serving the Community Brings Positive Result**

Although Larung Gar is just a Buddhist center, not a real city, it still needs to have a beautiful and clean environment. Wherever we live, not only should we be responsible for our own behaviors, we are also responsible for the environment of the whole community. I believe your inner qualities and wisdom are above that of many others because you spend most of your time hearing, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma. Still, you also should take your responsibility and try to create a better environment for Larung Gar such as planting trees and flowers in and around your yard.

In the *Sutra on Praising the Noble Qualities of the Sangha*, it says making offering to the sangha and making them happy will generate inconceivable merit. Conversely, if we bring inconvenience to the sangha or pollute the environment where they live, the negative

consequence is also huge. For example, when some people repair their houses, they would pile the construction waste on the road randomly or throw them in the public dumpster, which is not only an act of polluting the environment but also of wasting the property of the sangha because the cleaners working here are hired by the sangha with the sangha funds. It will accumulate huge negative karma if we use the sangha resources to deal with our personal matters. Since this is one's own personal business, one should hire a car or a tractor to dispose of the refuse to the right place.

While enjoying the services of the sangha, we should provide services for the sangha in return which will accumulate great merit for us. Now at every Dharma assembly here at Larung Gar, Tibetan lamas and jomos are providing meals for the whole sangha and most of us would think of nothing about the meals. It is not right to take them for granted and expect everything to be just provided for us and that we deserve to be served by others, just as explained in the *Introduction to the Middle Way* where a non-Buddhist self is defined as the one who only experiences enjoyments and is devoid of all activities.

Therefore, everyone, especially those who are in positions of authority, should seriously consider how they can provide services to the sangha. If they are elected to be in a leadership position yet

do nothing but only pick on others' faults, they will be the type of leaders described in Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*:

*When named to a high position,  
One rarely knows what to do.  
Though one has eyes to see others,  
A mirror is required to see oneself.*

Here I am using Larung Gar as an example. The fact is wherever we live, we should become part of the local community and work to provide convenience and bring benefit to the community. This way, we will be easily accepted by others and live happily among them. If we cannot contribute or provide any positive change, we should at least not bring any damage. Otherwise, if we only enjoy others' services but not bring any benefit to them in return, and even worse, cause trouble to them, then we would not be happy in the end. Please bear this in mind.

## SIKSANANDA AND BUDDHISM IN XINJIANG

As mentioned in the previous session, the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* was translated by the prominent translator Siksanda, who was from the Kingdom of Khotan, today an oasis town in Xinjiang, China. Similar to what Kumarajiva left in his relics, Siksanda's tongue remained intact after his cremation, which is regarded as a proof that all his translations of Buddhist scriptures were accurate and elegant.

Although historical records of Siksanda are scant, what can be certain is that he lived in the time when Buddhism was flourishing and he translated many highly valued scriptures including the 80-volume *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Many extremely precious Mahayana sutras such as the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* were brought to China during that period of time by great translators like Siksanda.



Siksananda can be said as a great “Manifested Lotswa”, which means in Tibetan Buddhism a translator who had made extraordinary contributions to Buddhism. Previous Tibetan masters would often pay homage to panditas and lotsawas before giving teachings. Khenpo Depa and many other khenpos of his time used to recall the kindness of great lotsawas during their teachings—how these lotsawas sought for the Dharma scriptures in India and then translated them into Tibetan.

According to historical records, Buddhism used to thrive in the kingdoms within the Xinjiang region, such as the Kingdom of Khotan and the Kingdom of Kucha. In *A Record of Buddhist Countries* written by Master Faxian, the renowned Buddhist master from the Eastern Jin Dynasty in the 4th century who had been travelling to India to seek the Dharma, it was recorded that there were tens of thousands of monastics in the Kingdom of Khotan when he visited there: Throughout the country the houses of the people stood apart like separate stars, and each family had a small stupa reared in front of its door. The smallest stupa might be twenty cubits high, or rather more, in which the Khotan people made rooms for travelling monks from all quarters with whatever stuff they needed.

The scene in Khotan at that time was very similar to that in the Tibetan region, where from ancient times up to now, it has been a

general practice that every household has a shrine room in which the representations of the Three Jewels—the Buddha statues, the Dharma scriptures and the Buddhist stupas—are placed. Although few of the younger generations nowadays are following the practice, the majority of Tibetans have kept this tradition.

However, with the invasion of the Islamic kingdoms across Xinjiang beginning around 9th century in the Song Dynasty, Buddhism began to diminish slowly and eventually after a few hundred years, the whole regions was Islamized and Buddhism completely vanished in the Ming Dynasty in the 16th century.

As a Buddhist, we should be aware of such history. Being aware of the history doesn't mean we should fight against someone. It means that we should develop a sense of what is happening or going to happen, instead of remaining blind and indifferent and doing nothing until the danger is upon us. Understanding that all sentient beings had been our parents in previous lifetimes, Buddhist followers practice loving-kindness and compassion to every person. Yet some people might think Buddhists are incapable of response and thus would indiscriminately wage conflicts with Buddhism just to pursue their self-interests.

Throughout history, there were many tyrants who launched wars for their own benefits, disregarding the welfare of ordinary people.

It is the same for some religious leaders. One of the most famous examples is the Crusades, a series of holy wars between Christians and Muslims that went on for about two hundred years. War is violent and a source of great suffering, yet the Crusades were called holy wars and the leaders who launched them preached to the crusaders that the best way to serve their God and to receive everlasting glory would be to pledge their lives to serve in the holy war.

There are extremist groups today who would commit horrible acts in the name of religion to achieve their goals. This is what makes theocracy something that is feared in many countries. Under a theocracy, extremists could use religion as a guise to achieve their political ambitions. Examples of individuals inflicting harm on countless innocent people in the name of religion can be found throughout history. While they may justify their harmful actions in the name of love and benevolence, in actuality they are motivated by their self-interests. Seeing the detrimental impact brought by religions to humanity, it is understandable that many people today choose not to be religious, and some even detest religion.

No matter how one may call it, be it a holy war or just a war, nothing can justify the deaths it brings. And no matter how many flower wreaths are offered, such deaths cannot be glorified. In Buddhism, however, any war would be waged using the sword of

compassion to cut through the root of ignorance. As it is said in the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*,

*Subduers see disturbing emotions as  
The enemy, not the person who has them.*

Not a single being is seen as an enemy by Buddha Shakyamuni. The real enemies in Buddhism that Dharma practitioners fight against are the 84,000 kinds of afflictions in sentient beings' minds, not the sentient beings who are bound by these mental afflictions. The wrathful forms of buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as the fierce signs and weapons in their hands are only the symbols for the elimination of the darkness of ignorance in the minds of all sentient beings and not meant to inflict actual harms to any sentient being.

## **Develop Rational Faith in Buddhism**

As Buddhist followers, we should understand the uniqueness and supremeness of Buddhist teaching. There are thousands of religions in the world and each religion deems its doctrine to be the best. It is almost impossible for anyone to discern the doctrines of different religions without sufficient study and knowledge. Yet, one may learn much about a religion by observing its founder since he is the most important figure of a given religion. Some

religions are guided by celestial beings, while some by humans. Some founders did not pass down any doctrine, while some did so.

The founder of Buddhism is Shakyamuni Buddha. We can examine his teachings through three types of investigation or three types of valid cognition, which are direct perception for manifest phenomena, inference for hidden phenomena, and valid scriptures for very hidden phenomena, to see if there is any theoretical irrationality within the teachings. If through such examinations you still find the Buddha's teaching rational and acceptable, you can take refuge in the Buddha, in his teachings, the Dharma, and in his followers, the Sangha. This is the right attitude to follow a religion. If you are following Buddhism just because others around you are, then it is just blind faith.

During the Cultural Revolution, many people relinquished their Buddhist beliefs while others did not. Those who upheld their beliefs during such difficult times had generated unwavering conviction in the Buddha through their in-depth study and practice. Yet, those who hadn't developed such a firm conviction would readily abandon their beliefs when threatened. It's likely that they did not really understand the differences between Shakyamuni Buddha and the God because they felt both were inconceivable. They may have just followed others who claimed that "Shakyamuni

Buddha is good”, “Padmasambhava is very good”, “Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara are good”.

Therefore, it is essential that we develop a rational faith towards the Buddha and his teachings through listening and contemplating. For instance, through learning the *Commentary on Valid Cognition*, we can see that the Buddha is the omniscient one endowed with valid perception. When we start to learn Buddhism, the first step is to listen to the teaching from a Dharma teacher, then we need to review the text and contemplate on its meaning. We should examine the teaching rigorously with scientific investigation, theoretical inference, or personal experience to see if it is trustworthy or not. After examining the teaching on our own, we can then come to our own conclusion that Shakyamuni Buddha is truly great and he is omniscient in both the conventional and ultimate truths of all phenomena.

In general, there are two types of truths regarding all phenomena, the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. The conventional truth concerns the objects of our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, and can understand through ordinary perceptions, whereas the ultimate truth is not the object of ordinary perceptions, but transcends the dualistic conception. For many great scientists and scholars in the world, such as Einstein, Newton, and Aristotle, they were only well versed in certain fields of worldly knowledge

and revealed part of the conventional truth. None of them had ever realized the pervasive principle of dependent origination or the ultimate truth of emptiness. Their understanding towards emptiness is not even comparable to the realization of an arhat.

Through this type of analysis, we can clearly see that except for the Buddha, neither scientists nor other religious leaders have ever expounded on the ultimate truth of all phenomena. If we ever want to realize the ultimate truth, we have to rely on the Buddha's teaching. Even if we have doubts towards Buddhism, these doubts can be dispelled through our observation on the profound and unique philosophy of emptiness. As it says in the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*,

*Whoever doubts what the Buddha said,  
About that which is hidden,  
Should rely on emptiness  
And gain conviction in him alone.*

It means that if anyone has any doubt in the profound teachings of the Buddha, including the existence of reincarnation, the infallible law of causality, the inconceivable merit of generosity, as well as the subtle observation of discipline and patience, a clear understanding of emptiness would help clarify the doubt and cultivate conviction.

## THE TATHAGATA'S LIGHT AND SOUND

**At that time, the Tathagata smiled and emitted hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of clouds of great light. There were clouds of light of great perfect completeness, clouds of light of great kindness and compassion, clouds of light of great wisdom, clouds of light of great prajna, clouds of light of great samadhi, clouds of light of great auspiciousness, clouds of light of great merit, clouds of light of great virtue, clouds of light of great refuge, and clouds of light of great praise.**

At that time, the Buddha smiled and emitted numerous clouds of light. In many sutras, the Buddha was described to emit great light from the protuberance of his head, from the middle between his eyebrow, from his heart, or from his entire body. Here it is not clear what the origins were for the light. Nonetheless, whatever the Buddha did, whether it be a smile or any other action, it would





not be meaningless. In the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middles Way*, it says,

*Not a single movement of Buddhas  
Is without reason; even their breathing  
Is exclusively for  
The benefit of sentient beings.*

The word “cloud” in the text has the same meaning as in the phrase of *Offering Clouds of Samantabhadra*, indicating massive or plenty of. Offering clouds means a great deal of offering that pervades the whole space, like clouds pervading the entire sky. Here clouds of great light can be explained both in the tantric way and the way

of the common vehicle. In Tantrayana, it can be interpreted as the inconceivable luminosity of the nature of the mind, while in the common vehicle, the numerous clouds of great light emitted by the Buddha can be understood as a way to dispel the darkness of ignorance in the minds of sentient beings.

So each of the clouds of light can be explained from different aspects. For instance, “clouds of light of great perfect completeness” suggests that the Buddha has perfected the activity of benefiting oneself and others. I will not explain them one by one because many Dharma masters in Han Buddhism have annotated these lights according to their own understanding, such as the great master Ouyi Zhixu in the Ming Dynasty.

Some Dharma friends attach great importance to light and often exclaim when they see a rainbow or something radiant. If you really fancy light, you can find all types of light in big cities, but none of them is the light mentioned here in the text. Here the noble qualities of the Buddha, such as his compassion, wisdom, prajna, and auspiciousness are what were manifested as great light.

In some situations, the light of the Buddha can be seen directly. For example, when you feel blessed from making a pilgrimage to a holy mountain, very possibly you will see some auspicious signs appearing externally. But in most cases, the light of the Buddha

cannot be seen directly. For instance, when the strength of love, compassion, joy or impartiality arises in your mind, or when you attain certain level of wisdom and samadhi, it is the light of the Buddha illuminating your mind, even though it cannot be seen by the naked eyes. In whichever case, the light of the Buddha equally shines upon every sentient being at all times.

**After emitting an inexpressible [number of] clouds of light such as these, he furthermore gave forth various sublime, wonderful sounds. There was the sound of perfection of giving, the sound of perfection of morality, the sound of perfection of patience, the sound of perfection of diligence, the sound of perfection of meditation, the sound of perfection of prajna, the sound of kindness and compassion, the sound of joy and equanimity, the sound of liberation, the sound of no-outflows, the sound of wisdom, the sound of great wisdom, the sound of the lion's roar, the sound of the great lion's roar, the sound of cloud thunder, and the sound of great cloud thunder.**

After emitting countless light, the Buddha then released various wondrous, subtle and pleasant sounds. One can imagine the scene as a kind of modern musical light show. When the Buddha was about to turn the Wheel of Dharma, he first emitted great light and then gave forth different sounds. Such sounds may not necessarily



be the sound of a conch shell or the like that we can hear. They have a broad spectrum that covers six paramitas, four immeasurables, and the realization of ultimate truth, etc. Those who are fortunate enough to hear can be blessed by any of these sounds which would raise the corresponding quality in their minds. For example, when the Buddha gave forth the sound of perfection of meditation or the sound of perfection of prajna, the concentration or wisdom would increase in the listeners' minds. This is one method the Buddha used to benefit sentient beings.

When some people hear a particular kind of sound, it can generate both mundane and transmundane noble qualities. In 1986, the second year after I came to Larung Gar, His Holiness Jigme

Phuntsok Rinpoche decided to visit a great number of monasteries mainly in the Kham region, with the purpose of encouraging those who wanted to go with him to Mount Wutai for pilgrimage in the following year to recite Manjushri's mantra 100 million times. In the way, His Holiness said, an auspicious origination to spread the Dharma could be created.

The cars His Holiness rode during this trip were not of luxury, sometimes it was only a truck and the best was only a Beijing Jeep. Regardless of whatever vehicle His Holiness rode in, he would have a loudspeaker installed on the top of it playing Tsangyang Gyatso's songs and many different mantras, such as Guru Rinpoche's mantra and the Mani mantra. These sounds created amazingly great auspiciousness for the trip.

We visited more than 70 monasteries around the region and passed through places such as Drango, Garze, Dawu, Nyagrong, Dartsedo, and Rongtrak. Since restrictions to religions were somewhat relaxed at that time, whenever we passed a village or a town, we would turn the volume of the speaker to the maximum level and the sound attracted many people. Especially when we passed county townships, most of the people nearby would come out upon hearing the sound and filled the streets. I was newly ordained at that time and was very curious and excited to see the gathering big crowds.

However, people's responses toward the sound were different. Most people were touched by the sound of mantras and joined their palms together with faith, and with tears welling up in their eyes. Others were attracted by the big sound out of curiosity and came out to see what happened. A few people were annoyed by the big sound and became a bit unfriendly towards us. Irrespective of the response, although I had no clue at that time, His Holiness said that virtuous roots were planted in those who heard the sound.

Because sentient beings' propensities are so different—some can resonate with sound easily, some with beautiful sceneries, buddhas and bodhisattvas would manifest in different forms and apply their skillful means to bring sentient beings to the path of liberation. We used to beat drums, blow conch shell and play other Dharma instruments before and after Dharma class. We now just blow conch shell and recite Guru Rinpoche's mantra. These are all necessary and skillful means to plant virtuous seeds in beings who hear the sound.

## ATTENDEES OF THE DHARMA ASSEMBLY

After he had given forth an inexpressibly-inexpressible [number of] sounds such as these, from the saha world and other lands, measureless millions of devas, nagas, ghosts, and spirits also assembled in the palace of the Trayastrimsa Heaven. They were from the Heaven of the Four Deva Kings, the Trayastrimsa Heaven, the Suyama Heaven, the Tusita Heaven, the Heaven of Delight in Transformations, the Heaven of Mastery over Others' Transformations, the Heaven of Brahma's Assembly, the Heaven of Brahma's Ministers, the Great Brahma Heaven, the Heaven of Limited Light, the Heaven of Measureless Light, the Light-Sound Heaven, the Heaven of Limited Purity, the Heaven of Measureless Purity, the Heaven of Universal Purity, the Heaven of Birth of Merit, the Heaven of Love of Merit, the Heaven of Abundant Results, the Heaven of No Perception, the Heaven of No Affliction, the Heaven of No Heat [from affliction], the Heaven of Good Sight, the Heaven of Good Manifestation, the Ultimate

**Form Heaven, the Mahesvara Heaven, and so forth, up to the Heaven of the State of Neither-Perception-nor-Non-Perception. All the multitudes of devas, nagas, ghosts, and spirits came and assembled there.**



After the Buddha made all these miraculous demonstrations, countless devas, nagas, ghosts and spirits from the Saha world and other lands all gathered in the palace of the Trayastrimsa Heaven. Devas, or the celestial beings, dwell in the various heavens belonging to the desire realm, the form realm and the formless realm. If you want to have a more detailed study, all these heavens in the three realms are explained extensively in the *Treasury of*



*Abhidharma, the Wish Fulfilling Treasury and the Yogacarabhumi Shastra.*

Basically, in the desire realm there are six heavens: the Heaven of the Four Deva Kings, the Trayastrimsa Heaven, the Suyama Heaven, the Tusita Heaven, the Heaven of Delight in Transformations, the Heaven of Mastery over Others' Transformations. It's fairly easy for celestial beings in these heavens to come to the Trayastrimsa Heaven to attend the teaching.

The form realm has four levels of dhyana, and within each dhyana there are different heavens. The Heaven of Brahma's Assembly, the Heaven of Brahma's Ministers, the Great Brahma Heaven are found in the first dhyana. The Heaven of Limited Light, the Heaven of Measureless Light, the Light-Sound Heaven are in the second dhyana. The Heaven of Limited Purity, the Heaven of Measureless Purity, the Heaven of Universal Purity are in the third dhyana. The fourth dhyana has eight heavens, the first three are the abodes for ordinary celestial beings, and noble enlightened beings live in the latter five. The first three are the Heaven of Birth of Merit, the Heaven of Love of Merit, the Heaven of Abundant Results. The Heaven of No Perception is part of the Heaven of Abundant Results. It is the place where people, usually non-Buddhist practitioners, who constantly practice worldly meditation would take rebirth. The latter five heavens, i.e., the Heaven of No Affliction, the Heaven

of No Heat, the Heaven of Good Sight, the Heaven of Good Manifestation, and the Ultimate Form Heaven are heavens where noble beings live. The Mahesvara Heaven belongs to the Ultimate Form Heaven, and in this heaven dwells Mahesvara, the Deva King of the Ultimate Form Heaven.

Then there are the four heavens of the formless realm. They are the Heaven of the State of Infinite Space, the Heaven of the State of Infinite Consciousness, the Heaven of the State of Nothing Whatever, and the Heaven of the State of Neither-Perception-nor-Non-Perception. The Heaven of the State of Neither-Perception-nor-Non-Perception, or the Peak of Existence, is the highest existence of the three realms.

The locations of the four heavens of the formless realm vary in different scriptures. In the *Wish Fulfilling Treasury*, the omniscient Longchenpa quoted many scriptures and elaborated extensively on the topic of the formless realm. According to his analysis, celestial beings in the formless realm actually do have subtle forms, and just because their forms are too subtle, they are said to be formless. Based on this fact, as Longchenpa explained, the four heavens of the formless realm are located on top of the form realm. However, in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, it says beings of the formless realm have no form at all, so there is not a particular location for the formless realm. Wherever a being who attains the samadhi of the

formless realm perishes, he will take rebirth in the formless realm there and then and will enter into meditative concentration for tens of thousands of great kalpas at that place. Therefore, the place where the being dies is the location of the formless realm.

Recently I have been absorbed in the translation of the *Wish Fulfilling Treasury*, and I find the omniscient Longchenpa is truly knowledgeable, capable of introducing the expansive Buddhist view of cosmology while also elaborating in detail the non-Buddhist viewpoints as well. I have spent many days to understand and translate these viewpoints and sometimes I could almost believe that he was teaching the non-Buddhist viewpoints instead of Buddhism.

Because he introduced both Buddhist and non-Buddhist viewpoints in such a broad way, great masters in the past attached great importance to this treatise. Although I received its oral transmission and read it once after I just came to Larung Gar, I have never studied it formally. Later, I decided to translate Longchenpa's *Seven Treasuries* into Chinese and the *Wish Fulfilling Treasury* is one of them. It is in two big volumes and the translation of the first volume has basically been completed. I am working on the second volume now and the teaching on formless realm is in the first volume.

**Furthermore, from other lands and the saha world, sea spirits, river spirits, stream spirits, tree spirits, mountain spirits, earth spirits, brook-and-marsh spirits, seedling-and-crop spirits, day spirits, night spirits, space spirits, heaven spirits, food-and-drink spirits, grass-and-wood spirits—spirits such as these all came and assembled there.**

In Buddhism, all types of ghosts and spirits are clearly described and explained. In seas there are sea spirits and in rivers there are river spirits. That is why whenever the spirit of a river or a sea is offended, accidents would probably happen to people who are crossing it. Brook-and-marsh sometimes refers to lakes. Space spirits are living in the space, and heaven spirits abide in the celestial world. Food-and-drink spirits are a type of fire spirits. Cookstove spirits or kitchen spirits belong to food-and-drink spirits, who would be offended if there are bad odors from the stove.

There are many beings in this world that we can not see with our eyes or hear with our ears but we cannot simply deny their existence. Given the pervasive influence of materialism, many do not believe the existence of ghosts and spirits. But when they are caught by them, they will have to admit their existence. I know an officer who did not believe in anything supernatural, but after he experienced something related to the evil spirits, he admitted their existence. A number of western politicians did not believe

in supernatural phenomena either but they admit later in their biographies the existence of ghosts and spirits when they described their personal experience.

Many things just do not make sense if we explain them only with the view of materialism. For example, when mountain spirits, earth spirits or road spirits are not happy, they will make fun of people and might even inflict harm on whoever passes by, whereas when we please them by making smoke offering to them, they would provide convenience for us. As a matter of fact, making smoke offering to spirits and ghosts can bring them real benefits because some of them are in the form of hungry ghosts who are really miserable.

**Furthermore, from other lands and the saha world, great ghost kings known as Ghost King Evil Eyes, Ghost King Consuming Blood, Ghost King Consuming Vital Energy, Ghost King Consuming Fetuses and Eggs, Ghost King Spreading Diseases, Ghost King Controlling Poisons, Ghost King Kindhearted, Ghost King Merit and Benefit, Ghost King Great Love and Respect—ghost kings such as these all came and assembled there.**

The various spirits and ghost kings who came to the assembly were introduced. The Ghost King Consuming Blood often sucks the blood of sentient beings, and Ghost King Consuming Vital Energy



consumes sentient beings' energy. Some people always look pale and are sick all the time, which might suggest that their energy has been consumed by this kind of ghost. Ghost King Consuming Fetuses and Eggs lives on eating fetuses and eggs, and sometimes the death of a baby in the womb can be caused by this kind of ghost. Also, negative actions from people will displease the Ghost King Spreading Diseases who will consequently spread diseases such as various flus and plagues around the world. The current coronavirus pandemic could be attributed to this kind of ghost.

People who are addicted to taking drugs are possibly controlled by the Ghost King Controlling Poisons. The large number of young people who use drugs legally or otherwise are controlled by these

kind of ghosts. They will suffer terribly and gradually lose their freedom and self-control.

Ghost King Kindhearted has a kind heart and always takes care of sentient beings by providing them with things that they enjoy, so not all ghosts are evil. I sometimes feel some Asuras, Rakshas and Yakshas are better than human beings. When you get to know them, you will find they are kindhearted and filled with compassion. I have many good friends who are among them. (Audience laughing)

All in all, it is important to remember that by reciting the name of Ksitigarbha, all these ghosts and spirits can be subdued and become our friends.

# **Lecture Three**

**July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020**



I'd like to stress two points before today's teaching on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. I'm glad to know that a lot of people are able to receive this teaching through various media platforms and are also greatly inspired by this teaching. One thing I want to remind everyone is that once you start listening to it, by all means try not to miss any session. If for some reasons you have to miss a session, it would be best to listen to the recorded lesson the following day. In doing so, you would create an auspicious condition for yourself to be able to receive the Dharma teaching completely and successfully in all your future lifetimes. If you can listen to a teaching from beginning to end without disruption, this teaching will bring you positive influence in all your lifetimes. Therefore, it's important to be diligent in receiving any Dharma teaching and complete all sessions of a given teaching.

Secondly, while studying the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, do not settle for superficial understanding but instead you should really engage in it and strive to gain familiarity with all the teachings within this sutra and thus allow you to receive immense benefits. While everyone may spend the same amount time listening to this teaching, those who really engage deeply into the study will benefit way more than those who do not. Although some of you may have learnt this sutra before, by and large, one needs to study a scripture repeatedly in order to be well-versed in its contents so that one would be able to

apply it in practical use. That is why here at Larung Gar, we have monastic teachers teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *The Way of the Bodhisattva* every year. After repeated studies, a student would eventually assimilate these teachings into their beings and apply them in practice.

Given that there are thirteen chapters in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, we need to be really familiar with the content of each chapter after receiving the teaching. For instance, if one were to be asked what the chapter *Spiritual Penetration in the Trayastrimsa Heaven* talks about and why the Buddha preached the Dharma to his mother, one should have a clear answer. Also, in the twelfth chapter, *The Benefits from Seeing and Hearing*, it explains the inconceivable benefits of Ksitigarbha, whoever hears the name of Ksitigarbha, sees the image of Ksitigarbha, touches the statue of Ksitigarbha or even recalls Ksitigarbha in one's mind will all gain inconceivable merits. In the last chapter *Entrusting Humans and Devas*, the Buddha entrusted all stubborn and obdurate beings in this degenerate age to Ksitigarbha. This should convince us to seek to develop a strong conviction on how crucial it is for us modern people to pray to this great bodhisattva so that we can be saved from the lower realms.

I felt so elated and joyful when translating these teachings. Normally the working staff in a company would try to build a good relationship with their leader so that it would be more convenient

for them to get things done. The same goes to our Dharma practice. If we can establish a good connection with Ksitigarbha by learning this sutra, it will create favorable conditions for our Dharma practice and thus bring much auspiciousness into other aspects of our lives.

## EFFICACY STORY: A KSITIGARBHA IMAGE ON A WALKING STICK

As I had mentioned in the previous lecture, I translated some efficacy stories of Ksitigarbha into Tibetan. I believe their Tibetan versions will be helpful to future beings to generate faith towards Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Now I'd like to share such a story from *The Brief Records of Efficacy of the Three Jewels*.

In the Tang Dynasty a man whose family name was Liu found a walking stick on his way to his neighbor's home. On the top of the stick was carved an image but he had no idea whose image that was. He took it back home, stuck it in the wall of his house, and seldom thought of it for many years. Later he died of an illness but his chest remained warm, so his family did not bury him straightaway. After one day and two nights, he revived and started crying. When his family asked him what happened, he told them what he had experienced while in the bardo.

He said, after death he was taken to the Lord of Death who was ferocious and ready to sentence him, and then there came a monk who was plain looking, even a little unsightly. Seeing the monk, the Lord of Death came off his throne, prostrated to him and asked, "Great Master, what brings you here?" The monk replied, "The man you have here is my benefactor, I have come to rescue him." The Lord of Death told the monk, "This person's death is destined by his karma and that is irreversible, so how can you save him?" The monk said, "When I was in the Trayastrimsa Heaven, Shakyamuni Buddha had entrusted all sentient beings including those with immutable karma to me, so how can I abandon Liu and leave him alone?"

Hearing this, the Lord of Death said, "Honored one, your determination is as unshakable as the Vajra Mount, I will release him." Then the monk appeared pleased and took Liu by hand and led him away. When the monk sent Liu back to the previous world and was ready to leave, Liu asked, "Noble man, who are you?" "I'm Ksitigarbha. You had taken a walking stick home with my image carved on it and stuck it in the wall of your house. I've been remembering the kindness you do to me." The monk replied and then disappeared suddenly.

Recognizing that he was saved by Ksitigarbha and yet he had never treated Ksitigarbha's image on the stick with due respect, Liu felt

deep remorse. Therefore, he requested a sculptor to restore the image of Ksitigarbha on the top of the stick and dignified it with colors and placed it in his house which he had built into a shrine specially for Ksitigarbha.

As a rule, immutable karma cannot be averted and one has to accept its consequences. But due to the special connection to Ksitigarbha, sentient beings, particularly in the degenerate age, can be freed from their immutable karma and do not have to bear its resultant suffering. In the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha entrusted Jambudvipa sentient beings to Ksitigarbha three times, asking him to save these beings with evil karma from falling into the lower realms. As such, the Buddha appeared to have granted Ksitigarbha special power and blessings that enable him to avert immutable karma. The mantra named *Ksitigarbha Mantra to Remove Fixed Karma* is also very powerful in averting immutable karma.

We can draw three observations from this story. First, do not discriminate based on the appearance of a Ksitigarbha statue or image, because even an unsightly-looking image is an object of veneration and offering and should be enshrined reverently. Second, relying upon the power of Ksitigarbha's mighty blessing, some of our seriously negative karma that is immutable can indeed be averted and we will thus not fall into the lower realms. Recently some Dharma friends, as they are studying *Fifty Stanzas on Following*

*a Teacher*, told me, “I had argued with my guru before so very likely I will take rebirth in the lower realms after death. I am hopeless now.” Actually, by praying to Ksitigarbha and relying on his blessing, such worries can be pacified. Third, even though Liu only took the Ksitigarbha image home and did not make any offering or show respect to it, he was well treated as a benefactor and rescued by Ksitigarbha. If we make offering and pray to Ksitigarbha with great respect and devotion, the merit generated will be inconceivably greater. These three observations should further enhance our enthusiasm and faith in this sutra and in the practice of Ksitigarbha.

Developing deep faith and having insight in certain Dharma practices is very important to each and every Buddhist practitioner, monastic and lay alike. Of course, the most ideal situation is that you have faith and personal experience in all kinds of Dharma practices, whether it be renunciation, bodhicitta, impermanence, emptiness or compassion. However, this would happen only to the minority of practitioners who have keen faculty and great merit. Nonetheless, even if you cannot gain personal experience in every practice, you should at least try to develop deep and unwavering faith in one or two specific practices. Such faith will support your deep engagement into the practice and allow you to obtain accomplishments in your Dharma practice. For instance, if

you are very interested in the teaching of impermanence and have a strong conviction that this teaching can transform your mind, then your confidence and enthusiasm will enable you to follow the practice of impermanence and make noticeable progress.

As personal capacities vary a lot from one to another, the practice that one person resonates with or feels affinity for may not be appropriate for another. Some practitioners find teachings on impermanence helpful; some find renunciation beneficial; some believe praying to Ksitigarbha is powerful; while still others think the Dzogchen teaching on non-duality is penetrating. Whatever Dharma practice it is, as long as you find it beneficial to you, you should engage it with deep contemplation and practice accordingly so that this Dharma practice would change your mindset and bring you great benefit, both worldly and transcendentally.

If you have no faith in any Dharma practice, you will not gain any personal experience nor any benefit from the Dharma even if you have been studying them for a long time. This is similar to those students who would fail a subject at school despite them having attended all the classes on the subject. The main reason for this is the lack of interest and passion. For those students who are interested in a particular subject such as physics, math or chemistry, even though they may not have scored high on the exams, they are



still bound to gain certain valuable knowledge from learning the subjects.

Without gaining any personal experience or insight into any Dharma practice, even those who remain in the sangha for a long time and learn the Dharma like everyone else will regress from the Dharma path when unfavorable conditions occur. Given that impermanence is the true reality of all phenomena, you cannot expect to remain in your present environment without it changing. At certain point in the future, very possibly you will find yourself living in a completely different environment with a lack of Buddhist views and behaviors and without any favorable condition whatsoever for your Dharma practice. By then, if you haven't yet gained any insight or personal experience into any practice, it is possible that you would abandon the learning and practice of the Dharma, or even worse, denigrate the Dharma.

During the Cultural Revolution, Buddhist followers, Tibetans and Han Chinese alike, were all forced to abandon their belief and to defame Buddhist teachings publicly such as admitting that the Three Jewels had no blessing, samsara did not exist, and there were no past or future lives. During the process, some people were very resolute in upholding their belief and would not abandon the Three Jewels under tough challenges even at the cost of their lives; some with neutral attitude neither supported nor opposed their

religion; whereas some recanted their faith willingly and even voluntarily gave the public talk of how superstitious Buddhism was.

I remember a public speech of this kind I attended in my hometown when I was a child herding yaks. One time I got my parents' permission to play and stay overnight at my aunt's home. On that night, the whole family was asked to come to a meeting where the keynote speaker was a man who had been a monastic. He talked about topics like how the Three Jewels had no value and Buddhism was superstition. Truth be told, I felt very uncomfortable and wanted to argue with him but my aunt pinched me really hard and stopped me, "Don't, it's dangerous." As far as I knew, he used to teach others about "good is rewarded with good and evil with evil" when he had been a monk. Ironically, it was from his mouth that the words of denigrating the principle of cause and effect came. He was very eloquent when he taught others about the karmic law but deep in his heart there was no sincere faith at all.

A lot of you here were neither born to the Buddhist faith nor grew up with the Dharma. Instead, you encountered the Dharma in your adulthood due to various reasons. Some entered the Dharma because their latent tendency of renunciation from previous lives awakened, and some because they accidentally had a fight with

others and wanted to be free from suffering. For these people, their faith is feeble and can easily be compromised under unfavorable circumstances. However, once one has gained a deep insight and developed a strong faith in the Dharma, then one will not easily abandon the Dharma path. Therefore, it's crucial for each and every practitioner to develop a deep-rooted view in the Dharma as a foundation of their faith.

## COUNTLESS BEINGS LIBERATED BY KSITIGARBHA

**At that time, Sakyamuni Buddha said to Manjusri, Dharma Prince, Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, “Look at all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, devas, nagas, ghosts, and spirits from this and other worlds, from this and other lands—those who come and assemble in the Trayastrimsa Heaven now. Do you know their number?”**

**Manjusri said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, even if I were to measure and fathom with the power of my spiritual penetration for a thousand kalpas, I would not be able to know it.”**

Here the two words “world” and “land” basically share the same meaning. In sutras it is quite common to use different words to express the same meaning. Since sentient beings possess different faculties and preferences, some understand better when using “world”, while some understand better when using “land”. This is



why similar words would appear together in sutras to express the same meaning.

Since so many beings came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven, the Buddha asked Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, the total number of the present beings. Actually as the omniscient one, the Buddha knew exactly how many beings there were. However, for the sake of encouraging others to desire the Dharma, or in order to dispel sentient beings' doubts, the Buddha himself sometimes took the initiative to ask questions.

As recorded in the biography of Manjushri or in many Mahayana sutras such as *The Array of Virtues of Manjushri's Buddha Realm*, this

great bodhisattva's miraculous power and wisdom is inconceivable and he is regarded as the one most supreme in wisdom. He had encouraged the one thousand buddhas of the Fortunate Kalpa to generate bodhicitta. But even if Manjushri were to measure and reckon the total number of all beings participating in the Dharma assembly with his inconceivable wisdom and miraculous power for a thousand kalpas, he would not be able to know it.

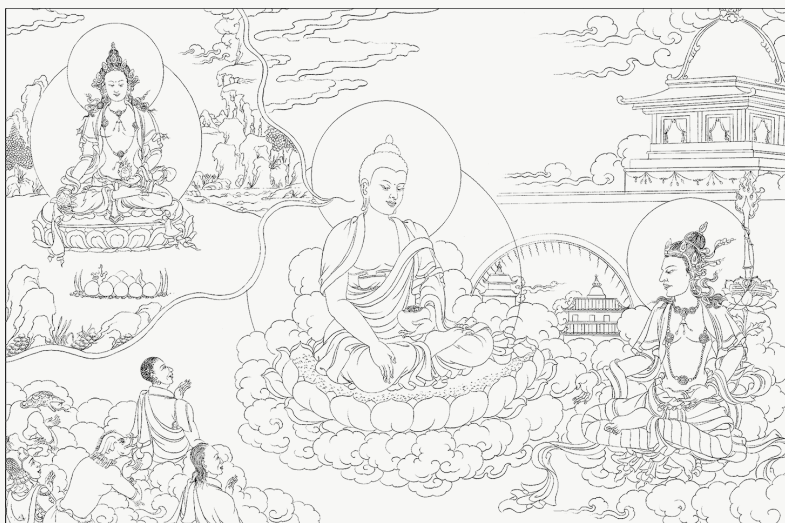
Normally when a big Dharma assembly takes place, as we see at Larung Gar, a huge crowd of people will gather together. Likewise, when the Buddha was going to give the teaching in the Trayastrimsa Heaven, the numbers in the crowd would be even more inconceivable, just as the situation described in *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, "In a single atom may I see as many pure realms as atoms in the universe, and in each realm, buddhas beyond all imagining." So in a single atom, there are realms as many as the number of atoms in the universe, and in each realm, there are unimaginably large number of buddhas, bodhisattvas and other beings. If by the power of Manjushri's non-dualistic wisdom it was difficult to reckon the number, it would be even more impossible for ordinary beings with their ordinary sense faculties and dualistic thinking to imagine such a scene and count the number of beings gathered there.

The realization of buddhas and bodhisattvas is inconceivable and unfathomable, so are many great masters' activities of spreading the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings. When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was holding the Great Dharma Assembly of Sukhavati at the entrance of the Laung Gar valley in 1993, there were hundreds of thousands of participants. Back then, despite the fact that communication was not so convenient, transportation was poor, and information was particularly hard to disseminate, still so many people participated in the Sukhavati assembly. When the proper causes and conditions align, inconceivable things can naturally happen. When I look at those photos taken at the assembly at that time, I am still astonished by the large crowd of people gathering in this remote valley more than two decades ago.

Indeed, when a great master or tertön is turning the Dharma Wheel, other than human beings whom we can see with our naked eyes, there are also various non-human beings in the Dharma assembly who are invisible to us, such as ghosts, spirits, gods, nagas, yakshas, and asuras. It has become a tradition for great masters to count the number of participants in a Dharma assembly higher than the actual number of the people present. For instance, if a hundred people participated, then the total number of attendees may be recorded as one thousand, indicating the extra non-human beings who are also present but invisible to us. If we don't do that, they

may become unhappy as they are not taken into consideration in the assembly.

**The Buddha told Manjusri, “As I see them through the Buddha eye, their number still cannot be counted fully. All these are beings who have been guided across, are being guided across, will be guided across [to the other shore], have been brought to attainment, are being brought to attainment, or will be brought to attainment by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva throughout many long kalpas.”**



Buddhism talks about five kinds of visions or five eyes: the eye of flesh, the divine eye, the wisdom eye, the Dharma eye, and the



Buddha eye. The Buddha eye is the primordial wisdom that knows all aspects—the relative and the ultimate truths—of all phenomena. Here Buddha Shakyamuni said that even by seeing the assembly through his Buddha eye that he was still unable to establish the exact number of all the beings present. We can imagine what an extraordinary and marvelous scene it was!

Of course, Buddha Shakyamuni is the venerable one who has perfected abandonment and realization, yet he still claimed that he couldn't count the number fully. The Buddha probably had intended to demonstrate and exalt the merit of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva because most beings gathered in the Trayastrimsa Heaven had a deep karmic affinity with Ksitigarbha: some had been liberated, some were liberating, some were about to be liberated by him; and some had been brought to attainment, some were being brought to attainment and some was about to be brought to attainment by him.

**Manjusri said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, in the past I have long cultivated roots of goodness and have attained unobstructed wisdom; therefore, when I hear what the Buddha says, I immediately believe and accept it. However, sravakas of small attainment, devas and nagas and others of the eight classes of beings, as well as living beings in the future—although hearing the sincere, truthful words of the Tathagata, will certainly harbor**

**doubts. Even if they receive these words most respectfully, they may still be unable to avoid slandering them. O World-Honored One, please speak in detail about what practices Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva cultivated and what vows he made during his causal states [of cultivation] that have enabled him to accomplish such inconceivable deeds.”**

As we’ve mentioned, Manjushri had encouraged the one thousand buddhas of the Fortunate Kalpa to generate bodhicitta, so we can roughly imagine how long he had been cultivating the virtuous roots in Mahayana practice. As a result, he had achieved extensive and profound wisdom without any obscuration and was thus able to understand and accept whatever the Buddha said. Unlike those hearers, devas and nagas and others of the eight classes of beings, as well as living beings in the future, he had no doubt at all about the fact spoken by the Buddha, that countless beings had such a deep connection with Ksitigarbha.

For Dharma teachings such as the principle of cause and effect or the true reality of emptiness, some people can believe and accept them straightaway and can easily assimilate them into their being, while others with strong wrong views are extremely obdurate and no matter how many times they are taught about the teachings, they simply would not accept them, or even worse, they may denigrate the Buddha and the Dharma with their biased and

prejudiced views. In the same manner, some may find Ksitigarbha's inconceivable wisdom and power truly impressive, feeling deeply inspired by such teaching, while others may refuse it as something beyond their common sense and view it as absolutely impossible.

What has caused such discrepancy that some people can cultivate right view and easily resonate with the Dharma while others would just stick to their wrong views and turn away from the Dharma? To some extent, this is due to our modern lifestyle and an education which focus more on materialism and utilitarianism, but more importantly, it is very much related to one's karmic tendency habituated from previous lifetimes.

I often think that I must have a virtuous connection with the Dharma in my previous lives because since my childhood in this life I have always been delighted in seeing sutras and buddha statues. I'm also very receptive to Mahayana teachings and can easily assimilate them, whether it is the teaching on emptiness or compassion and altruism. I have never questioned their reliability nor have I come up with any refutation toward them. As for what exactly such a connection is, probably only those with the supercognition of one's own and others' past lives can tell.

Back to the Manjushri case, because he had been well-trained in the Dharma through numerous lifetimes and gained supreme wisdom, he was able to accept whatever the Buddha said immediately and had no doubt whatsoever about it. However, for various other beings, particularly ordinary beings in this degenerate age, after hearing the Buddha's true words, although they may accept it for a while, due to their lack of cultivation in the profound Dharma from previous lives as well as the lack of wisdom cultivated through hearing, contemplating and meditating in this life, they would very likely still harbor doubts about the Buddha's vajra words and may abandon or even denigrate them when confronted with certain challenges. Here in the text, even some of the beings in the Trayastrimsa Heaven may still lack the capacity to fully believe Ksitigarbha's qualities, let alone ordinary beings in this degenerate age who are entrenched in the wrong views of eternalism and nihilism.

In order to address the doubts held by these beings, Manjushri asked the Buddha to speak about how Ksitigarbha accomplished such inconceivable deeds, how he generated supreme bodhicitta and made the vow that "until all hells are empty of sentient beings, I will not attain buddhahood", and how he practiced the six perfections.

Generating a firm belief in the Buddha and his valid cognition and his teaching which reveals the truth of all phenomena is the key to clearly answering these questions. This requires a rational and intelligent mind by which even if reasonable doubts arise toward what the Buddha had said, progress can still be made. But if we simply deny what the Buddha said out of our own blind and irrational judgment, then we are just holding onto a foolish wrong view. As is mentioned in *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*,

*Whoever doubts what the Buddha said,  
About that which is hidden  
Should rely on emptiness  
And gain conviction in him alone.*

Regardless of whether you have faith in the Dharma or not, if you have doubt about the profound teachings such as reincarnation and karmic law, you should first try to understand the Buddha's teaching on emptiness. This will help gain conviction in the Buddha. To observe and examine the philosophy of emptiness, you can rely on the four great logical arguments of the Middle Way, which are 1) an investigation of the cause: the Diamond Splinters; 2) an investigation of the result: refuting existent or non-existent results; 3) an investigation of the essential identity: neither one nor many; and 4) an investigation of all: the Great Interdependence. You may

also analyze the Buddha's teaching by applying suitable worldly knowledge. Through comprehensive discernment, you will find the teaching on emptiness is undeniably true and thus convince yourself of the reliability of the Buddha's teachings and that they are valid cognitions.

Although renowned scientists such as Einstein have made great contributions to human society in term of scientific development, they never approached the ultimate truth of emptiness and they became weak and vulnerable as they were confronted by age, sickness, and death. If they had had the opportunity to encounter the teaching of emptiness from Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti or Aryadeva, their wisdom would have become complete and thorough. I do not mean to encourage all scientists to enter the Dharma just because I am a Buddhist. My point is that if anyone, irrespective of one's nationality, social status, and religious belief, can thoroughly analyze and examine the Buddhist teaching on emptiness, one will discover the truth of everything behind their appearance. Then one will start to understand and accept the profound meaning of the Buddha's vajra speech.

## INCONCEIVABLE QUALITIES OF KSITIGARBHA

The Buddha told Manjusri, “As an analogy, suppose all the grasses, trees, thickets, forests, rice, sesame, bamboo, reeds, mountains, stones, and dust particles in the three thousandfold world system were each counted as a unit, and [for each unit] there would be a Ganges River; for each grain of sand in each of these Ganges Rivers, there would be a world; for each speck of dust in each of these worlds, there would be a kalpa; and for every speck of dust accumulated during each of these kalpas, there would be a kalpa. The time since Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva attained the Tenth Ground of Fruition [of Bodhisattva Development] is thousands of times greater than that of the above analogy. How much greater yet [is the time] since Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva was at the stages of sravaka and pratyekabuddha!

Here the Buddha used an analogy to describe how inconceivable Ksitigarbha’s great deeds were since the beginningless time. This

analogy may be a bit difficult to grasp because it is beyond our usual comprehension. Those who have learnt the *Treasury of Abhidharma* may know well about a third-order thousandfold world system. It consists of one thousand second-order thousandfold world systems, each of which in turn consists of one thousand worlds. Each of these worlds has at its center a Mount Meru surrounded by seven oceans and seven rings of golden mountains separating them. Outside are the four continents and eight subcontinents. This entire world is then surrounded by the outer iron mountains. So a third-order thousandfold world system, which is also called trichiliocosm, is a universe of a billion worlds.

The number of all objects in such a universe of a billion worlds, including grass, trees, bushes, rice, sesame, bamboos, reeds, mountains, stones, and even very fine specks of dust, must be inconceivably innumerable. Each of these objects is counted as a unit, imagine that each unit represents a Ganges River, then the number of all the objects is the number of all the Ganges Rivers. In each Ganges River there are countless grains of sand, each grain of sand in all those Ganges Rivers represents a world, then there must be countless number of worlds. In every world there are untold number of dust particles. Each dust particle represents the time duration of a kalpa, then the number of kalpas equals the number of dust particles in all those numerous worlds, so there must be



again innumerable kalpas. Within all those kalpas each of the dust particles that would accumulate also represents the time duration of a kalpa. In this way of calculation, we may have a rough idea of how unimaginable the number of all the kalpas is!

Although such time duration is unimaginably long, it is much shorter than one thousandth of the time since Ksitigarbha attained the tenth bhumi. If we elaborate this further, the amount of time he spent benefiting beings from his first to ninth bhumi, the time he spent benefiting beings when he was at the shravaka and pratyekabuddha stage, and the time when he was at the path of accumulation and the path of joining as an ordinary being would be even longer. So even with such an unimaginable analogy, it still cannot fully illustrate the time that Ksitigarbha had spent on benefiting sentient beings in the past, as well as the vast number of beings saved and liberated by him.

We actually don't have to do the math down to kalpas in the analogy, it would already be impossible even if we have to only count the number of grains of sand on the Ganges River. So in Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way* for example, when a bodhisattva's qualities are too many to count, nayutas and the number of small dust particles are used to describe them. To illustrate the qualities of a bodhisattva on the ninth bhumi, Chandrakirti says,

*And now on Perfect Intellect,  
All virtues mentioned earlier are theirs,  
Increased to equal all the grains of dust that fill  
Ten times a hundred thousand countless billion worlds.*

With respect to the profound Mahayana teachings, there are two types of persons who can accept them: those not so intelligent ones, because they find themselves incapable of discerning the teachings and just simply accept them, and those with very sharp intellectual faculties because they have a clear understanding of the Mahayana teachings on true reality. Those falling in between are the usual ones who would generate doubts. I am uncertain on how one would accept such an analogy and the time duration it conveys, but Ksitigarbha's vast activities of benefiting sentient beings over numerous kalpas are truly inconceivable and indescribable and definitely beyond our conceptual thoughts.

Here I want to further clarify Ksitigarbha's past lives. Some of you may know of Ksitigarbha as a former prince from Silla named Kim Gyo-gak who was born in 696 and died in 794. He got ordained and went to Mount Jiuhua for practice where he eventually attained enlightenment and where he left a well-preserved, dehydrated body. This is just one of the legends of Ksitigarbha's emanations. If one simply regards this as the whole story of Ksitigarbha's past lives then it is a very narrow and one-sided understanding about

him and contradicts what we will learn here in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*.

I'm not saying Kim Gyo-gak is not a real historic figure and his life story is not a true history. But our understanding towards Ksitigarbha should not be limited by this. Think about the inconceivable number of sentient beings Ksitigarbha had tamed over numerous lifetimes, it is such a huge activity that even tens of thousands of Kim Gyo-gak would not be able to accomplish. As such, it should be clear that Kim Gyo-gak was just one of Ksitigarbha's countless emanations.

Also, I'm not saying that Mount Jiuhua should not be Ksitigarbha's bodhimanda. When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, he planned to visit Mount Jiuhua to make pilgrimage to Ksitigarbha. In his first pilgrimage trip to the Han region in 1987, he only visited Mount Wutai where Manjushri resides and Mount Emei where Samantabhadra resides. In his second pilgrimage trip to the Han region in 1997, he planned to visit Mount Jizu where Maitreya entered into samadhi, as well as all the four sacred Buddhist mountains in the Han region. The trip was scheduled to first go to Mount Emei, then Mount Jizu, Mount Putuo where Avalokitesvara resides, Mount Jiuhua, and finally Mount Wutai. Unfortunately, after he visited the first three and was about to go to Mount Jiuhua, he could not get permission from the authorities

and the trip had to be cancelled. My main point here is that Mount Jiuhua is the bodhimanda of Ksitigarbha, but his life story did not stop at Kim Gyo-gak, and his activities of benefiting sentient beings are extremely vast and deep.

A lot of people think Manjushri is supreme in his wisdom and he is a great bodhisattva by the side of Buddha Shakyamuni, yet Ksitigarbha was only a monk at Mount Jiuhua with no additional biographies. This is not a well-grounded opinion of Ksitigarbha. I've translated the *Biographies of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas* into Chinese and its English version is also available. People can learn more about the inconceivable qualities and activities of these great bodhisattvas from this book.

Then Buddha Shakyamuni said the following about Ksitigarbha to Manjushri,

**“Manjusri, inconceivable are the awesome spiritual penetration and vows of this Bodhisattva. In the future if there are good men and good women who hear this Bodhisattva’s name, and they sing his praises, reverently gaze, pay obeisance, recite his name, make offerings, or if they paint, carve, sculpt, or use lacquer to make his image, these people will be reborn a hundred times in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas and will never fall into the lower realms.**

Here we learn why this great bodhisattva Ksitigarbha is so capable of accomplishing such magnificent deeds of liberating sentient beings. It is because of his inconceivably miraculous power and vast aspirations. This also explains why the enlightened activities of different great masters vary a great deal: some masters are very powerful at taming sentient beings and performing vast activities, while some masters appear much less powerful and their activities are not that impressive. Their ability to benefit sentient beings and the expanse of their activities have very much to do with their miraculous power and the vows they had made in the past.

Because Ksitigarbha possesses such inconceivable power and aspirations, if anyone upon hearing his name venerates him through any means such as reciting his name, praising him, paying homage to him, making prostration to him, making offerings to him with flower, incense and lamps, this person will be reborn in the Trayastrimsa Heaven one hundred times and never fall into the three lower realms—the hell realm, hungry ghost realm, and animal realm. The same goes to those who make his image, regardless of whether it is an image following the Han Buddhist tradition or Tibetan Buddhist tradition. By drawing colorful thangkas and pictures of Ksitigarbha, engraving his image on wooden boards or metals, making lacquered images of him, or sculpting his statues by using different materials whether it is bronze, gold, stone or

any other new materials, this person will certainly be freed from the lower realms.

Now that you know that the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is indeed a great sutra that can save numerous beings. I hope that if time permits that you will all recite this sutra as often as possible. There is a very short sutra called *Sutra of the Buddha Speaks of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva*. An early written manuscript of this sutra was discovered in the Dunhuang Caves and is now preserved in the National Library of France. This sutra says that anyone who recites the name of Ksitigarbha as well as his sutra is bound to take rebirth in Sukhavati. Hence it is essential for those who aspire to be reborn in Sukhavati to recite the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and the name of Ksitigarbha.

Reciting the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and the name of Ksitigarbha can help ensure that we do not fall into the lower realms. Because all of us have committed innumerable negative deeds in this life and our past lives from the beginningless time, we should be very concerned about falling into the lower realms after our death. If we do not have the ability to guarantee our rebirths in Sukhavati, or achieve the rainbow body in one lifetime, we should at least seek the assurance of not taking rebirth in the lower realms by relying on the power of Ksitigarbha. I think this is relevant to each and every practitioner because if one falls into the lower realms, one will not be able to get out for an infinitely long time. Even

after being liberated from there, one will inevitably be reborn as a person with disability such as blindness that brings numerous afflictions. Thus it is vital for us to recite the *Ksitigarbha sutra* and the name of Ksitigarbha as part of our fundamental practice.

His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had widely propagated the Ksitigarbha practice during his lifetime and put great importance in reciting the name of Ksitigarbha as well as held the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly every year. However, maybe because I was too young to think deeply back then, I simply thought whatever His Holiness said was important but never deeply contemplated why among the Eight Great Bodhisattvas only reciting the name of Ksitigarbha was emphasized. As His Holiness said, on the one hand, practicing Ksitigarbha was necessary for the sangha community at Larung Gar to avoid hardships such as the lack of food and clothing; but more importantly, it was His Holiness's foremost aspiration that everyone who had connected with him would be reborn in Sukhavati instead of falling into lower realms. It is only since this year when I started translating this sutra and understanding more thoroughly the merits of this sutra that I've gotten deeper understanding of His Holiness's words and why he actively propagated the practice of Ksitigarbha over all these years.

I followed and relied on His Holiness's guidance for 19 years and accompanied him many times on Dharma trips outside of Larung Gar. When I was at Larung Gar, I never missed a single session of his teachings. He would often give us additional instructions on specific issues before and after classes. Even though I truly believed in His Holiness's words, I never fully understood his instructions and thus failed to attach enough importance to them. Now as His Holiness is no longer in this world, the more I think about his words the more I feel that all he said conveyed profound meaning and had special and deep purpose for numerous beings.



# **Lecture Four**

**July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

## EFFICACY STORY: A GIRL SAVED HER MOTHER FROM THE HELL

We will continue with the study of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. It has a total of thirteen chapters and we now study the first chapter. Today we will talk about the story of a noble Brahman girl whose father was called Silou Shanxian and mother Yue Dili. In the collection of Successive Tripitaka, there's a book compiled by Monk Changjin from the Northern Song Dynasty called *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*. This is the earliest known book that introduced Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha with many stories about Ksitigarbha's help and support to those who pray to him. Among them there's one story related to the teaching today. In brief, it talks about a girl in the Tang Dynasty who sincerely prayed to Ksitigarbha for her mother and then Ksitigarbha saved her mother from the hell realm.

When the girl was young, her mother died. The girl was so saddened that she refused to eat and wanted to commit suicide. Then her

father consoled her saying, “Why are you not eating? Your mother has passed away but I am still with you. If you really miss your mother, get a Ksitigarbha statue and pray and make aspirations in front of it so that your mother would be freed from suffering and attain happiness.”

Then the father gave her some money to have a meter high Ksitigarbha statue made. When the statue was completed, she said, “I want to place this magnificent Ksitigarbha statue in my mother’s bedroom so that whenever I want to see my mother, I can enter her room and see this statue.” Her father was happy to vacate the room for the Ksitigarbha statue and she always made offerings to the statue and prostrated in front of it, wishing Ksitigarbha to save her mother from suffering.

One night the daughter had a dream in which a monk-like person told her, “Your mother was born into the hot hell after death. But since you are so filial to her and your devotion has really touched me, I’ve entered the hell and given her Dharma teachings and blessings. By doing so, she has taken rebirth to the celestial realm. I used to be a Brahman girl, my mother was called Yue Dili and my father Silou Shanxian. When my mother passed away, I realized that she had been seriously suffered in the hell. Being overwhelmed with grief, I generated bodhicitta deep in my heart and decided to help all living beings free from such suffering.” When she woke up

from the dream, she was so happy and became even more devoted to Ksitigarbha.

What has this story told us? We should know that when our parents pass away that it would be greatly beneficial to our deceased parents to erect Ksitigarbha statues in monasteries or any other place with desirable conditions. Many have no idea how they could help those who have died. Actually we can release the dead from suffering by making offerings and supplication to buddhas and bodhisattvas just as Ksitigarbha did in his previous life. We can get them connected with Ksitigarbha by printing related scriptures or making his statues, which will be of great benefits to the dead. As we have learned in the previous lecture, Ksitigarbha has been benefiting sentient beings over innumerable lifetimes and countless eons. If one makes offerings and pays homage to Ksitigarbha's image, one will never fall into the three lower realms.

## AN ELDER'S SON GENERATED BODHICITTA

Manjushri, in the distant past, an inexpressibly-inexpressible [number of] kalpas ago, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva was once the son of a great elder. At that time in the world there was a Buddha named Lion's Swift Rousing Perfect in Ten Thousand Practices Tathagata. The elder's son saw the Buddha's signs and characteristics of excellence, how he was adorned with thousands of merits. He therefore inquired of that Buddha what practices he had cultivated and what vows he had made to achieve these signs of excellence.

The Buddha told Manjushri, countless eons ago, Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha was the son of a great elder, a powerful and rich person. Probably because the Buddha wanted to emphasize that it was a long, long time ago, he repeated "inexpressible" twice here. It is



quite common in sutras that certain important messages are repeated twice, such as “countless and countless”, or “inconceivable and inconceivable”.

At that time, there was a buddha named Lion’s Swift Rousing Perfect in Ten Thousand Practices Tathagata who had a very dignified appearance. The son saw that the Buddha was adorned with thousands of merits, and replete with all excellent features, so he asked the Buddha what kind of vow he had made and what kind of practice he had cultivated to achieve such a magnificent appearance.

As a matter of fact, a magnificent appearance can easily attract and inspire others, especially young people. Before I got ordained, I knew a lama who was a chant leader. He was always wearing a bright yellow robe with quite loose sleeves and I found it so beautiful. I thought that after I got ordained, I would also be dressed like that. So right after I graduated from my college and was ready to become a monk, I bought a piece of yellow cloth and tailored a robe of exactly the same design. I told another senior lama that I would like to wear that robe on the first day I got ordained. As he was very kind to me, he told me directly that as a new monk that I had better not, otherwise people might think I was an arrogant man and mock me. Then he just gave me his old robes that wasn't even as beautiful and clean as my own new robe.

Here the elder's son was curious about how the Buddha had attained such excellent appearance. As explained in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* and also in *The Forest of Gem in the Garden of the Dharma*, all the Buddha's excellent marks and signs are not without any reason, but they were the result of his immense accumulation of countless merits. Also, the *Mahavibhasa Shastra* explains that the Buddha's physical body does not age and his magnificent appearance remains unchanged in his entire lifetime, even right before his parinirvana. For instance, the Buddha won't have many

wrinkles or grey hair as time goes by, because in his causal stage, the Buddha had already eliminated the cause of aging.

As ordinary beings, no matter how adorable and charming we are when we are young, we cannot escape the process of getting old. I suspect that this is why normal people think that the Buddha would also have the signs of age. For instance, in some movies and TV dramas, the Buddha in his later years is depicted as someone having a lot of wrinkles, walking unsteadily and looking frail. Actually, ordinary and enlightened beings, including both arhats and bodhisattvas, will get old, but the Buddha's physical body would never become like that.

In this modern society, people place great values on an individual's appearance. Sometimes a good-looking person would be more convincing than a logical speech. I used to disagree with some Buddhists' choice of cosmetic surgery or face-lift technique to improve their beauty. But later I figure that it is not a bad idea if everyone around them prefers to take into consideration their level of appearance. Buddhists should not remain stubborn and refuse any change in the world. Otherwise, they may not be welcomed or easily accepted by other communities. Or even worse, people may generate negative attitudes towards Buddhists.



I notice some Dharma practitioners who do not take care of their appearance. Their hair is always unkempt, and their clothes are untidy. If they are Mahasiddhas and have specific intentions, their untidy manner may be understandable. But as ordinary practitioners, they should maintain a good appearance and not displease others with their apathy. As a Tibetan saying goes, whether a person is good looking or not depends on his previous karma, but it is his own fault if he does not dress himself up. It means we don't have to go out of our way to please others, but we have to be considerate and follow the basic rules of conduct, including how we should dress and behave in public.

The Buddha had given very detailed teaching on monastic vows, and there are many specific rules for monks and nuns to discipline their behaviors. For instance, their shemdap (a maroon skirt only for monastics that is made using a patched piece of cloth) should not be worn too high or too low. All these rules serve a common purpose of not disturbing others and causing them to generate negative views towards monastics. As human beings living in society, we do need to act in conformity to social conventions and traditions.

Therefore, we should not hold the view that since Dharma practitioners are meant to dismantle all attachments that it is not necessary to have a good appearance. It is actually quite wrong.

Even if you have abandoned all your worldly concerns or have eliminated all your attachments, you need not make yourself look like the odd one in front of others. On the contrary, you should be more considerate and observe the local convention and cultural tradition to please others around you. This is required in all the three vows of Shrivakayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

**“Lion’s Swift Rousing Perfect in Ten Thousand Practices Tathagata told the elder’s son that if he wished to attain this [Buddha] body, he would have to guide all suffering beings across to liberation throughout a very long time.**

The Tathagata told the elder’s son that if he wanted to attain such excellent appearance, he would have to liberate all living beings from suffering throughout a long, long time. In other words, he must generate the mind of bodhicitta to guide all living beings to attain full enlightenment. Normally we would say that the Buddha had been practicing and benefiting living beings for three great asamkhyeyas of eons before he achieved buddhahood. Indeed, the time is much longer than we can imagine. It is through countless and countless eons that the Buddha had taken the bodhicitta vow and never stopped liberating living beings from the ocean of suffering that is samsara.

As ordinary people, we may occasionally help someone or engage in certain charitable activities for a few years. This is certainly far short of the activities of a bodhisattva. Very few people can devote their whole life to the wellbeing of others and the majority of people are exhausted by their selfish pursuit. For this reason, they cannot possess a healthy body or a peaceful mind but are frequently tortured by various pains and distresses. If we have inflicted harms on others for our own benefit, there's no doubts that as karmic retribution we will have to undertake the unbearable suffering in this or future life. On the other hand, if we are enjoying health, beauty, richness and freedom this life, it is the fully ripened effect of our virtuous deeds in benefiting others in many of our past lives.

**“Manjushri, the elder’s son hence made a vow, saying ‘From now on, throughout incalculable kalpas in the future, I will employ many skillful means for the sake of wrongdoing suffering beings in the six realms of existence, causing all of them to attain liberation; only after that will I myself attain Buddhahood.’ He made such a great vow in front of that Buddha. Now, hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of nayutas of inexpressible kalpas later, he is still a Bodhisattva.**

Upon hearing the Tathagata's reply, the elder's son hence made the great vow that from then on and for countless eons, he would use all possible means to relieve all beings from the suffering of samsara and that he would not become a buddha until all samsaric living beings have been liberated. That is why even after such a long time he is still a bodhisattva. We are all familiar with the famous aspiration made by Ksitigarbha, "As long as all hells have not been emptied, I will not attain buddhahood." Indeed, inconceivably countless eons ago, when he was the elder's son, he had made the great vow to liberate all sentient beings from the six realms of samsara.

Making such a great Mahayana aspiration is quite crucial for every one of us. Nobody can tell how long one can remain in this world as a human being. If one is alive for 70 or 80 years but never makes any wish to benefit others, it would really be a huge waste of this human existence. On the contrary, even if one only has a very short life span but has made full use of his human body to generate the mind of bodhicitta, his life would be far more meaningful than the previous one. In *Collection of Essence of All Sutras*, a treatise compiled by the great monk Dao Shi in the Tang Dynasty, it is said,

*Those who have a lifespan of one hundred years,  
While never make any virtuous wish*

*Are not as good as those who live only for one day,  
But make the four great vows.*

The four great vows are held in high esteem in Han Buddhism, as they express the aspiration of bodhicitta. They are:

*Living beings are incalculable, I vow to liberate them all.*

*Afflictions are infinite, I vow to extinguish them all.*

*The Dharma teachings are innumerable, I vow to master them all.*

*The Buddha path is unsurpassable, I vow to achieve it.*

So it was in that previous life before the Tathagata that Ksitigarbha made the great aspiration of bodhicitta and has never since stopped from benefiting and enlightening living beings in samsara. It is of great benefit for us to frequently pray to Ksitigarbha for instance by chanting his name so that natural disasters such as flood, fire, as well as human diseases, pandemics can be all pacified.

In *Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions*, the Buddha says that Ksitigarbha “spends extraordinary efforts in guiding and benefiting sentient beings in the age of five degenerations by virtue of his fundamental vows as well as those sentient beings’ karmic connection with him.” In particular, Ksitigarbha has a deep connection to all beings in our world of Jambudvipa. Hence, our supplication to Buddha Shakyamuni and Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha

is far more efficient than to other buddhas and bodhisattvas. If we are able to pay homage, make prostrations, and pray to Ksitigarbha, we are creating an auspicious cause to fulfil our wishes.

That is why we usually call Ksitigarbha the “King of Wish-Fulfilling Jewel” as he can satisfy all worldly and transcendental requirements of sentient beings. For instance, as Dharma practitioners, we may wish to achieve enlightenment quickly and thus possess the ability to help and awaken other living beings, or as ordinary people, we may wish for good fortune, a promising career, a harmonious relationship, a healthy body, etc. For all of these wishes to be fulfilled, we can pray fervently to Ksitigarbha.

## THE NOBLE BRAHMAN GIRL WHO SAVED HER MOTHER

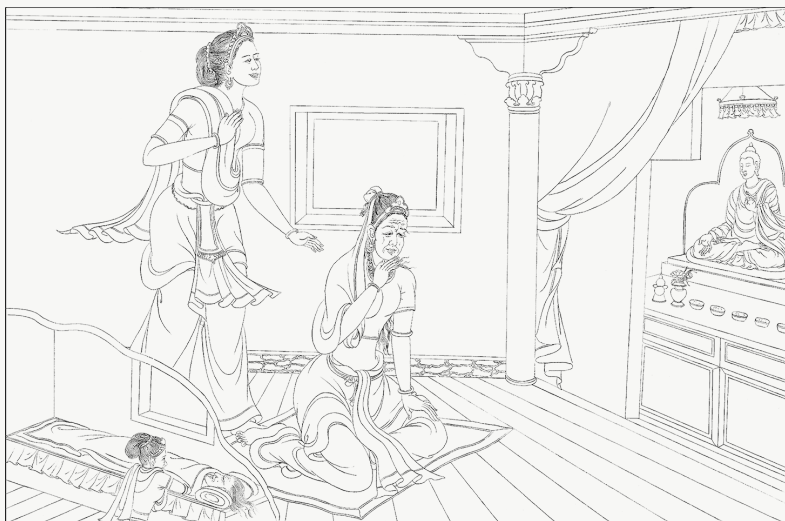
Now we move on to the story of the noble Brahman girl. It is about how Ksitigarbha repaid his mother's kindness and further benefited other living beings in one of his previous lives. This is a famous story and it has been made into films so worldly people may more easily learn about Ksitigarbha's activities and aspirations. When we study this sutra, it is better for us to read more related materials to approach the teaching in a comprehensive manner. There are quite a few great masters who have taught this sutra. Their teachings are available online and are very good references for us to understand the sutra from all different perspectives. One thing to be noticed is that unfortunately, there are also certain writings or comments that are not in accordance with Dharma teaching, or even worse, turn against the right view of the Dharma. I'd like to recommend you not to read them unless you have developed a robust conviction of the Dharma. Otherwise, you will

be easily led astray by them from cultivating the right view and the right faith in the Dharma.

**Moreover, in the past, inconceivable asamkhyeya kalpas ago, in the world there was a Buddha named Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata. The lifespan of that Buddha was four hundred thousand myriad million asamkhyeya kalpas. During the Age of Semblance Dharma, there was a Brahman woman who had ample, profound merits from previous lives. She was admired and respected by people. Whether she was walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, devas guarded and protected her. Her mother, however, believed in false doctrines and often slighted the Triple Gem. The holy woman used many skillful means to persuade and encourage her mother to give rise to right view, but her mother did not fully believe. Before long, the mother's life ended and her consciousness fell into the Incessant Hell.**

Boundless kalpas ago, there was a Buddha who had lived for innumerable eons. The number “four hundred thousand myriad million asamkhyeya kalpas” is really beyond our imagination. If we've learned about the Buddhist cosmology, we would know that besides our earth planet, there are numerous unbelievable worlds and the dimensions of the whole universe are beyond our ordinary





perception. The Buddha's Semblance Dharma Age means the time when the Buddha had passed into parinirvana and his Dharma teaching still existed in that world. At that time, there was a girl who was born in the Brahmin caste and had ample and profound merits. Because she had strong devotion to the Three Jewels, she was constantly safeguarded and protected by many gods.

As a matter of fact, those who sincerely practice virtues and engage in good deeds will always be protected by gods and Dharma protectors. For Dharma practitioners, it is crucial to constantly pray to the guru, deity and Dharma protectors. Praying to the guru is the fundamental practice to achieve any spiritual accomplishment; praying to the deity can bring us favorable conditions for our

Dharma practice; and praying to the Dharma protectors, such as the Nyingma lineage's three major Dharma protectors, i.e., Gesar, Ekajati, and Rahula, as well as Tsiu Marpo, can dispel unfavorable conditions that we may encounter along our Dharma path. Sometimes it is very difficult to avert obstacles by only relying on our own ability. But if we are safeguarded by Dharma protectors and the Three Jewels, even at a time of great danger, they will protect us and transform adversities into a path to enlightenment. Their blessings can be extraordinarily powerful.

As for myself, I don't think I have the supernatural power of knowing my past lives, but I do feel a strong disposition in being a Buddhist and a devotion to the Three Jewels in my mindstream. Since a young age, I have had many experiences of being protected by deities and Dharma protectors when I was sick or on many other occasions. I firmly believe their protections have been key to my development. In this age of degeneration where obstacles are rampant, we Buddhist practitioners must rely on a stronger power to avert various unfavorable conditions. Otherwise, our Dharma practice would likely not be successful. Just like a person going to a dangerous place alone, without a powerful guardian, it would be difficult for him to survive.

In the story, the Brahman girl's mother had wrong beliefs and always disrespected and slandered the Three Jewels. The girl

used many ways to try to convince her mother of the truth of the Buddha's teachings but her mother died before completely accepting them. Then due to her negative karma, she fell into the dreadful Incessant Hell and underwent unbearable pain. In the following part of the sutra, there's detailed explanation on the features of the Incessant Hell.

Actually, her mother's case is very similar to many Dharma practitioners' parents. Due to their karma from past lives, no matter how hard their kids try to introduce them to the merit of the Three Jewels, they would not believe. Sometimes they would accept a few Dharma teachings, while at other times they may even further denigrate Buddhism. Their faith is easily swayed by their previous negative karma and the influence of various improper views in their present life.

**The Brahman woman knew that when her mother was alive, she had not believed in cause and effect. Realizing that her mother would certainly be reborn in the lower realms in accordance with her karma, the woman sold the family house and searched far and wide for incense, flowers, and various objects worthy to be offered. She then made many great offerings to that past Buddha's stupas and monasteries.**



The Brahman girl knew that since her mother did not believe in the karmic law of cause and effect, her karmic retribution might drive her to fall into the lower realms after death. To save her mother, this daughter sold all her family possessions and properties to buy incense, flowers and various objects worthy to be offered. Then she made many offerings to the Buddha's stupas and monasteries.

Performing offerings as such is quite meaningful to the deceased. Especially, offering those items that the deceased strongly attached to when alive can greatly benefit the deceased. It is a traditional practice in Tibet that if a family member died, people would first deal with the items that the deceased was most attached to when they were alive, for example, the mala that he's so fond of, or the

coral and jade that he treasured so much. Family members would offer these stuffs to the sangha or great masters in order to liberate the deceased from suffering. Nowadays, people may have strong attachment to cars, smart phones, and so on. It is better to use these items of the deceased to make offerings and perform the transference of consciousness for them.

On the contrary, if family members just take these items as their own, the deceased may be further annoyed and his strong attachment to these objects would make both him and his family members unpeaceful. Even if later, the family members spend their own money to make offerings to the Three Jewels on behalf of the deceased, as mentioned in the later part of this sutra, the deceased would only receive one seventh of the benefit while the remaining six sevenths would be gained by the family members.

In *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra*, it says, “Offering items that the deceased used to ornament themselves, as well as the shrine hall, house, garden, bathing pool that belonged to the deceased, will generate the most amount of blessing and merit for the deceased, which can save them from the misfortune of falling into hell and also serve as a foundation to their liberation from suffering and their rebirth in the Pure Land.” Offering what belonged to the deceased to the Three Jewels, such as their cherished coral, agate and decorative objects that they once used to decorate themselves as

well as their shrine hall, garden, bathing pool, pond, etc., generates the greatest merit and reward for the deceased, which can rescue them from hell and cause them to take rebirth in the Pure Land.

We should be frequently reminded of this teaching so that we would know how to properly deal with people's belongings after they die. Traditionally in the Tibetan area, if a herder dies, his family members would bring his best horse, together with the best riding saddles, to a monastery and offer them to the sangha or the great master. This is very crucial for the deceased. But I'm afraid that in the Han areas or other countries, there's no such practice and people have no idea on how to save the deceased in such an efficient way.

## **Prayed to the Tathagata and Received His Blessing**

**In one of the monasteries, she saw Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata's image: his awe-inspiring appearance was sculpted and painted, replete with splendor and dignity. As the Brahman woman gazed up at and made obeisance to his honored countenance, her reverence multiplied. She thought to herself, 'The Buddha is called the great awakened one, replete with all wisdom. If [it were] during the time that**

**this Buddha is in the world, and I were to inquire of him after my mother's death, he would certainly know where she is.'**



In a temple the Brahman girl saw the awe-inspiring image of Buddha Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King. The Buddha's image was sculpted and painted in the temple, replete with splendor and dignity. Through the virtue of great offering and devoted supplication, one may also be able to see the Buddha in one's own perception or dream. In either case, the Buddha's appearance is perfectly magnificent and majestic, without any defect but endowed with all supreme qualities.

The girl gazed up at the Buddha's face and paid homage, and her devotion multiplied. She thought to herself, "The Buddha has complete wisdom. If he were still in this world, I would be able to ask him where my mother is." Although the Brahman girl had sincere faith in the Buddha, she didn't realize that the Buddha, as well as his wisdom and compassion, is pervasive regardless of whether the Buddha had passed into nirvana or not. That's why she thought that if the Buddha were still alive, she could directly ask him where her mother was born.

As Dharma teachers, either khenpos or khenmos, our mission is to help others resolve their doubts and answer questions as best as we can. Many years ago, I pretended to be a layperson and called an old Dharma practitioner and asked, "Would you do me a favor please?" He replied straightaway, "No, I can't. I'm busy." Then I deliberately tested him, "I thought you have generated bodhicitta." He said, "Well, it also depends on whether I am free or not..."

Actually, just as in the case of the Brahman girl, she couldn't get over the grief of her mother's death and desperately needed help. Sometimes people are unable to pull themselves out of a painful situation. At such time, we need to try all our best to help alleviate their pain. Sometimes we may think their situation is not that miserable, but for them it could be extremely distressing. Therefore,



we should not neglect their feeling but rather try whatever we can to help them.

**“The Brahman woman wept for a long time as she gazed up longingly at the Tathagata. Suddenly she heard a voice in the sky saying, ‘Weeping holy woman, do not be so sorrowful. I will show you where your mother has gone.’**

**“The Brahman woman joined her palms, faced skyward, and answered by saying, ‘Who is the divine virtuous one relieving me of my worry? Ever since I lost my mother, I have held her in memory day and night. There is nowhere that I can ask about the realm of her rebirth.’**



**“A voice again resounded in the sky, telling the woman, ‘I am the one to whom you gaze reverently and pay obeisance, the past Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata. I have seen that you think of your mother many times more than ordinary beings do theirs. Therefore, I have come to show you [where she is].’**

The daughter cried for a long time, gazing up longingly at the Buddha and supplicating to him, suddenly, there was a voice in the sky saying, “Weeping noble girl, do not grieve too much. I will show you where your mother is.” Then the daughter joined her palms gratefully and answered, “Who are you, the divine virtuous one, that has come to comfort and relieve me of my anxiety? Since my mother passed away, I think of her day and night. I do not know where I can go to ask about her rebirth.” The voice sounded in the sky again, “I am the Buddha you have been praying to. I have seen that you miss your mother a lot more than ordinary beings so I have come to tell you.”

As ordinary beings, we would be so heartbroken upon the death of our parents, our lovers, our teachers or any of those who are dearest to us. We may keep thinking of them deeply and wondering where they have gone after their death. One dreads the process of samsara which a person, upon death, would enter a new and unknown world alone and helpless. We would hope that one can

take rebirth in the Pure Land instead of any of the three lower realms, but it is entirely dependent on one's own karma.

In this story, because the Brahman girl cherished her mother much more than ordinary people, her sincere supplication deeply touched the Buddha and caused him to appear in front of her. I guess this girl must be an extraordinary practitioner and have uncommon devotion to the Three Jewels. Similarly, if we have a strong devotion to buddhas and bodhisattvas, we can also receive their response when praying to them. In *The King of Samadhis Sutra*, it is said,

*Those who recollect the Buddha's body form*

*After the Buddha passed into nirvana*

*Will see the Buddha in person*

*By the virtue of the Buddha's miraculous power.*

It is also said in the same sutra, "Those who, while walking, sitting, standing, or sleeping, recollect the moon-like Buddha, will always be in the Buddha's presence, and will attain the vast nirvana." In Mipham Rinpoche's *The Treasury of Blessings: A Practice of Buddha Shakyamuni*, he said, "Visualize the form of the Buddha in this way, and imagine that he is actually there, in front of you. The instant that you generate this thought—as the buddhas' wisdom body is not constrained by limits like time or location—he will certainly be

there. One of the sutras says: Should anyone think of the Buddha, he is there, right in front of them, constantly granting his blessings and freedom from all harm.” Likewise, should we pray to Buddha Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava, Ksitigarbha or any other deity, as long as we generate genuine faith, the faith itself will become the real deity appearing in front of us. A faith like such is essential in both Mahayana and Vajrayana practice.

**“Upon hearing these words, the Brahman woman cast her entire body [skyward] to prostrate herself, injuring her limbs and joints. Her attendants supported and attended her for quite a while before she finally came to. Then she said toward the sky, ‘I implore the Buddha to take kind pity upon me and quickly tell me in what realm my mother has been reborn, now that I am near death myself.’**

**“Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata told the holy woman, ‘After your offering is complete, go home quickly. Sit upright and meditate on my name. You will soon know where your mother has been reborn.’**

Upon hearing the Buddha’s words, the Brahman girl was so moved that she cast her body skyward to prostrate herself. Since she did so in such a vigorous way, she hurt her knees and limbs and fainted. After she revived, she said to the Buddha, “May the



Buddha compassionately tell me where my mother is as I know that I will not live long.” The Buddha said, “After your offering is complete, go home and meditate on my name. Then you will know where your mother is.”

In this mundane world, it is quite natural that people are strongly attached to their beloved ones as illustrated in a story from *The Extensive Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni* where after the death of her husband, a woman held his skeleton and roamed the charnel ground for a long time. It would appear that the Brahman girl had the same deep love for her mother, but as we can see at the end of this story, the girl generated bodhicitta for the welfare of all living beings because of this love.

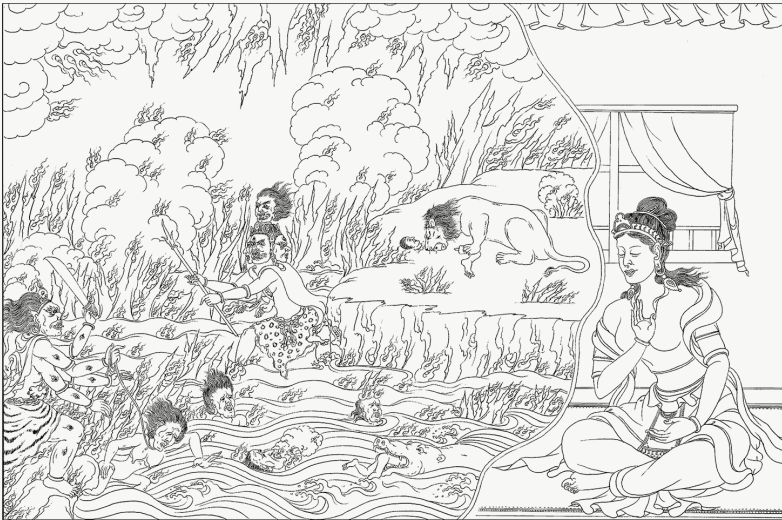
## **Came to the Hell and Knew Her Mother Had Been Saved**

**“After the Brahman woman made obeisance to the Buddha, she returned home immediately, and because she thought of her mother, she sat upright meditating on Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata.**



**“After a day and a night, she suddenly saw herself beside a sea whose waters seethed. Many evil beasts with iron bodies flew and ran on the sea, rushing here and there in pursuit. She saw hundreds of thousands of myriads of men and women, rising and sinking in the sea, snatched up and devoured by vying**

evil beasts. She also saw yaksas whose appearances were each different—some had many hands, some many eyes, some many legs, some many heads—and protruding from their mouths were teeth as sharp as swords. They drove the wrongdoers on toward the evil beasts; moreover, they themselves hit and seized those people; they forced their heads and feet together—the forms [of torment] were myriad in variety, a sight at which one would not dare look for long. During that time, the Brahman woman was naturally without fear because of the power of recollecting the Buddha.



The Brahman girl returned home immediately and started to meditate the Buddha for the sake of her mother. Here “meditating”

in original Chinese is “Nian”(念), which can be interpreted in two ways: one is to recollect the Buddha attentively, and another is to chant the Buddha’s name and sincerely pray to him. I feel “praying to the Buddha” is more easy to understand, so I use the word “pray” in my Tibetan translation. If I just literally translate “Nian” into a Tibetan word, I’m afraid those who only understand Tibetan but not ancient Chinese would be confused.

After the girl had prayed for one day and one night, suddenly she found herself beside a sea with boiling water. Many fierce beasts with iron bodies were flying and running back and forth above the sea. She saw hundreds of thousands of men and women who were eaten and bitten by those fierce beasts. There were also many yakshas with difference forms. Some had many hands, some many eyes, some many legs, and some many heads. Their teeth grew out of their mouths and were as sharp as swords. These yakshas drove the wrongdoers toward the evil beasts and also hit and seized them, twisting their heads and feet together. No one dared to willingly look at these terrifying sights. But because the Brahman girl was blessed by the Buddha and with this power protecting her, she had no fear upon seeing them.

Here we see the incredible power of the blessing from the Buddha. Some people can be very timid and often scared easily by trivial things. I know some practitioners who, even when talking with



me, seem to panic as if there were evil forces behind their backs. Last year, the year of 2019, I was investigated for about four or five months, and had to answer the same questions in front of different people every day. But still, I felt quite calm and this process didn't perturb me at all. Even though at the end they declared that the Puti Association of my lay students was an illegal organization and then forcefully banned it, I could still accept the result peacefully because I have already given my all and recognized that there were still many issues beyond my control.

Soon after, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic broke out in the winter, the whole world has been reshaped in many respects and many countries are now still in recession. Many people have lost their jobs or seen their incomes cut. Their lifestyle has to adapt to these new changes. Some people have said that the lockdowns from the pandemic have introduced the world's biggest psychological challenge and many people have not found a good solution to deal with their emotional stress and anxiety.

For sure, we should not be too careless in the face of the pandemic as it is still ongoing. But on the other hand, being too worried or frightened is not helpful or necessary and can only make the situation even worse. In reality, human beings are very adaptable to new changes. For instance, we never used to wear face masks. But now, if we are not wearing one we would feel that something

is missing or uncomfortable. Before, when I was in Chengdu I rarely wore face mask except in hospitals. Since last year, I have gotten used to wearing face mask and feel it is quite natural to see everyone wearing a face mask. Another example, being confined to one's own home for months used to be thought impossible. However, within less than just one year, we all recognize it as the best way to protect oneself and others. Therefore, we do need to adjust ourselves to different lifestyles and there is no doubt that we have the ability to adapt to change.

Dharma practice follows the same way. At the beginning, a person may have strong mental afflictions and be easily distracted and disturbed by external things. Gradually, he will start to enjoy meditation and the peace and serenity it brings him. Eventually, he can become an experienced meditator and very skilled in taming his mind. For those who may be reluctant to listen to Dharma teaching, a gradual adjustment of his attitude and motivation can make listening attentively to the Dharma a habit.

We also need to cultivate an open mind to embrace impermanence. We should never think that our life is permanently fixed upon the present mode. The reality is that there will always be changes and when changes strike, we should accept them readily as we know they are part of nature. It is pointless to feel heartbroken, shocked, or speechless in face of unexpected changes. We have to break

up our habitual thinking pattern and train our mind in this way. Otherwise, without a well-prepared mind for impermanence, we will be devastated when a big change occurs in our life.

I saw Buddhists who were well-trained in impermanence remained unperturbed during the pandemic, whereas many worldly people's normal lives were shattered by a sudden loss of their wealth, status or family members. For example, countries like Malaysia and Thailand used to be agricultural countries which transitioned to an economy overly reliant on tourism. During the lockdown, international travel was suddenly disrupted and they were left in a conundrum. They cannot turn back because their farm fields were gone and turned into tall buildings. In a short span of half a year, unpredictable changes threw people into serious predicaments. If one gets used to thinking that everything is in one's own hands and can be completely controlled by oneself then this person will be in great pain when something happens that disrupts that. On the contrary, the practice of impermanence gives us the power to confront the worst situation calmly and bravely.

For now, it is important for us Dharma practitioners to continue our spiritual practice. But at the same time, we should try our best to help those in need. For instance, at Larung Gar, we are offering work positions to local Tibetans so that they can earn a living and

also serve the sangha to accumulate merit. I know their salary would help support them and their families.

We should also not be too worried, apprehensive, or excessively anxious about everything because that would only keep us trapped in a state of panic. If our mind remains calm and peaceful, even if the world becomes as dreadful as hell, we will not have any fear. The Brahman girl is such an admirable example for us. By praying to the Buddha and relying on the Buddha's blessing, she was not even slightly scared upon seeing the horrible scenes in hell. It is my wish that in the future all of us can reach such a state so that by relying upon the power of the Buddha we will be naturally without any fear.

**“There was a ghost king named Poisonless who prostrated himself to welcome her. He said to the holy woman, ‘Excellent, Bodhisattva! For what reason have you come here?’**

**“The Brahman woman asked the ghost king, ‘What is this place?’**

**“Poisonless replied, ‘This is the first of the seas west of the Great Iron Encircling Mountains.’**

**“The holy woman asked, ‘I have heard that hells are within the Iron Encircling [Mountains]. Is this really so?’**

**“Poisonless replied, ‘There really are hells.’**

**“The holy woman asked, ‘Now, how have I come to the hells?’**

**“Poisonless replied, ‘If it were not by [the power of] awesome spiritual penetration, then it would have been by the force of karma. Without either, one cannot come here at all.’**



Then a ghost king named Poisonless appeared and came to greet the Brahman girl. He asked her for what reason she had come here. But the girl had no idea where she was. So Poisonless told her that she was in the first of the seas of the western side of the Great Iron Encircling Mountains. The girl recalled that in the sutras there were descriptions of hells within the Iron Encircling Mountains,

she wondered if that was true. She also had no idea why she was able to come here. The ghost king Poisonless told her that there indeed existed hells and only those with either the miraculous power of buddhas and bodhisattvas or the power of their own karma could come here. If it were not because of these two things, one would not be able to come to hell.

As a matter of fact, there are two types of beings in hells. The first type are those who had committed grave offenses and driven by the power of their negative karma have fallen into hell. The second type are those enlightened dakinis or yogis who are endowed with the miraculous power of buddhas and bodhisattvas and driven by their compassion. They have come to hell to save the wrongdoers from unbearable suffering.

**“The holy woman asked further, ‘Why is this water seething, and why are there so many wrongdoers and evil beasts?’**

**“Poisonless replied, ‘These are recently deceased beings of Jambudvīpa who had done evil. They have passed through forty-nine days without any descendants doing virtuous deeds on their behalf to rescue them from suffering. Besides that, during their lifetime they did not plant any good causes. Therefore, their own karma will accordingly bring about the hells, and naturally they are to cross this sea first. A hundred thousand yojanas east of**

this sea, there is another sea where the suffering is many times greater than this one. To the east of that sea, there is yet another sea where the suffering is multiplied again. Brought on by the evil causes in the karma of body, speech, and mind, these seas are called the seas of karma. This is that place.'

"The holy woman again asked Ghost King Poisonless, 'Where are the hells?'

"Poisonless replied, 'Within the three seas are great hells. They number in the hundreds of thousands, and each one is different. There are eighteen specifically known as the great hells. Second [to them] there are five hundred, where the agonizing suffering is measureless; and next, there are hundreds of thousands, also with measureless suffering.'

The noble Brahman girl asked again, "Why is the sea boiling? Why are there so many evil persons and fierce beasts?" Poisonless told her that those recently deceased beings of Jambudvīpa who have committed severely negative karma are crossing these seas and will fall into the hell manifested by their own karma unless somebody has arranged proper rituals or performed good deeds on their behalf to rescue them during the first forty-nine days after death or if they had redeeming merit from virtuous actions when they were alive. Usually, if their family members can perform virtuous deeds



within the first forty-nine days, such as chanting the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* or other sutras and mantras, and dedicate the merit to them, they will not come to these seas and fall into hells.

There are three seas that the deceased need to cross before going to hells. All of them are called the seas of karma. According to some commentary, they are created respectively by one's desire, hatred and ignorance. Within the three seas are numerous hells numbered in the hundreds of thousands, each of them different from the others. There are eighteen specifically known as the great hells, including eight hot hells, eight cold hells, along with the neighboring hell and the ephemeral hell. Second to them there are five hundred hells, where the agonizing suffering is immeasurable;



and next, there are hundreds of thousands of hells also with immeasurable suffering.

In the *Dharmatrata Dhyana Sutra* translated by Buddhahadbra, it is said,

*Even if one had a hundred heads  
And each head holds a hundred tongues,  
One can never completely describe all kinds of suffering in hells  
Throughout numerous kalpas.*

The types of suffering in hells are infinite and cannot be enumerated one by one throughout hundreds and thousands of eons. In order to eliminate the suffering of hells, we must rely on the powerful blessing of the Buddha. By recollecting the Buddha and chanting his name, we will be protected by his power and nobody can do harm to us. In the *Sutra of Secretly and Subtly Upholding Infinite Doors*, the Buddha said, “Those who frequently recollect the Buddha will never give evil a chance.” Whether in hells or in human world, no evil forces or negative karmic forces can get a chance to impose harms to those who recite the Buddha’s name and pray to the Buddha frequently.

**“The holy woman again asked the great ghost king, ‘My mother passed away not long ago. I wonder, to what realm has her consciousness gone?’**

“The ghost king asked the holy woman, ‘What actions did the Bodhisattva’s mother do habitually while she was alive?’

“The holy woman replied, ‘My mother held false views, and she ridiculed and slandered the Triple Gem. Even when she temporarily believed, she would quickly become disrespectful again. She passed away recently. I do not know where she has been reborn.’

“Poisonless asked, ‘What was the name and clan of the Bodhisattva’s mother?’

“The holy woman replied, ‘My parents were both Brahmans. My father’s name was Silou Shanxian, and my mother’s name was Yue Dili.’

“Poisonless joined his palms and informed the Bodhisattva, ‘Holy One, please return to your home. Do not be worried or sorrowful in remembering, for the woman wrongdoer Yue Dili was reborn in heaven three days ago. It is said that by virtue of her filial child’s making offerings to cultivate merit in the mother’s behalf by practicing giving to the stupas and monasteries of Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata, not only was the Bodhisattva’s mother released from the hells, the other wrongdoers in the Incessant Hell, too, experienced

happiness and were reborn on that day.’ After the ghost king had finished speaking, he joined his palms and withdrew.



The Brahman girl wondered where her mother was, so she asked the ghost king Poisonless. Poisonless asked what her mother used to do when she was alive. She answered, “My mother had improper beliefs and disrespected the Three Jewels. At one time she believed in the Buddha, and then soon after became disrespectful.” That is why the Brahman girl was so worried that her mother would probably fall into the lower realms after death. After Poisonless learned of her mother’s name, he respectfully told the noble girl, “Please return home and do not be sad. Your mother ascended to heaven three days ago. She was saved by your filial piety as you

made offerings to the Buddha's stupas and monasteries to cultivate merit on her behalf. Not only was your mother released from hell, but the other wrongdoers in the Incessant Hell were also reborn and experienced happiness." After the ghost king had finished speaking, he joined his palms in respect and withdrew.

**"The Brahman woman quickly returned as if from a dream. Upon realizing this event, she made an immense vow before the image and stupa of Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata, 'I vow that throughout the future kalpas, I will employ many skillful means for all wrongdoing suffering beings, causing them all to attain liberation.'"**

**The Buddha told Manjushri, "Ghost King Poisonless then is now Leader In Wealth Bodhisattva, and the Brahman woman is now Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva."**

The Brahmin girl woke up as if from a dream. Realizing that she had saved her mother from hell by making offering and praying to the Buddha, she made a great vow in front of the Buddha, "May I employ as many possible skillful means as I can to release all wrongdoing suffering beings from pain and cause them all to attain liberation." After this story, Buddha Shakyamuni told Manjushri, "The ghost king Poisonless is now the bodhisattva named Leader-In-Wealth, and the Brahmin girl is now Bodhisattva



Ksitigarbha.” This vow is very essential and it differentiates the Mahayana and Shravakayana practice. As Mahayana practitioners, we should follow in the footsteps of these great bodhisattvas and make the same aspirations in all our lifetimes. As *The King of Aspiration Prayers* reads,

*In order to perform the full virtue of Good Actions,  
I shall act according to Manjushri’s prayers of aspiration,  
And without ever growing weary, in all the eons to come,  
I shall perfectly fulfil every one of his aims!*

Also,

*Sentient beings are as limitless  
As the boundless expanse of space;  
So shall my prayers of aspiration for them  
Be as limitless as their karma and harmful emotions!*

We should always remind ourselves of these great vows. Following the same aspirations as those from the great bodhisattvas such as Manjushri, Samantabhadra, or Ksitigarbha, as well as those of our lineage masters, is the best and sincerest dedication we can give to benefit all sentient beings.

In this story, the Brahman girl never thought that she had finished what she needed to do because her mother had been reborn in

heaven. Instead, as she realized that she was able to save her mother from hell, she made this immense vow that she would save all sentient beings in samsara. As mentioned in the story we quoted in the beginning of this lecture, it is because of her mother that the Brahman girl generated bodhicitta deep in her heart.

For each of us, there may be any number of causes that can trigger our bodhicitta, either our beloved ones or our enemies. What is important for us is that we must seize that opportunity to genuinely give rise to bodhicitta and to reinforce it over time. We should never think, “Enlightening sentient beings is the activities of those great bodhisattvas, and I only need to focus on my own happiness and freedom.” This is not right. We have learned from the story of Ksitigarbha’s previous life that this great bodhisattva was just a normal girl, by virtue of her most loved one, she generated bodhicitta and she never abandoned her vows throughout numerous lifetimes. This is such a great example to inspire and encourage us.

After finishing the study of the first chapter, we should remember the incredible qualities of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, the great vows that he had made in his previous lives, and also the two stories about how he had generated bodhicitta in different lifetimes. It is important for us to keep them in our mind to nourish our Mahayana practice.

Although the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* didn't have a Tibetan version in history, this is a unique sutra endowed with extraordinary blessing. Its blessing has been well recognized by numerous great Han masters and practitioners for centuries. That's why I decided to translate it into Tibetan. However, if we do not understand and adopt its deep meaning through comprehensive study and reflection, we would get little benefit from it.

During this study, we should not think that these are just some simple stories and can be easily repeated nor should we behave like some academic scholars who would just focus on certain words and try to pick up faults or even doubt its authenticity. Instead, we should sincerely cherish these teachings and stories and use them to inspire and reinforce our Mahayana practice.





## Chapter Two

*The Assembly of the Emanations*

Ksitigarbha certainly has great power and skillful means. In this degenerate age, whether it is to liberate sentient beings or tame our own afflicted mind, we should pray to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva for his great blessing. Due to his past profound and vast vows and the promise he made to Buddha Shakyamuni, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is especially compassionate towards beings with severe negative karma and he will save them with all his skillful means.

—Khenpo Sodargye

# **Lecture Five**

**July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

## EFFICACY STORY: MAKING KSITIGARBHA STATUE SAVES ONE FROM DEATH

We will now continue with the teaching on *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Firstly, I would like to briefly talk about Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's merit by introducing another story to you from the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*, a book in the collection of Successive Tripitaka from which we have shared another story in the previous lecture.

In the Song Dynasty, there was a monk who misused the sangha's properties when he dealt with affairs for the monastery, violated monastic precepts, and indulged frequently in various distractions concerning his body, speech and mind. Because he neither kept pure precepts nor accumulated any virtue as a monastic, he died of a minor ailment one day. However, the upper part of both sides of his body remained warm and three days later, he revived and started crying.

Tearfully, he declared to others what happened after he passed away. Upon his death, two subordinates of the King Yama came and forcefully took him away. When they came to a city gate, a monk appeared and said to him, “I am Ksitigarbha. When you were alive, you once made a statue of me in the capital city. Though you did not make any offering to my statue, I still need to reward you for making it. Since you are a follower of the Huayan School, I am now teaching you a verse:

*If people want to really know  
All Buddhas of the three times,  
They should contemplate that  
It is the mind that creates all tathagatas.*

If you can recite this verse, the way to hells will be blocked and the path to pure realms will open to you.”

He memorized this verse and carried on walking into the gate to meet the King Yama. The King Yama asked him, “Since you had encountered the Dharma when you were alive, what kind of virtuous deeds had you performed?” He replied, “Ignorant as I was, I indulged in distractions and did not perform any virtuous deeds. When I was dealing with affairs for the monastery, I did not observe the precepts purely either. There is only one Dharma verse with four lines that I had received and kept in heart.”

The King Yama then asked him to recite it. As soon as he recited the complete verse that Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva taught him, all beings in hell who heard his recitation were liberated from their suffering. Seeing this, the King Yama told him to stop and asked to send him back to the human world, which was why he got revived.

Later on, he found that the verse was quoted from *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Thereafter, the monk often told other monks about his experience and those who heard it generated sincere faith towards *Avatamsaka Sutra* and aspired to study and practice it. You may find another version of this verse, which reads,

*If people want to really know  
All buddhas of all times,  
They should contemplate the nature of the cosmos:  
All is but mental construction.*

The reason for such discrepancy is due to the different versions of *Avatamsaka Sutra*. The version directly above was from Siksanda's 80-fascicle *Avatamsaka Sutra* in the Tang Dynasty, while the verse in the story is from an earlier version of *Avatamsaka Sutra* translated by Buddhahadra in the Eastern Jin Dynasty.

From this story, we should know that, whether it is listening to the teaching of *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, printing *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, making

statues or pictures of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, or hearing the name of Ksitigarbha, the merit generated is enormous.

## THE GATHERING OF KSITIGARBHA'S EMANATIONS

Next, we will discuss the second chapter, *The Assembly of the Emanations*. “Emanations” here refer to the numerous emanations of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, and “assembly” talks about all the emanations Ksitigarbha gathered in the Trayastrimsa Heaven. So what happened here? At that time, numerous emanations of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva were liberating sentient beings in multitudes of worlds. Since Buddha Shakyamuni was turning the Dharma Wheel in the Trayastrimsa Heaven, all Ksitigarbha emanations throughout those worlds gathered in the Trayastrimsa Heaven awaiting Buddha Shakyamuni to expound on the noble Dharma.

Toward the messages conveyed in this chapter, those who have faith in the Dharma will easily accept and be convinced, while for those who have no faith, some of the messages might be too unthinkable to believe. As a matter of fact, faith is the prerequisite for learning the Dharma. In Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*,



it states, “For the ocean of the Dharma, faith enables one to enter it, and wisdom enables one to cross it.” So if you really want to enter the Dharma that is as vast as the ocean, you need to have faith in it, and you also need wisdom to master its deep meaning. As a result, with both faith and wisdom, you will be able to attain liberation from samsara and also benefit sentient beings accordingly.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Assembly of the Emanations**

**At that time, emanation Ksitigarbha Bodhisattvas from all the hells in hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of unthinkable, ineffable, immeasurable, inexpressible, measureless asamkhyeyas of worlds all came and assembled in the palace of the Trayastrimsa Heaven. [...]**

There are incalculable and infinite number of worlds out there and each world has six realms. In every hell realm of the six realms there are miserable sentient beings who were saved by innumerable emanations of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. At that time, they all came to the palace of the Trayastrimsa Heaven.

### **The Inconceivableness of the World System**

In the text, four words are used to describe how infinite and measureless the number of the worlds are. Unthinkable means it



is inconceivable with our conceptual mind; ineffable means that no words or languages can precisely describe it; immeasurable means it is beyond the evaluation of conventional valid cognition; inexpressible means it cannot be expounded by any means, be it words or any other manner.

From here we should know that buddhas and bodhisattvas will manifest in multitude of forms across the six realms of infinite worlds in order to benefit all sentient beings. Likewise, many great Mahasiddhas also manifest various emanations simultaneously in different places so that those fortunately connected beings can see their physical forms, hear their Vajra speech and receive their wisdom blessings. These amazing stories are easily found

in the biographies of these great masters. For example, in Lama Tsongkhapa's biography, it records that he manifested different emanations at the same time in different realms and places such as the Dakini realm, the Tushita heaven, and the human world Jambudvīpa. Even in the human world, he appeared simultaneously in front of his disciple Khedrup Je in the Tibetan area and 1,800 bhikkhus in Mount Wutai in the Han area. As a matter of fact, as he told Khedrup Je, his emanations were everywhere.

Another good example is Jetsün Milarepa. Before Milarepa passed into parinirvana, he stayed at Drin Dingma in order to release a terrible sinner called Geshe Tsakpuwa. After Geshe Tsakpuwa was transformed, Milarepa said, "It was necessary for me to stay in this place (Drin Dingma) so that a terrible sinner could express his regret and thus be released from his sinful deeds. But now as this is done, I should find another place to die. For a meditator like me to die in a village would be like a king dying in a commoner's house. So now I shall go to make my charnel ground at Chubar."

Seban Repa, one of the disciples said, "Since you are fatigued by illness, we should carry you on a stretcher."

"You cannot be certain that I am sick, and you cannot be certain that I shall die. I have displayed the appearance of sickness, and I shall go to Chubar to display the appearance of death. I do not

require a stretcher. Some of you younger repas go on ahead of me to Chubar.”

The younger repas then left for Chubar, but the Jetsun reached Driche Puk before them. Another Jetsun departed in the company of the senior resident disciples. Yet another Jetsun displayed the appearance of illness seated upon the flat rock Rekpa Dukchen. Another was attended by faithful disciples who came to see him later at Chubar. Still another Jetsun taught the Dharma seated at Drakar to patrons from Dingma who had gathered outside, and furthermore, individual Jetsuns appeared inside the homes of each resident to receive their respects.

Those who had gone on ahead to Chubar said, “The Jetsun has reached Chubar before us.”

The senior disciples said, “He was accompanied by us on the journey.”

Each person who arrived later said that he had accompanied the Jetsun during the trip.

One person said, “He is staying in my house.” Those who had listened to his Dharma teachings said, “On that day he was in Drakar teaching the Dharma.”

Each person who had paid his respects likewise said, “On that day I invited him to my home to pay my respects.”

As they all had different stories and could not agree upon what had happened, they asked the Jetsün, who replied, “All of you are correct. I was teasing you.”

As seen in this incidence, when great masters were about to enter into nirvana, they would sometimes perform miraculous acts. We should also understand how inconceivable the world truly is. Imagine how people must have thought of the idea of infinite worlds in the universe at a time when geocentrism (a belief in the earth being at the center of the universe) or heliocentrism (a belief in the sun being at the center of the universe) prevailed. People must think that the idea was absurd and would ask, “How is it possible? Where are they?” Today in the 21st century, with the aid of astronomical telescopes and other astronomical observations and studies, we now clearly know that there are unimaginably massive number of planets that exist out there in the vast universe.

Sometimes we see from a photo or a computer image that there are innumerable star-like bright spots in the space. We know that each of those bright spots is indeed a galaxy with innumerable luminous stars with their own light. This is in addition to the

incalculable and infinite number of associated planets which do not produce their own lights.

We might feel that the Earth we live on today is a huge planet, but compared to what is within the entire universe, or even just our galaxy, the Milky Way, it is merely a small, tiny dust particle. From this perspective, those who find the Buddhist terms of “unthinkable, ineffable, immeasurable, and inexpressible” unacceptable simply do not understand Buddhist cosmology. In a way, it is the same as people who do not have specialized knowledge and expertise in the field of astronomy finding these astronomical concepts or even pictures describing the universe as unthinkable, ineffable, immeasurable, and inexpressible.

The Buddhist understanding of the world from a macro perspective that was taught more than 2,500 years ago is so comprehensive that even people in this era of digital technology cannot fully grasp. If we probe into Buddhist cosmology, we will realize how profound and rich it actually is and it is not at all as narrow and constrained as some individual religions and scholars claimed.

**[...] Because of the spiritual power of the Tathagata, each came from his direction with beings—also numbering in the thousands of myriads of millions of nayutas—who had obtained liberation from the karmic paths, and all came holding incense and flowers**

to make offering to the Buddha. Those groups of beings who came were irreversibly [on the path] to unexcelled perfect complete awakening because they had been taught and transformed by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. For many long kalpas these beings had been wandering in samsara, undergoing suffering in the six realms of existence with never a momentary rest. Due to the great kindness and compassion and profound vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, they each had realized attainments. When they came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven, their hearts danced joyously. They gazed up in reverence at the Tathagata, their eyes never leaving him for a moment.

Besides countless emanations of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, by virtue of Buddha Shakyamuni's miraculous power, beings from different worlds of the ten directions who had attained liberation from samsara also came to the palace of the Trayastrimsa Heaven. They all had generated a supreme mind, gained comfort, and been freed from the karmic paths. The number of these beings is uncountably large. All of them held various offering objects such as incense and flowers and made offerings to Buddha Shakyamuni. We could imagine how grand the scene was.

These beings all had been taught and transformed by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. This great bodhisattva had inspired them to generate positive motivation, had ripened their mindstreams and had

liberated them from samsara. Having been taught by Ksitigarbha, they all gave rise to an awakened mind and would never retrogress from the path to unexcelled and perfect enlightenment.

Among them, some were from form realm, some formless realm and some desire realm. For numerous long eons they had been wandering in samsara and experiencing severe sufferings the whole time without a moment of rest. Thanks to the great loving-kindness, compassion, and the deep and vast vows of Ksitigarbha, they attained different stages of enlightenment such as the fruition of arhathood, solitary realizer, bodhisattvas and even buddhahood.

It was not an easy thing for them to come to the Trayastrimsa Heaven and see the majestic physical form of the Buddha. So upon seeing the Buddha, they all felt joyful and could not take their eyes off the Buddha. They gazed at the Buddha's countenance with reverence and delight, their eyes not leaving him for a moment.



## HOW DID THE BUDDHA TRANSFORM OBSTINATE BEINGS?

At that time, the World-Honored One stretched forth his golden arm and placed his hand on the crowns of the heads of all the emanation Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas from hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of unthinkable, ineffable, immeasurable, inexpressible, measureless asamkhyeyas of worlds and spoke these words, [...]



At that time, Buddha Shakyamuni stretched forth his golden colored arm and touched the crowns of all the emanations of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. The Buddha displayed only one magnificent physical form, yet he was able to place his hand on the crowns of all those countless emanations of Ksitigarbha at the same time, which is truly beyond our imagination.

People may hold different views towards rituals such as touching one's head or giving one initiation. Actually, as a way to bestow blessing, touching one's head is mentioned in many sutras such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. Through this action, a genuinely enlightened master can transfer his or her blessings and accomplishments to those fortunately connected disciples.

If a disciple has steadfast and devoted faith, the best way for the disciple to receive siddhis and blessings from the guru is for the guru to touch the disciple's head. But for those who lack faith or even hold wrong views, even if they were touched 500 times by a guru, it would still be meaningless or even worse, become a cause to damage their minds stream.

Speaking from my own experience, when His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, I often had the opportunity to receive His Holiness' touching of my head. After His Holiness left this world, I often dreamt of him, and whenever I see him in my

dream, the first thing he would do is to touch my head. I often write down the dreams I had in my diary. When I review my diary, it would appear that I received his touching more often in my dreams than in real life when His Holiness was alive.

## **Buddha Shakyamuni's Analysis of Beings in His Time**

**[...] "I teach and transform obstinate living beings like these in the evil age of the five degenerations, causing their minds to be regulated and tamed so that they abandon the false and return to the true. However, there are one or two out of every ten who still have evil habits. [...]"**

The Buddha had made five hundred great vows in order to teach and transform beings in the evil age of the five degenerations. These beings were very stubborn and obstinate, and the Buddha employed various skillful means to tame their minds so that they would renounce evil and return to the virtuous and right path. But in the process of transformation, one or two-tenths of them would still cling to their evil habits and refuse to be tamed.

This could be considered as a general analysis by Buddha Shakyamuni when he was alive of sentient beings in the degenerate age. Sentient beings of the evil times are indeed difficult to be

transformed. Because of the persistent power of Mara, many great masters often face severe challenges in their efforts to benefit sentient beings. Great Mahasiddha Lingje Repa once said, “In bringing sentient beings to liberation, no one is able to stop me except for those who have violated the samaya. I cannot liberate a person who has broken the samaya.” Later in life he was visited by a disciple who broke the samaya. Even such an accomplished master could still be tainted by his student’s fault of breaking samaya. As a result, he became delirious and lost the power of his speech. Soon after, he passed into parinirvana.

When khenpos and khenmos, or monastic Dharma teachers in general, do not engage in activities benefiting sentient beings and do not pay sufficient attention to the dispositions of various beings, they will have no idea how difficult it is to teach and educate their disciples. Only after one has engaged in instructing and guiding sentient beings would one be able to identify with the Buddha’s analysis and realize at the end that some of them would be either too obdurate to be tamed at all or extremely challenging to do so.

When Buddha Shakyamuni was alive, adults could live to about 100 years. If at the Buddha’s time, one or two out of ten were not transformable, in the more degenerated present when we do not live such longevity, the ratio of untamable would likely be much higher. Moreover, the Buddha was adorned with immaculate

qualities and merits. Arising from his omniscient wisdom, the Buddha has unimaginably numerous skillful means to attract and teach sentient beings. So if the Buddha would still not be able to tame one or two out of ten himself, the bodhicitta aspirations of us ordinary beings may not be strong enough to sustain us to tirelessly and effectively benefit sentient beings.

When we look at the biographies of many great masters, their entire Dharma activities can be divided into three phases: the early phase, the middle phase and the final phase. As Dharma practitioners who aspire to liberate sentient beings today, we should be prepared for a bumpy journey because as the age is becoming increasingly degenerate, sentient beings may present with all sorts of problems and challenges. Faced with such uncertainties, it is likely that we would encounter failures in benefiting sentient beings. So we should be mentally prepared while at the same time continuously deepen our realization of the true nature of all phenomena through meditative practice.

## **Four Types of Predispositions of Sentient Beings**

**[...] I too transform into hundreds of thousands of millions of emanations and employ many skillful means [for living beings]. Some beings are of keen capacity: they immediately believe**

**and accept upon hearing [the Dharma]. Some are reaping the results of wholesome [deeds]: they achieve accomplishments through energetic encouragement. Some are ignorant and dull: they return [to the true] only after long being instructed. Some have karma that is heavy: they do not give rise to respect [for the Dharma].**

To tame sentient beings, Buddha Shakyamuni also transformed into hundreds of billions of emanations, which is a staggering number, and applied numerous skillful to teach sentient beings. Here in the text the Buddha divided beings into four groups: those of keen faculty, those reaping the results of wholesome deeds, those who are ignorant but educatable, and those with heavy negative karma and unreceptive to the Dharma teaching.

Those with keen faculties can understand and accept the Dharma teaching straightaway upon hearing it, and thus be able to eliminate their mental afflictions by practicing the teaching. Those with great merits and being fortunately connected to the Dharma through virtuous deeds can gain attainments on the path as easily and naturally as fruits falling off the trees when ripe. To this group of beings, the Buddha could just energetically encourage them and they will then be ripened on to the Dharma path to attain accomplishments.

For those who are dull, stubborn and ignorant, the Buddha took much time and great efforts to instruct and guide them so that they can renounce evil and return to the right path. While for those with severe negativities, even the Buddha himself has no way to make them generate faith in the Dharma and respect the Dharma. Even if they could generate slight faith in the Dharma occasionally, they would soon be obscured again by their strong mental afflictions and deviant views.

People with strong afflictions are very pitiful and miserable. For a strongly afflicted person, he or she may possess the afflictions of as much as a hundred ordinary persons'. They are overwhelmed with a host of distorted views, afflictive emotions and suffering that even the Buddha would find difficult to resolve because they show no respect, faith or reverence to the Dharma teaching.

In the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* and the Vinaya, sentient beings who had no connection with the Buddha could not benefit from the Buddha's teachings. If these people could not even be attracted by the Buddha himself who is incomparably virtuous, then it would be even more difficult for ordinary Buddhists to benefit them.

## THE BUDDHA'S VARIOUS EMANATIONS TO TAME BEINGS

**“Living beings like these types are each different. I therefore transform into emanations to guide them across to liberation. The emanations are manifested in the forms of a man, a woman, a deva, a naga, a spirit, a ghost, or a mountain, a forest, a stream, a plain, a river, a pond, a spring, or a well to benefit people, so that they all may be guided across to liberation. [...]**

As a result of their specific karma from previous lives, sentient beings vary a great deal from one another in terms of their faculties. For some people, tears well up in their eyes upon hearing a bit of the Dharma, and they accept the teaching immediately and generate the right view. On the opposite, some may generate more and more wrong views even as they listen to the Dharma for years or even for eons. There are also the middle ones, who are slowly absorbed into the Dharma and eventually embark on the right path. Because all sentient beings are different in terms of propensity and



faculties, the Buddha would manifest in various forms to liberate and free them from their sufferings.

As the Buddha told us, his manifestations include men, women, devas, nagas, spirits and ghosts. Thereby those ghosts and gods that people worship are possibly the manifestations of the Buddha. What is more, the Buddha also manifests various insentient forms such as mountains, forests, streams, plains, rivers, ponds, springs or wells to bring beings to liberation.

As elaborated in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, even roads, lamps, and doorsteps can be the manifestations of the Buddha. Also, it states in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*,

*The profound realm of the buddhas  
Is equal in extent to space.  
To comply with sentient beings,  
They comprehensively enter the world.*

The profound realization of buddhas is as deep and vast as the expanse of the space, but in order to act in accord with sentient beings, they enter the world universally and have numerous manifestations in front of sentient beings. Hence, many forms, whether it is a male body, a female body, or even a mountain, a stream, a river, can all be the manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Very likely, people we despise and loath, our enemies, or even the wicked ones are also the manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas who come to teach and subdue sentient beings purposely in this way. This is called the magical display of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

**[...] The emanations are also manifested in the forms of Sakra, Brahma, a wheel-turning king, a householder, a king, a high minister, a government official, or a bhikṣu, a bhiksuni, an upasaka, an upasika, or a sravaka, an arhat, a pratyekabuddha, a Bodhisattva, or others to teach and guide living beings across. It is not only in the form of a Buddha that I have manifested before them.**



Given this teaching, we can imagine that a country's president or chief executive could be the manifestation of the Buddha. It is not only in the form of a buddha that the Buddha appears. Here a shravaka means a shravakayana practitioner who has attained the first, second or third level of the shravakayana enlightenment, which can be called a stream-enter, a once-returner, or a non-returner. And an arhat means the one who attains the fourth level, the highest fruition of the shravakayana.

Many people pay homage to a buddha statue whenever they go to a monastery, believing he is the one who could liberate sentient beings. Yet toward people around them, they would simply think of them as they are: This is a brahman, that is a lay practitioner or just a monastic. They seldom think that these ordinary beings to whom they have little respect for could be the manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas. However, the Buddha told us that if he appeared only in the form of a buddha, it would be impossible for him to bring all sentient beings to liberation, so he must manifest in various forms.

There are many great masters throughout history who are widely recognized as the true emanations of buddhas and bodhisattvas. In Han Buddhism, for example, Master Hanshan and Master Shide were said to be the emanations of Manjushri and Samantabhadra

respectively. In Tibet, King Trisong Detsen was generally recognized as the emanation of Manjushri, Songtsen Gampo was the manifestation of Avalokiteshvara and Lha Thothori Nyentsen was Samantabhadra.

In modern history, Master Qingding, a well-known Han master in the 20th century, was deemed to be the manifestation of Ksitigarbha. For my root guru H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, there are many prophecies indicating that he was the reincarnation of certain great master. For instance, he was recognized as the reincarnation of Lerab Lingpa, the manifestation of Nanam Dorje Dudjom, as well as the embodiment of Padmasambhava. Nevertheless, regardless of what he had been prophesized and regardless of whether others accept it or not, I firmly believe he is Manjushri himself. When I pray to His Holiness, or when I practice the guru yoga, I have a strong faith that my guru is no different from Manjushri and all his words and behaviors are perfectly pure. Relying on such faith, as a person heavily burdened with negative karma, I have received enormous blessings, specifically uncommon wisdom and compassion, from the great bodhisattva Manjushri.

When His Holiness was at Mount Wutai in 1987, the worldly abode of Manjushri, he revealed several tantric sadhanas that require the practitioner to visualize his or her guru to be no different from Bodhisattva Manjushri. In this way the practitioner can gain

enormous blessings. Also, the guru yoga prayer of His Holiness reads:

*In the pure realm of the great sacred site, the Five-Peaked Mountain,  
The blessings of Manjushri's wisdom ripened in your mind—  
Jigme Phuntsok, at your feet I pray!*

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

In this prayer, His Holiness simply said that he received the blessings of Manjushri's wisdom. But in my mind, His Holiness is exactly Manjushri, and they are not two separate entities. Although His Holiness often encouraged us to recite the names of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, Eliminate-Obstructions Bodhisattva (Sarvanivaranavishkambhin), and other bodhisattva names, personally speaking, I find it difficult to visualize His Holiness as these deities. But it is rather easy for me to visualize him in the form of Manjushri. You might think that it is just my conceptual thought at play but it is indeed one of my personal experiences in Dharma practice. Anyway, whether His Holiness is in this world or not, if we perceive him with no difference from Manjushri, we will surely receive his extraordinary blessings.

# KSITIGARBHA'S PROMISE TO SAVE SENTIENT BEINGS

## The Buddha's Entrustment to Ksitigarbha

**“You see how, kalpa after kalpa, diligently and arduously I guide difficult-to-teach, obstinate, wrongdoing, suffering beings such as these across to liberation. Those not yet regulated and tamed experience ripened effects according to their karma. If they fall into the lower realms and undergo great suffering, you should remember what I am earnestly entrusting to you now in the Trayastrimsa Heaven: Help all living beings in the saha world from now until Maitreya [Buddha] arises in the world—cause them to attain liberation, to leave all suffering forever, and to meet [Maitreya] Buddha and be given prediction.”**

The Buddha concluded that for numerous kalpas he had toiled and endured all kinds of challenges in order to liberate obstinate and wrongdoing sentient beings. Of course, the Buddha is free from suffering and disturbing emotions himself, but he still appeared



to undergo the hardship in this degenerate age because sentient beings are exceptionally obdurate and difficult to teach. Many of them do not accept the noble Dharma, and also refuse to follow the virtuous worldly rules to change their evil habits. Therefore, even Buddha Shakyamuni himself found no way to transform them. As a result, the Buddha asked Ksitigarbha to take care of these wrongdoers and suffering beings, before Buddha Maitreya appears in this world in the future.

According to *The Buddha Speaks of All Causes* translated into Chinese by An Shigao, Maitreya will come to this human world to attain buddhahood after 570,600,000 years, which is an unimaginably long time. Here in the second chapter of this sutra, the Buddha

declared his entrustment to every emanation of Ksitigarbha gathering in the Trayastrimsa Heaven. He said, “Those who fail to be tamed by me would experience ripened effects of their negative karma. When they fall into lower realms, you Ksitigarbha should remember that I have solemnly, sincerely and repeatedly entrusted you that it is your responsibility to bring these beings to liberation.” In the last chapter, *Entrusting Humans and Devas*, Buddha Shakyamuni once again entrusted Ksitigarbha with those untamed beings and asked him to use great supernatural power and skillful means to guide them across to liberation.

From here we see that even the Buddha was not able to bring each and every being to enlightenment at his time. It is then unnecessary to expect ordinary Dharma teachers like us to try to liberate all sentient beings in this even more degenerate age. Sometimes, just planting a virtuous seed in one’s mind alone can be extremely difficult. It is also possible that even though we may exert all our strengths to benefit someone, sometimes we not only fail to bring any benefit to them, but even worse, we inflict harm on them.

Therefore, in the course of propagating the Dharma and benefiting beings, it is best to focus on those beings who have karmic connections with us. If some people are simply impossible to convert even though we have exhausted every possible means, then we should hand them over to a more suitable person to continue working on



their enlightenment. People's karmic conditions are inconceivable, for example, some would not be tamed by Ananda, yet Manjushri found a way; some where Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara failed but Ananda and Kasyapa succeeded in getting remedies to subdue them. If we hand them over to someone else who happens to have stronger affinity with them, they might be liberated more swiftly. This is a very useful skillful means.

## **How Does Ksitigarbha Guide Beings?**

**At that time, emanation Ksitigarbha Bodhisattvas from the various worlds returned together to one form, and weeping from pity and great love, he said to the Buddha, "Throughout many long kalpas Buddhas have guided me, so that I am able to attain inconceivable spiritual power and be replete with great wisdom. My emanations fill worlds as numerous as the sand grains in hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of Ganges Rivers. In each of these worlds, I transform into hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of emanations. Each emanation guides hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of people across, causing them to revere and take refuge in the Triple Gem, leave samsara forever, and reach the bliss of nirvana. [...]**



Upon hearing the Buddha's words, those inexpressible and inconceivable numbers of Ksitigarbha's emanations all emerged into one single form of Ksitigarbha. Then this Ksitigarbha was weeping to the Buddha with great love. He told the Buddha, all his inconceivable power and great wisdom were due to the guidance and blessings of buddhas throughout numerous kalpas, and now as a result, he was able to teach and guide numerous beings in numerous worlds by transforming himself into numerous emanations. As we can see, the display of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is truly inconceivable, and the blessings of buddhas are even more inconceivable.

Then how does Ksitigarbha guide sentient beings? He first teaches them to respect and take refuge in the Three Jewels, then he frees them from samsara, and eventually, he guides them to the ultimate peace of nirvana. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the first crucial step. After taking refuge, whether you later become a monastic or just remain as a lay practitioner, as long as you maintain veneration for the Three Jewels and have steadfast faith at all time, and keep daily practices and prayers in your lifetime instead of committing any severe negativity, then even if you are not practicing diligently, you will never be corrupted and fall into the lower realms. This is stated in many sutras such as the *The Noble Sutra of Recalling the Three Jewels*.

Certainly, it is only Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva who has such a great aspiration and power to manifest countless emanations in order to liberate countless suffering beings. Some other bodhisattvas who have not attained such power or have not made such an aspiration may not even be able to go to hells. In the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*, it states, “He is called Ksitigarbha because of his great courage. He appears in the department of a monastic.” The Sanskrit word Ksitigarbha can be translated as Earth Treasury, and it also means the treasury of quality, or as indicated in this sutra, being very courageous.

The appearance of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva in Han Buddhism is somehow different from that in Tibetan Buddhism. In Han Buddhism, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva usually appears as a monastic monk, as described in the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*. In many stories of Ksitigarbha in Han Buddhism, Ksitigarbha is a monk holding a monk staff in his right hand and a wish-fulfilling jewel in his left hand. While in Tibetan Buddhism, Ksitigarbha is in a sambhogakaya form, adorned with thirteen special ornaments. In Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *Verses of the Eight Noble Auspicious Ones*, Ksitigarbha holds a vase of goodness and a wish-fulfilling jewel in his hands, which is based on the traditional depiction of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas. He has another liturgy of Ksitigarbha, in which the bodhisattva holds a wish-fulfilling jewel in one hand, and a flower in the other.

These forms of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva in both Tibetan Buddhism and Han Buddhism can be the object of visualization when you practice Ksitigarbha. You can choose the form in which you have the strongest faith. In fact, as long as you have faith towards a particular bodhisattva, no matter what robes he wears and what postures or mudra he takes, it would be similarly meaningful to you.

**[...] As long as they do good deeds in Buddhadharma, even if such deeds are as little as a strand of hair, a drop of water, a grain**

**of sand, a speck of dust, or a bit of a minute down hair, I will gradually guide them across to liberation, causing them to gain great benefits. [...]**

What kind of sentient beings can be guided and liberated by Ksitigarbha? They are those who engage in virtuous activities within the Buddhadharma. Even if their good deeds are as little as a hair, a drop, a grain of sand, or a speck of dust, a bit of a minute down hair, Ksitigarbha will gradually guide and save them, and bring them both temporary and ultimate benefits.

So we should never neglect a good deed just because it is trivial. As an old saying goes, “Do not fail to do a good thing even if it is small, and do not commit an evil thing even if it is small.” Speaking of the Dharma practice, we should never think it meaningless or insignificant to make a prostration or offer a little lamp in front of a buddha statue, or to chant the name of a buddha or bodhisattva even just a few times. Actually, even the chanting of Ksitigarbha’s name seven times can create incredible power to pacify our mental afflictions, as well as to bring peace to the entire world.

It is quite important for each of us to make connections to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, either by making his statue, printing his sutra, reciting his name, or by any other virtuous deeds. With such connection, we gain the hope to be transformed and liberated by

him in the future. Also, if we want to help someone, the best and most efficient way is to get this person connected with Ksitigarbha. On the contrary, if no virtue related to the Dharma is performed, one will not be able to form any connection with Ksitigarbha, and consequently one cannot attain liberation through the power of this great bodhisattva.

## **Ksitigarbha, Savior of Beings of the Degenerate Age**

**[...] O World-Honored One, please do not be concerned about future living beings who have unwholesome karma."**

**Thus he said three times to the Buddha, "O World-Honored One, please do not be concerned about future living beings who have unwholesome karma."**

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva spoke this three times to Buddha Shakyamuni, promising the Buddha that he would take care of those most rebellious, obstinate and evil beings whom even the Buddha found difficult to transform. At the end of the sutra, the Buddha once again entrusted beings in the evil time of degeneration to Ksitigarbha, and Ksitigarbha assured the Buddha that he would take the responsibility of liberating sentient beings of the degenerate age.

Ksitigarbha certainly has great power and skillful means. In this degenerate age, whether it is to liberate sentient beings or tame our own afflicted mind, we should pray to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva for his great blessing. Due to his past profound and vast vows and the promise he made to Buddha Shakyamuni, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is especially compassionate towards beings with severe negative karma and he will save them with all his skillful means.

At the time when the Dharma was prosperous and the afflictive emotions of sentient beings were much weaker, for instance, at the Age of the Right Dharma, a lot of buddhas and bodhisattvas manifested in the world. And since there were so many great masters present to guide sentient beings, many achieved different stages of enlightenment through Dharma practice. Given that all kinds of favorable causes and conditions were gathered together, everything was auspicious at that time.

In the present degenerate age, however, unwholesomeness is everywhere. In the outer phenomenal world, all types of natural and man-made disasters such as wars and famine, which have been increasingly obvious in the past 30 or 40 years, are ravaging sentient beings. In people's inner worlds, their root and subsidiary afflictive emotions, such as greed, hatred, ignorance, jealousy, arrogance, hypocrisy, deception and resentment, are like surging waves accelerating day by day. Within Buddhism itself, heartbreaking

news appears frequently: monasteries and buddha statues being demolished, eminent masters passing into nirvana, etc.

At a time like this, it is impossible for us to avoid these tragedies by our own effort. We must rely on the very powerful deities such as Ksitigarbha, Padmasambhava and Tara to safeguard us. By sincerely and fervently praying to these deities, many negativities in either the outer world or the inner world can be drastically transformed. If some of them cannot be transformed, it is only due to the severe ripening karma that cannot be stopped by any means. This is how the karmic law works in the phenomenal world.

**At that time, the Buddha praised Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, saying, "Excellent, excellent! I will help in your aspirations. You will be able to fulfill the profound vows taken throughout many long kalpas, finish guiding [beings] far and wide [to the other shore], and immediately attain bodhi."**

The Buddha praised Ksitigarbha and said, "I am pleased with your vows and I rejoice in your deeds. The vast and profound vows you made through so many kalpas will be fulfilled and your vast activities to bring sentient beings everywhere to liberation will be accomplished. By then, you will instantly attain bodhi." So it is not that Ksitigarbha will never attain buddhahood. When his



activities are accomplished, he will reach unexcelled and perfect enlightenment.



## Chapter Three

*Observing the Karmic Conditions of  
Living Beings*

Ksitigarbha is the great bodhisattva who is able to convert immutable karma. So as long as we pray to him sincerely, by either chanting his name or his mantra or his sutra, there is no doubt that both our negative karma and the suffering of hell beings can be eliminated miraculously!

—Khenpo Sodargye

# **Lecture Six**

**July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

## PROPER WAY IN MAKING OFFERINGS

I have noticed that many Dharma friends are not completely aware of how to properly lay out offerings in front of the Three Jewels. This is a basic and important knowledge that Buddhist followers should master. I would like to talk about this topic a little bit before today's teaching.

Generally, the offerings should be placed at a position lower than any buddha statue or thangka and the proportion among them should be aesthetically pleasing. Some people arrange their home shrines properly and when you walk into their shrines, everything is well-adorned and nice-looking, naturally inspiring one's respect to the Three Jewels. But many others seem to be unclear about such basic knowledge. For example, some people would pile up fruits high like a mountain and the statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas are completely covered by them. It is almost like the Monkey King Sun Wukong did when he was living inside the Mountain

of Flowers and Fruits. Some place the buddha statues behind the mountain-like offerings, blocking the statues from view. Some place two piles of fruits in the shape of a mandala on both sides of a buddha statue, which is much lower than the fruit piles in the previous example. Some offer very big bowls in front of smaller buddha statues or the smaller images of Dharma protectors. These scenes make one feel like a very small person using a gigantic bowl to eat. None of these is an appropriate way to make offerings to buddhas and bodhisattvas in a shrine.

In the Seven-Branch Offerings and Mandala Offerings sections, Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* introduces clearly the proper way of making offerings. For instance, it says that one should use clean and perfectly pure offerings, without being ensnared by stinginess, hypocrisy, or ostentation. Also, whatever form of offering one makes, if one makes it beautiful and pleasing, even if it is just in the way it is set out, reflecting the respect that one shows to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, they will bring a vast amount of merit. Patrul Rinpoche therefore urges us to make an effort in arranging our offerings properly and nicely.

Generally speaking, Buddhist traditions have evolved specific requirements for setting out offerings. The items of offering may vary according to different traditions and the main deity being worshiped in the shrine. To some extent, you could arrange your

offerings that conform to your own culture and traditions but do not simply just lay out offerings based on your own preferences, putting anything you find pleasing on the offering table and making the shrine very messy. Although you may make offerings with a pure mind, if you arrange the offerings haphazardly and offer anything you like, the merit generated is much less than if you had set them out neatly and beautifully while conforming to the Buddhist tradition. If you don't know what offerings are suitable and how to arrange them, a good reference would be to refer to how offerings are set out in tangkas or in some traditionally prestigious monasteries.

In conclusion, making offerings to the Three Jewels is a Buddhist culture that we should all understand. It is like building an extraordinary building or even just a small specialty inn, an elaborate design is critical. When we make offerings in our shrines, we should know the specific rules and follow them accordingly.

## EFFICACY STORY: BEING SAVED FROM MISFORTUNES

Now I'd like to talk about a story from the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*. In the Tang Dynasty, there was a provincial governor named Jutong Kang who had great faith in Buddhism. He made offerings to Ksitigarbha for many years and intended to draw the picture of Ksitigarbha. After finishing the drawing and even before putting colors on it, the picture emitted radiant light which greatly enhanced his faith.

One day, he had a dream in which he was chased by two horse riders. He was unable to outrun them so he just stood there in fear. The two persons got off their horses and said to him, "We made a mistake. You are a patron of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. The Lord of Death once said he would not capture any patron of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva even if they had committed heavy negativities." After saying these words, the two persons disappeared. When he woke



up the next morning, he made grand offerings to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva as an expression of gratitude to him.

Later during the reign of Emperor Tang Xizong, evil ghost spirits caused widespread plague across the country and took the lives of numerous people. One night Jutong had a dream that hundreds of ghost spirits came to his door, but they muttered, "This is Ksitigarbha's house, we cannot go inside.", and then they just left. Many bad things like these in Jutong's life were avoided through Ksitigarbha's power and blessing.

At the age of 87, Jutong became slightly ill one day so he fervently prayed to Ksitigarbha with the hope of recovery. Later a young monk entered his dream and told him, "You had killed a kind of finch and this negative karma would have caused you to fall into hell. Now this karma can only be exhausted through your illness. Please forgive me and bear with your illness for another couple of days, and then you should be able to take birth in Amitabha's Pure Land." After Jutong woke up, he was so delighted and he prostrated to Ksitigarbha. Then after a couple of days, he fully recovered and eventually took rebirth in the Pure Land.

With the current worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and all kinds of rampant natural calamities, we should know that as long as we have faith in and pray to Ksitigarbha wholeheartedly, all of

these negativities can be eliminated. According to the records in the Buddhist texts, there were many cases that various epidemics and diseases were dispelled by the power of Ksitigarbha. Now in order to protect ourselves, we need to take precautions such as frequent hand washing, mask-wearing, and frequent disinfection. More importantly, from the spiritual point of view, we should also pray to buddhas and bodhisattvas by reciting their names and mantras as an extraordinary way to protect the lives of ourselves and others.

# THE RIPENED EFFECTS OF WRONGDOINGS

## Chapter Three

### Observing the Karmic Conditions of Living Beings

At that time, the Buddha's mother, Queen Maya, respectfully joined her palms and asked Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, "Holy One, living beings of Jambudvipa generate different karma. What ripened effects do they experience?"

Ksitigarbha replied, "There are thousands of myriads of worlds and lands: some have hells, others do not have hells; some have women, others do not have women; some have Buddhadharma, others do not have Buddhadharma; this is also the case for [the presence or absence of] sravakas, pratyekabuddhas, and so forth. There is not only the category of ripened effects of wrongdoing as occur in the hells."



If sentient beings of Jambudvipa created severely negative karma, very likely they will fall into the hell realm. The most horrible hell in the hell realm is the Incessant Hell. This chapter introduces the primary cause of rebirth in the Incessant Hell and the types of suffering one would experience in it.

Although sometimes the Buddha's mother refers to Mahaprajapati, the woman who raised him, Shakyamuni Buddha's biological mother was Queen Maya. She passed away seven days after giving birth to the Buddha and then was reborn into the Trayastrimsa Heaven. Jambudvipa refers to the world we're living in now. Here the question and answer between Queen Maya and Ksitigarbha seem to be not directly related. Queen Maya asked Ksitigarbha the

various kinds of wrongdoings sentient beings of this world committed and the corresponding retributions they would experience. However, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva did not address her question directly, but instead gave her a big picture of the infinite worlds and lands which also result from different karma of sentient beings.

The situations of the infinite worlds and lands vary a lot. Some have hells while some not; some have women while others not as in the case of Amitabha's Pure Land; some have Buddhadharma and others don't; some worlds have shravakas and pratyekabuddhas present and others do not, so on and so forth. All the disparities are the results of different karma generated by different living beings. This means that karmic retribution does not occur only in hells. If all karma only ripens in hells, then it would be awfully terrifying. Actually, experiencing suffering in hells is the most severe karmic retribution sentient beings could receive.

**Queen Maya again said to the Bodhisattva, "I wish to hear about the lower realms brought on by the ripened effects of wrongdoing in Jambudvīpa."**

**Ksitigarbha replied, "Holy Mother, please listen and I will briefly speak about that."**

**The Buddha's mother answered, "Holy One, please tell me."**

As mentioned in the sixth chapter of this sutra, “The mental stirring and thoughts of living beings of Jambudvīpa almost always concern wrongdoings.” Since sentient beings in this world create a frightening amount of negative karma, the ripened effects they experience would certainly be dreadful. This was why Queen Maya wanted to really hear about the various negative karma created by beings of Jambudvīpa, and the retributions they would experience in the lower realms, especially in the Incessant Hell.

Once again Queen Maya restated her question. Her further inquiry to Kṣitigarbha reminds us of what a persistent reporter would do in a news conference where a reporter would raise a very sharp question to the host and the host would try to dodge the question by giving an equivocal response. Then the reporter would follow up and keep on grilling the host by repeating the question and asking the host to answer it directly. Queen Maya was similar. She wanted to hear about the wrongdoings of beings in Jambudvīpa and their karmic retributions, not an overall summary introduction of different worlds.

This time, Kṣitigarbha didn’t equivocate but answered her question directly. Since the various types of suffering living beings would experience in the hell realm and the number of hells are infinite, it was impossible to describe them in detail even using countless kalpas, so Kṣitigarbha just described it in a succinct manner.

## CRIMES THAT LEAD ONE TO THE INCESSANT HELL

**At that time, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva said to the Holy Mother, “The offenses in Jambudvipa and the ripened effects are like these: If there are living beings who are not filial toward their parents, who even kill them, they will fall into the Incessant Hell, and for thousands of myriads of millions of kalpas, be without a time of release despite their wishes.**

Ksitigarbha described the gravest wrongdoings that sentient beings in Jambudvipa could commit which would cause them to fall into the Incessant Hell. The wrongdoings are categorized into five groups which are similar but not identical to the five crimes with immediate retribution introduced in other sutras. There are also different classifications of the acts similar to the five crimes with immediate retribution. In some treatises, the wrongdoings mentioned here such as defiling monks and nuns, and damaging the property of the Three Jewels are categorized as acts similar to

the five crimes with immediate retribution. For example, in Karma Chakme Rinpoche's *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*, the five crimes with immediate retribution are killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing one's teacher, killing an Arhat, maliciously drawing blood from the body of a buddha, and creating a schism in the sangha. The acts similar to the five crimes with immediate retribution in this prayer are: killing ordained monks, defiling ordained nuns, purposely damaging the pictures or statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas, destroying a stupa, and damaging a shrine hall or a Dharma hall.

The first group of crimes that would lead someone to fall into the Incessant Hell for an infinite period of time include being unfilial towards, not respecting, or killing one's parents. As explained in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha*, although our parents are just ordinary beings, not noble arhats or bodhisattvas, they should be the object of our deep veneration because they have brought us into this world and raised us and we all owe them a great debt of gratitude. That is why if we don't respect them, or even harm them, the karmic retribution will be horrible.

There's a sutra called the *Six Realms of Cyclic Existence Sutra*, a sutra compiled by Ashvaghosha and translated by Master Ri Cheng from Sanskrit into Chinese in the Song Dynasty. In this sutra, it says:



*Towards one's parents and teachers,  
And those of merit and virtue,  
One who shows arrogance or even kills them  
Will surely fall into the Incessant Hell.*

Due to their ignorance of the law of cause and effect, some people may show disrespect, arrogance towards or even kill their parents in the present lifetime. If they fail to purify such negative karma through confession, they are bound to fall into the Incessant Hell where they cannot get out for an infinite period of time.

**“If there are living beings who shed a Buddha’s blood, who slander the Triple Gem, who disrespect the sacred sutras, they too will fall into the Incessant Hell, and for thousands of myriads of millions of kalpas, be without a time of release despite their wishes.**

This is the second group of crimes that would lead wrongdoers into the Incessant Hell. The crime of shedding a buddha’s blood can be committed under two situations. First, when the Buddha was alive, it refers to causing the Buddha’s body to bleed. Second, after the Buddha’s parinirvana, this crime can refer to deliberately destroying a buddha’s image, be it a thangka or a buddha statue. In the first example, Devadatta tried to kill the Buddha by throwing a rock at him from high up on a mountain but the Buddha was only



slightly wounded in the foot by a splinter. Though the Buddha's body has transformed to the indestructible vajra body, there are still people who have unfavorable connections with the Buddha in their past lives trying to harm or even kill the Buddha with a malicious intention. An equivalent crime to this after the Buddha's parinirvana is to harm or kill a vajra master.

The crime of slandering the Triple Gem means to denigrate the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha or to destroy the physical representations of the Three Jewels. The crime of disrespecting the sacred sutras means showing no respect to or sullyng Buddhist scriptures whether it be sutras or tantras. For instance, even though someone may respect the Buddha, if he treats the Buddhist texts

the same as any other worldly book and toss them around without regards, such behaviors disrespect the Dharma. Committing these kinds of misdeeds result in an awful consequence and would lead the person to fall into the Incessant Hell.

During the Cultural Revolution, for political, religious, and other reasons, many individuals committed grave crimes in the persecution of Buddhism and the Three Jewels. Although Buddhism is not at all an aggressive religion, its thriving growth may have invited jealousy and aggression from other individuals or religious communities who would then choose to inflict harm on Buddhism in various ways. Some even disguise themselves as monastic members in the sangha to achieve their purpose of damaging Buddhism.

There were those who held other beliefs yet pretended to be monastic sangha, wearing monastic robes and taught the Dharma to others. Seeing the majestic representatives of the Three Jewels such as magnificent buddha statues and stupas, or witnessing the growth of the sangha communities, these people were so resentful that they would use any means to do harm to the Three Jewels. The Buddha said in the *The Shurangama Sutra*, “In the degenerate times, false teachers as many as sand-grains in the River Ganges will appear and teach the Dharma.”

There have been numerous similar situations throughout history in both the West and the East. For example, an emperor who was a believer of one religion may seek to eradicate all other religions such as Buddhism. Or even a village governor who may have beliefs other than Buddhism would cause damage to buddha images, stupas and Buddhist scriptures and so on in his area of governance. Related prophecies about Buddhism being persecuted in various periods of time have been clearly stated in Padmasambhava's biographies.

The fact is that the Three Jewels can never be truly damaged. Destroying buddha statues doesn't mean the Dharma would vanish. Even if some scriptures were destroyed, it doesn't mean all scripture are destroyed. For example, someone burns the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* around his place, but the same sutras in other places still exist; if someone demolishes buddha statues around his place, buddha statues in other places still remain intact; if a president puts the monastic sangha in jail in his country, there are still many other sangha communities in other countries. However, with such grave crimes, these people would generate severe negative karma that will drive them into the unbearable Incessant Hell.

So it's really a wretched and ignorant act for people to purposely damage the Three Jewels. This situation is similar to the case that

those who have no gratitude for other's kindness and they would end up with more harm to themselves. In Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*, he says,

*Those with no gratitude for kindness,  
Harm themselves more than others.  
People who cast malevolent spells  
Suffer the consequences before their enemies do.*

Regarding this verse I remember a story of a relative of mine. When he got married, all my other relatives attended his wedding. They were very kind to him and introduced him to many other people. Yet, he did not even say a word of thanks to them. Afterwards, they all thought he was like a cold stone, no matter how kind they were to him, he would never appreciate them. So my other relatives started keeping their distance from him, nobody would like to help him anymore.

Those who have no sense of gratitude and do not return others' kindness can never hurt those who have helped them, instead, not returning others' kindness would only bring great loss to themselves. In the same way, those who damage the representatives of the Three Jewels will never really destroy the Three Jewels, instead, because of their wrongdoings, they would experience

immense suffering in the Incessant Hell for countless kalpas. This is nothing but the greatest loss to themselves.

**“If there are living beings who usurp or damage the property of the sangha, who defile monks or nuns, who commit sexual acts in the monastery, or who kill or harm beings there—living beings like these will fall into the Incessant Hell, and for thousands of myriads of millions of kalpas, be without a time of release despite their wishes.”**



The third group of crimes that will lead the wrongdoers to fall into the Incessant Hell include usurping or damaging the property of the sangha, meaning to usurp the sangha's funds, spoiling

the foods of the sangha, and damaging the property that the sangha uses. For example, breaking the windows of the sangha's residences, ruining the shrine hall of the sangha, and embezzling the money offered to the sangha for reciting prayers or for meals.

When staying at a monastery, we should try to practice virtues and refrain from negative acts. If we are to enjoy the property of the sangha, we must be very careful with it. In the Vinaya, it was said that the property of the sangha is like a poison, one who has been poisoned could be cured by an antidote, however, but there is no remedy for those who are poisoned by misusing, wasting, or destroying the property of the sangha. Usually Dharma practitioners can accept and enjoy what is offered to them without worrying that it might create negative karma. However, if we take what is not offered to us or if we damage the sangha's property, for example, if we have tainted or damaged the sangha's meditation cushions and yet we have not made proper recompense, its karmic retribution would be awful.

Defiling monks or nuns means to force bhikshus, bhikshunis, siksamanas, sramaneras, or sramaneris to violate their precepts of refraining from sexual activity. Committing sexual acts in the monastery or killing or harming beings there refers to for example, having sexual activity in the shrine hall, harming or killing people in a monastery.

Lay people should especially be careful with this crime and respect the pure life of monastics. When in a monastery, lay practitioners should practice virtues such as doing prostrations, making offerings to the Three Jewels and making aspirations together with the monastic sangha. However, driven by the strong power of their negative karma, some lay practitioners become confused about what is permissible and what is not. They may even indulge themselves in obsessive love with monks or nuns and try to seduce monks or nuns to engage in sexual activity and to abandon their vows. This is very ignorant of them! There is a book called *Rescuing from the Sea of Desire* written by Anshi Zhou, a lay practitioner of the Pure Land School in the Qing Dynasty that was highly recommended by Master Yin Guang. This book talks about the misfortunes of people who indulged in sexual desire and the merits gained by people who refrained from sexual misconduct. The book also tells the stories of people who defiled monastics and the horrible sufferings they faced as a result.

Though they may not be actually defiling monks and nuns, some lay people break the pure atmosphere of a monastery and in so doing accumulates negative karma. Even while they engage in virtuous actions in a monastery, they may engage in improper behaviors due to their habitual tendencies such as losing their temper, sowing intrigues against others, or spreading rumors or



slanders. Such practitioners disturb the sangha and make everyone unhappy, and thus will accumulate severe negative karma. For example, a lay volunteer may cook meals or offer other services to the sangha with other volunteers but his uncontrolled temper annoys all those working with him. For this kind of practitioners, I would suggest that they leave the sangha and confess their negativities in a solitary place. A lay Buddhist center or a quiet retreat would be a suitable environment for them. While staying in a monastery, practitioners, monastics and lay alike should all try to maintain the peace and purity of the monastery.

Anyone who commits any of the crimes described above without confessing them will fall into the Incessant Hell for an infinite period of time. Even after a thousand buddhas have appeared in this world, his or her karmic retribution may still continue. Therefore, timely confession is crucial for those who commit such crimes.

**“If there are living beings who pretend to be monastics but whose hearts are not those of monastics—they abuse the property of the sangha, deceive lay devotees, go against the precepts, do various evil acts—living beings like these will fall into the Incessant Hell, and for thousands of myriads of millions of kalpas, be without a time of release despite their wishes.**



The fourth group of severe crimes that will lead the wrongdoers to fall into the Incessant Hell concerns the abuse of the property of the sangha and cheating Buddhist followers. A typical example of this nowadays is to solicit donations from Buddhists with various improper reasons. Some monastics or lay Buddhists make pleas for donations on many occasions. They use the name of a monastery or a Dharma teacher to collect donations, saying they will invest the money to make buddha statues, to organize group practice and studies, or to construct buildings for the monastery. They are skilled at soliciting donations in the name of highly visible ongoing projects.

For instance, when they see an ongoing construction project, they would use the project to swindle others. Maybe they didn't have the intention to cheat in the beginning and only thought that their actions would create an opportunity for others to accumulate merit. Over the course, however, they were unable to separate their own money and the donations they had collected. It could be that they had mingled their personal money and the collected money. In that case, they should clarify their mistake to the sangha as well as to all donors and make up for the loss. But if they simply ignore or rudely deny their faults and continue to spend the donated money carelessly, they would create the very negative karma described in the text. Even worse are those who from the very beginning have solicited the donation solely for their personal benefits and tried to cover their actions by misusing the name of the sangha community. They are getting themselves into serious trouble in both this and future lives.

Whether it is at Larung Gar or at my own monastery, no one is allowed to collect donations for whatever project by boasting its merit. Having been staying at Larung Gar for more than thirty years, I have never collected any donations. However, some people would use my name to solicit donations, saying things like Khenpo is particularly short of money. Anyone who hears remarks like this should be vigilant for being deceived. Although the *Sutra*

*on Praising the Noble Qualities of the Sangha* says that we should venerate monks and nuns, such veneration does not necessarily require you to give money to them or say that you have to do so in order to prove your pure perception towards the sangha. Instead, one should always observe carefully before making any donation. It is quite true that not all Buddhists are trustworthy, and some people are very gifted in talking people into donating money. Therefore, when encountering others collecting donations in certain names, please first confirm its authenticity.

It is not good for a sangha community or an individual monk or nun to accumulate too much money or lead a lavish life. One should be content as long as there is enough food and sustenance. Even if one has been a devoted practitioner for many years, the pleasures of luxury and great wealth could still corrupt such a person in short order. Since only those practitioners who have achieved a stable state of spiritual realization would not be lured and tainted by money and wealth, there is a high risk for the majority of ordinary people of getting corrupted when dealing with money and properties. Everyone who aspires to be a good practitioner should keep this in mind.

**“If there are living beings who steal the wealth, goods, grains, food, drink, clothing from the property of the sangha, who take anything at all [from the sangha] that is not given to them, they**

**will fall into the Incessant Hell, and for thousands of myriads of millions of kalpas, be without a time of release despite their wishes.”**

The fifth crime is stealing from the sangha. We should not take anything at all without permission from the sangha even if it is as little as a needle, a thread, a blade of grass or a small log because the karmic result is very severe. People who are in charge of the property of the sangha should be extremely prudent with this, because the karmic retribution of the slightest mistake in managing the sangha’s property will bring unbearable suffering in hell. In order to manage the property of the sangha, one must have deep conviction in the law of cause and effect. Otherwise, one could accumulate severely negative karma out of one’s ignorance and inattention that result in theft from the sangha.

For Larung Gar, whenever money is involved, whether in a department or in certain projects, a supervisor should not be indifferent to the finance and just let his subordinates take full responsibilities. If he is asked to account for the details and his subordinates are unable to provide appropriate substantiation, it is not at all sufficient to gain the trust of others by simply saying, “I am a man of integrity and I swear in the name of the Three Jewels that I have never misappropriated any money.”

When the Samye Stupa of Larung Gar was in construction, I was the one supervising the project. Although we had only very minimum amount of fund for building the stupa, I still requested the cashier and the accountant responsible for the project to provide me a written report individually once a month. Some monastics might become lax after they have been supervising a project or department for a while. I am confident that monastics at Larung Gar who are in charge of such activities will not use the fund of the sangha for their own enjoyment, as they all have conviction in the law of cause and effect. Nevertheless, in order to be responsible for those volunteer subordinates, sound financial controls and supervision should be established and implemented. Without such controls, some may be tempted to misuse or embezzle the fund of the sangha due to their ignorance and carelessness, bringing negative consequences to themselves and others.

Therefore, it is best to have an accountant, a cashier, and a controller to manage the money when dealing with the property of the sangha in a monastery or a Buddhist community. It is very important to maintain a clear record of every account consistent with accepted accounting practices. I recommend to always have more than one authorized signers for a check as this is in accordance with the general financial control standards. We should exercise

prudence and care when dealing with the wealth and property of the sangha.

**Ksitigarbha continued, saying, “Holy Mother, if there are living beings who commit such offenses, they will fall into the hell with fivefold incessancy. Although they seek for their suffering to stop temporarily, that will not happen, not even for a thought-moment.”**

One who commits any of the crimes described above will fall into the Incessant Hell and experience immense suffering without even a momentary reprieve. In the human realm, no matter how miserable we feel from our suffering, we still have a chance to get some temporary relief. Even if one is seriously ill, there’s a chance that one can improve for the better or even recover; and if one suffers from insomnia, he or she may not be able to fall asleep for a couple of days but would eventually get some sleep. Even if we experience the most tremendous suffering as human beings, there would be an interruption or a termination for it. However, it is impossible for the suffering in the Incessant Hell to be interrupted, not even for a thought-moment.

## SUFFERINGS IN THE INCESSANT HELL

Queen Maya again asked Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “Why is that hell named Incessant Hell?”

Ksitigarbha replied, “Holy Mother, the hells are within the Great Iron Encircling Mountains. There are eighteen of the great hells; second [to them] there are five hundred, each with a different name; and next, there are hundreds of thousands, each also with a distinct name.

“In regard to the Incessant Hell, this city of hells is more than eighty thousand li in perimeter. The city walls are made entirely of iron, ten thousand li in height. Atop these walls the mass of fire leaves hardly a gap. Within this city of hells, the various hells are interconnected, each with a different name. There is just one hell named Incessant. It is eighteen thousand li in perimeter. Its hell walls are a thousand li in height, all made of iron, and with flames at the top reaching to the bottom and flames at the





**bottom reaching to the top. Iron snakes and iron dogs spew fire and rush here and there in pursuit atop these hell walls.”**

**“In this hell there is a bed that extends for ten thousand li. When one person undergoes torment there, that person sees his own body filling the bed. When thousands of myriads of people undergo torment there, each of them sees his own body filling the bed, too. Such are the ripened effects brought on by the many [kinds of] karma.”**

When asked how the Incessant Hell got its name, Ksitigarbha first gave an overall picture of the hells within the Great Iron Encircling Mountains. In summary, there are eighteen great hells,



five hundred middles ones and hundreds of thousands of small ones, each with a different name.

All these hells are linked to one another forming an entire city of hells. Atop the walls of the city, massive and pervasive fires burn leaving hardly a gap. In this city of hells, there is only one massive hell called the Incessant Hell. Its massive 300-mile tall walls are made entirely of iron with fire burning from top to bottom. On the top of the walls, blazing iron snakes and iron dogs stand guard, spewing fire and rushing here and there pursuing and frightening all, leaving them nowhere to hide.

Beings in the Incessant Hell experience various special karmic retributions. Inside this hell there is a bed that extends for more than three thousand miles. One who suffers there can see himself filling that bed, when thousands of people are suffering there, each of them sees himself filling that entire bed, too.

**“Moreover, the wrongdoers undergo all manner of suffering. There are hundreds of thousands of yaksas and evil ghosts with teeth like swords and eyes like lightning who pull and drag the wrongdoers with copper-clawed hands. There are also yaksas wielding large iron halberds who pierce the wrongdoers’ bodies, into their mouths and noses or into their abdomens and backs. They toss them into the air, catch them again, or else place them on the bed. There are also iron eagles that peck at the wrongdoers’ eyes. There are also iron snakes that strangle the wrongdoers’ necks. Long nails are driven into all their hundreds of joints. Their tongues are pulled out and plowed through. Their bowels are drawn out and chopped up. Molten copper is poured into their mouths. Their bodies are bound in hot iron. They undergo myriads of deaths and as many births. Such are the consequences brought about by their karma.**



What's more, the wrongdoers in the Incessant Hell undergo all kinds of suffering. Hundreds of thousands of ferocious yakshas and evil ghosts with sword-like teeth and lightning-like eyes drag the wrongdoers with their copper-clawed hands. Yakshas use huge iron halberds to hurl the wrongdoers' bodies, pierce their mouths and noses and stab their bellies and backs. They toss them into the air and catch them by skewering them with the halberds and hurl them onto the iron bed.

Also, burning iron eagles peck at the eyes of the wrongdoers, and iron snakes strangle the wrongdoers' necks. In all the hundreds of joints of their bodies, long nails are spiked through. Because of the ripening of their karma, their tongues, when pulled out, become

so huge and they experience the suffering of their tongues being plowed through. Their internal organs including intestines, lungs, and livers are drawn out and chopped up piece by piece. Molten copper is poured into their mouths and their bodies are wrapped up in burning hot iron. They experience myriads of sufferings and also undergo myriads of births and deaths in this hell. All these are the results of their various negative karma in their previous lives.

We should contemplate on the scenes of this hell described in the text carefully. Of course, without being able to see such miserable situations in person, we won't be able to imagine it or feel it vividly. Nowadays there are cartoons to describe these kinds of scenes in the hells. By looking at them, we may be able to have some feeling about the real hell.

**“They pass through millions of kalpas without a time of release despite their wishes. When this world undergoes destruction, they will be transferred to live [and suffer] in another world. When that world undergoes destruction, they will be transferred to another one. When that other world, too, undergoes destruction, they will pass in turn through others. After this world is formed, they will return here once again. Such are the ripened effects of wrongdoing as occur in the Incessant Hell.**

Although they are all desperate to be liberated from such intense and unbearable suffering, beings in the Incessant Hell cannot escape from it even after millions of kalpas. When the world undergoes destruction, if their karmic retribution of experiencing the suffering in the hell hasn't come to a stop, the wrongdoers will be transferred to the hell of another world to continue the suffering. When that world undergoes destruction, they will again be conveyed to the hell of the next world and so on. They will be passed through the hells of different worlds until this world is formed again. By then, if they still need to experience the karmic retribution, they will come back to the hell of this world. The time for the karmic retribution in the Incessant Hell is infinite.

If our world were really like the way the atheists describe and that there is no heaven nor hell, and people only live once without past or future lives, then it wouldn't matter if one commits negative karma or not, because he or she wouldn't experience its retribution of tremendous suffering. However, life is not a one-time deal and we don't only come to this world once. In reality, there is a variety of different information stored in our mindstreams such as our memories, propensities, and habitual tendencies which are none other than the traces of our past actions. All the negativities we had committed are stored in our mindstreams in the form of seeds, and at the proper time and under the right conditions, these seeds will

ripen into effects. As a result of the ripening of our negative karma, we would experience unbearable suffering in the hell realm.

The suffering of the Incessant Hell is indeed indescribable. Just as it is said in the *Collection of Essence of All Sutras*, “Once falling into the Incessant Hell, one will suffer from endless physical torture.” The following text describes five reasons why this hell is called Incessant. This is a unique teaching in this sutra because there’s no such extensive explanation in other sutras.

## **Five Qualities of Incessant Hell**

**“Moreover, this hell is called Incessant because of five qualities of such karmic consequences. What are the five?**

**“First, torment is undergone day and night throughout many kalpas with never any break. Therefore, it is called Incessant.**

**“Second, one person fills this hell; many people fill it, too. Therefore, it is called Incessant.**

**“Third, there are instruments of torment such as forks, clubs, eagles, snakes, wolves, dogs, pestles, grinders, saws, chisels, files, axes, cauldrons of boiling liquid, iron nets, iron ropes, iron donkeys, and iron horses. The wrongdoers are flayed alive. Their heads are bound in their own skin. Hot iron is poured over their**



bodies. They swallow iron balls when hungry and drink molten iron when thirsty. The wretched suffering continues nonstop throughout nayutas of kalpas. Therefore, it is called Incessant.

“Fourth, be they men, women, of any race, young or old, of upper or lower class, or nagas, spirits, devas, or ghosts, they all undergo such karmic consequences based on the offenses they committed. Therefore, it is called Incessant.

“Fifth, if beings fall into this hell, they will undergo myriads of deaths and myriads of births each day and night from the time of entry and on through hundreds of thousands of kalpas. Although they seek to pause, even in a thought-moment, that



**will not happen. Only when their karma is exhausted can they be reborn. Because of this continuity, it is called Incessant.”**

There are five reasons why the hell is called Incessant. First, the time to experience suffering in this hell is incessant. The wrongdoers experience torment day and night through many kalpas without having a moment of rest. In the *Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs*, it is said that beings in the Incessant Hell have to endure suffering for as long as one kalpa without interruption. In a prison where it is deemed as a place of suffering, prisoners will be released after serving their sentences; even one is sentenced to life imprisonment, he or she may not be in prison next life. However, beings in the Incessant Hell experience uninterrupted suffering through many kalpas and they can't even choose to die. This is the first reason why it is called Incessant.

Second, each wrongdoer's body occupies the entire hell. No matter if it is only one being or many beings, each of them finds his body filling the entire hell so it is called Incessant.

Third, the suffering is incessant. Beings are tortured with various implements continuously. Pestles are used to crush or grind beings' body in a mortar, just like rice is husked in a mortar. Grinders are used to grind beings' body gradually. Saws and chisels are used to cut their bodies piece by piece. They are hung on the iron nets to

be burnt and are tied up with iron ropes. Iron donkeys and iron horses trample over their bodies. Their heads are wrapped with their own skins; burning molten iron is poured on their bodies. They swallow iron balls to deal with hunger and drink molten iron to quench their thirst. They experience the various forms of suffering without interruption through numerous kalpas so their suffering is incessant.

Fourth, the karmic result is inescapable. Regardless of species, whether it be humans, dragons, gods, celestial beings or ghosts, and regardless of one's race, gender, age, or social status, anyone who commits the negativities leading to the Incessant Hell will for sure fall into this hell without exception. This is why it is called Incessant.

Fifth, beings experience never-ending births and deaths uninterruptedly. From the moment the wrongdoers enter this hell and on through hundreds of thousands of kalpas, they continually undergo myriads of births and myriads of deaths each day and night. During that time, even a brief pause of suffering is not possible. Only when their karma is exhausted should they be liberated from this hell. Hence, it is called Incessant.

In the Chinese text, there is a phrase Qiang, Hu, Yi, Di, (Chi: 羌胡夷狄) which means people of different races from all directions.

Some people believe it is a derogatory slang used to describe the ethnic minorities on the border of China, and because this is a very ancient way of expression in China, so they make the conclusion that this term should not exist in a Sanskrit sutra originated in ancient India, and thus the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is apocryphal. This is actually very untenable.

Each of the four characters signifies a specific meaning. The term Qiang refers to people from the west of the ancient China. Hu refers to people from the north. Yi refers to people from the east. Di also refers to people from the north. So it is possible that the translator used this term to refer to people of all races from all directions, and this is a better way to suit the Chinese language and the local culture.

What's more, it is very possible that the meaning of a certain term has different connotations in different periods of time. Words that are currently derogatory, neutral, and commendatory do not necessarily have the same meaning back in ancient times. So even though this term might be a little derogatory nowadays, it doesn't mean that it was derogatory when being used more than a thousand years ago.

People often consider a term as commendatory or derogatory based on what they had learned from their teachers and they would stick

to these perceptions. But the fact is that the property of a given term changes with history and culture. We have seen in even just a couple of decades that the usage and property of a word could undergo huge changes, let alone when the time duration is over a thousand years. Therefore, it would be imprudent for academics to deduce something to be right or wrong simply based on their limited learning and personal opinions. To deny something, one must first have reasonable and meticulous methods of discernment, which is a scientific attitude that one should adopt in academic research.

**Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva said to the Holy Mother, “This is a brief description of the Incessant Hell. If I were to speak in detail about the names of the hells and the instruments of torment and also about all the sufferings there, I could not finish even in a kalpa.”**

**After hearing this, Queen Maya sorrowfully joined her palms, prostrated herself, and withdrew.**

From this text we learn that the karmic retribution a wrongdoer experiences in the Incessant Hell is truly terrifying. As a matter of fact, we may all have, intentionally or unintentionally, committed one or more of these offenses in this life or in previous lives that could lead us to fall into the hell realm. We may have embezzled



the property of the Three Jewels due to our ignorance, disrespected our parents or teachers out of our arrogance, or damaged Buddhist scriptures carelessly. Does this mean that we will face these severe consequences and that there would be no way to be freed from such grave karma? It is not necessarily the case.

Actually, all negativities can be purified through sincere confession. In the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, it says that “Anyone who commits any of the five crimes with immediate retribution should confess the crime sincerely before the thirty-five confession buddhas day and night. Should the karma be purified, the thirty-five buddhas will appear before this person.”

In many Buddhist scriptures, it is also said that with sincere confession, crimes with immediate retribution can be purified in an instant, just like King Ajatashatru, due to his sincere and powerful confession, his karmic retribution for killing his father was exhausted within a very short time. It is also said in many tantras that relying upon the blessing and power of the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, even negative karma such as the five crimes of immediate retribution can be completely purified.

What's more, in the *Great Compassion Dharani Sutra*, it says that one who has abused the property of the sangha cannot purify such a heavy negativity even after one thousand buddhas have appeared in this world, however, by reciting the Great Compassion Dharani, all severe negativities including this negativity and the five crimes with immediate retribution can all be purified.

So although we may have committed severe offenses that will lead us to the hell realm, as long as we confess these negativities sincerely either by praying to the thirty-five confession buddhas, or reciting the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva or the Great Compassion Dharani, our negativities can be purified. As the great teachers of ancient times affirmed: There is nothing good about negative karma, except that they can be purified through confession. Please bear this in mind.

After hearing Ksitigarbha's brief introduction of the Incessant Hell, Queen Maya appeared very sad for those hell beings. We now also have a rough idea of how miserable those beings are. As practitioners, we should, while confessing our own wrongdoings sincerely, also dedicate our merit accumulated through Dharma practice to the hell beings in the hope that they can be freed as soon as possible. Whether we recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, practice Vajrasattva, or pray to Ksitigarbha, we should wholeheartedly dedicate our merit to them, through which they will sooner be liberated from hell. By the extraordinary blessing of buddhas and bodhisattvas, especially by the powerful blessing of Ksitigarbha, beings in the hell realm can be liberated from their suffering. As we've learned previously, Ksitigarbha is the great bodhisattva who is able to convert immutable karma. So as long as we pray to him sincerely, by either chanting his name or his mantra or his sutra, there is no doubt that both our negative karma and the suffering of hell beings can be eliminated miraculously!

## Dedication

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



It is always our wish to present a work of the highest quality to the readers so that anyone who reads this text would find inspiration. So we would very much appreciate your comments, feedback or suggestions for how this text might be improved and made more valuable. You are also greatly welcomed if you want to make a contribution to any of our other projects of translation.

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