

**KHENPO
SODARGYE'S**
Commentary on



**ORIGINAL VOWS OF
KSITIGARBHA
BODHISATTVA
SUTRA**

2nd
of 4 books
2023 Edition

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KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA
SUTRA**

2nd 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 FOUR

*The Karmic Consequences of Living Beings
of Jambudvīpa*

If the principle of cause and effect, such as Ksitigarbha's teachings given here, can take root among them, people will be more willing to observe the ten virtues with confidence and become more righteous, reliable and trustworthy. On the other hand, if people have no idea about the consequences of their actions and thoughts, and just do whatever they feel good without any discipline or introspection, it would be difficult for them to become a kind person with noble qualities.

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture Seven

July 22nd, 2020

I would like to stress one thing before our lesson today. Tomorrow we will enter the sixth Tibetan lunar month which is considered a very auspicious month for practicing virtues because Chokhor Duchen, the anniversary of the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma by the Buddha Shakyamuni occurred on the 4th day of this month. The merit generated by any virtuous practice within this month will be multiplied numerous times. We should take advantage of this good opportunity to carry out virtuous deeds, such as learning and practicing the Dharma, chanting sutras and prayers, circumambulating stupas, offering water and lamps to the Buddha, making offerings to the sangha, and freeing captive lives.

Especially on the fourth day, Buddhist followers all over the world will actively engage in all kinds of virtues to celebrate this festival. As we know, Buddhism has four major annual festivals: Chotrul Duchen, the Festival of Miracles on the 15th day of the first month, Saga Dawa Duchen, the Festival of Vaishakha on the 15th day of the fourth month, Chokhor Duchen, the Festival of Turning the Wheel of Dharma on the 4th day of the sixth month, and Lha Bab Duchen, the Festival of the Descent from Heaven on the 22nd day of the ninth month. As said in sutras and shastras, on these days the effects of any positive or negative action are multiplied countless times. There is an incredibly special interdependency on these days so we should make good use of these occasions to

perform as many virtuous deeds as we can. If we simply ignore these opportunities, we have not fully understood the principle of dependent arising.

At a minimum, we should refrain from any negative deed and also avoid any distraction, laziness and heedlessness in this month, because any negativity generated in this month will also be amplified. Therefore, try your best to be meticulously attentive to your actions and exert all your efforts in virtuous practice. Never be timid and weak, instead be well disciplined and endure any hardship you will face in your Dharma practice.

MASTER OUYI'S CONNECTION WITH KSITIGARBHA

Before going to the text, I would like to share with you the story of the great master Ouyi Zhixu, the ninth patriarch of the Pure Land School in Han Buddhism and one of the four eminent masters of the late Ming Dynasty. When the master was a teenager, he studied Confucianism and despised Buddhism and even wrote several dozens of anti-Buddhist essays as a way to defend Confucianism. However, at the age of seventeen, he had a chance to read two books, *Jottings Under a Bamboo Window* and *Record of Self-Awareness*, both written by Master Yunqi Zhuhong who was also one of the four eminent masters of the late Ming Dynasty. Inspired by these writings, he had a change of heart toward Buddhism. Thereupon he burnt all his anti-Buddhist essays and started to follow Buddhism.

At the age of twenty, his father died, and this heartbreaking loss impacted him immensely. One day, he heard someone chanting the

Ksitigarbha Sutra. He was so attracted by this sutra that he started to read it. Deeply inspired by the sutra, he generated a sincere mind of renunciation and started to chant the name of Amitabha attentively as his main practice. At the age of twenty-two, emulating the great deeds of Amitabha, he made forty-eight great aspirations to be an authentic Mahayana practitioner. In his aspiration prayer he wrote, “I vow to liberate sentient beings till the end of time, and I will never forsake sentient beings in the time of the five degenerations, not even for a thought-moment.” This aspiration was quite like Ksitigarbha’s fundamental vow which stated that he would not attain buddhahood until the hell was emptied. Eventually at the age of twenty-four, he took ordination and formally became a monk.

The master later stayed in Mount Jiuhua as his main residence to practice the Dharma. He made great efforts to foster Ksitigarbha’s spirit in the mountain as he believed Mount Jiuhua was indeed the manifestation of Ksitigarbha and all living beings inside the mountain were offspring of this great bodhisattva. In one of the essays he wrote in Mount Jiuhua, Master Ouyi called himself “the unlearned servant of Ksitigarbha” because “it was Ksitigarbha who uprooted my wrong views and placed me in the role of a monastic sangha.” And he further encouraged every practitioner on the mountain to “give up the differentiation of others and I,

right and wrong, but whole-heartedly engage in the transcendental practice of emptiness and thus spread the great spirit of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva everywhere.”

Among his works, there were many that were related to Ksitigarbha. He composed a commentary and a guidance of the actual practice of the *Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions*, one of three main sutras on Ksitigarbha. He also made a confessional and aspirational sadhana of Ksitigarbha. The master also started to prepare commentaries on the other two sutras on Ksitigarbha, the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha* and the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra*. Unfortunately, these two works were not finished before he passed into nirvana.

As we follow in the footsteps of past great masters and learn the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, let us not just scratch its surface. Instead, I hope every one of you will be deeply inspired by Ksitigarbha and also vow to benefit sentient beings and aspire firmly, “I will not attain buddhahood until I guide all living beings of the six realms to attain the perfect and full enlightenment.” As we make such aspirations, we should further lessen our self-centeredness and enhance our altruistic mind to benefit others as much as we can. It is through the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* that Master Ouyi generated the mind of renunciation and started to practice and propagate Buddhism. In the same manner, as a result of our living environment and the

education we received since childhood, we could have denigrated the Dharma due to our ignorance. Through learning this sutra and making these great aspirations, we will surely be able to purify our negativities and bring great benefits to others.

The Ksitigarbha practice is indeed an extraordinary one. In *Always Remember*, a book of selected instructions spoken by His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, His Holiness talked about the origination and benefits of the four great annual Dharma assemblies at Larung Gar. Regarding the Dharma assembly of the Ksitigarbha practice, His Holiness talked about the benefits of praying to Ksitigarbha. He said, “Anyone who prays to Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha will enjoy long life, good health, wealth, and the fulfillment of their wishes in this life. Ultimately speaking, if you pray to Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, you will surely attain the supreme merit and wisdom of the hearers, self-realized buddhas, bodhisattvas and buddhas. Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha is a unique jewel that even 100,000 wish-fulfilling jewels cannot compare with. If you pray to an ordinary wish-fulfilling jewel, it can only bestow worldly wealth, but not exceptional transcendental merit gained through discipline, concentration, and wisdom.”

At that time His Holiness frequently addressed the unusual benefits of praying to Ksitigarbha, but since it was in my early years at Larung Gar, I often wondered why. I used to ponder, “Among the

eight great bodhisattvas, why don't we have a Dharma assembly for Avalokiteshvara or Manjushri practice, but just for Ksitigarbha?" After all, no other scripture of Ksitigarbha has been found in the Tibetan Tripitaka except the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*, and that is why the scriptural proofs Mipham Rinpoche cited for Ksitigarbha in his *Biographies of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas* are only from this sutra. Also, there were scant stories of the efficacy of Ksitigarbha in the Tibetan regions. These questions bothered me for a long time. It was not until last year when I was translating the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* that I fully understood His Holiness' deep intention. His Holiness attached so much importance to this practice likely because he had observed with his extraordinary wisdom the uncommon dependent arising of the Ksitigarbha practice.

In brief, Ksitigarbha is a wish-fulfilling jewel for every living being. In order to quickly fulfill any worldly or transcendental wish, the best way is to pray to Ksitigarbha. One time, Sertar and its downstream regions experienced severe drought for many days. During the worst of it, His Holiness asked the entire sangha of Larung Gar to recite the name of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha and then it began to rain as a result. When autumn came, harvests in the Sertar region were just as good as in normal years.

The current situation is the opposite. Many places around the world are suffering from devastating floods and the homes and livelihoods of millions of people are hopelessly destroyed. Many countries are also struggling to revive their economies that have been battered by the Covid-19 pandemic. With all these difficulties, I do believe praying to Ksitigarbha would bring us surprising changes and help us overcome obstacles that are seemingly overwhelming.

EFFICACY STORY: KSITIGARBHA CHANGED A POOR GIRL'S LIFE

In the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*, there is a story of a poor girl in the Song Dynasty. She worked as a maid and was a sincere follower of Ksitigarbha who prayed to Ksitigarbha for many years. One day, as she was observing the Eight Precepts, she saw a huge crowd of tiny golden ants crawling on the ground of her room. Fearing that she might kill them by accidentally stepping on them, she did not go into the room. The next day when she went to see the ants again, all of them had disappeared while on her bed there were piles of granules made of pure gold. She collected them and sold them, becoming extraordinarily rich. This deepened her devotion to Ksitigarbha, so she turned her house into a temple in which Ksitigarbha was venerated. Later, the wife of the local prefectural governor passed away, and the governor married the girl and held her in high regard. All the changes in her life were the result of her firm devotion and strong mindfulness of Ksitigarbha.

Even if one only considers the worldly benefits of the blessing of Ksitigarbha, they are already incredible. Anyone who wants to fulfill any worldly wish, whether it is to overcome financial difficulties or to become rich and well-respected, can pray sincerely to Ksitigarbha. As a result of the pandemic, the world has undergone many structural changes. Natural disasters seem to appear much more frequently and many people, businessmen, in particular, are facing serious financial challenges. At such a time, if we pray sincerely to Ksitigarbha, all negative circumstances may be averted. The blessing of Ksitigarbha is truly incredible, and the power of dependent arising is utterly amazing.

THE BUDDHA'S ENTRUSTMENT TO KSITIGARBHA

Chapter Four

The Karmic Consequences of Living Beings of Jambudvīpa

At that time, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, it is through the power of awesome spiritual penetration of the Buddha Tathagata that I transform into emanation-forms throughout hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of worlds to rescue all beings who undergo the ripened effects of karma. If it were not for the power of the Tathagata’s great kindness, I would not be able to perform such transformations. Now, I have further been entrusted by the Buddha to guide all beings in the six realms of existence across to liberation until Ajita becomes a Buddha. I will do so, World-Honored One. Please do not be concerned.”



This chapter talks about the unbelievable karmic consequences of living beings. Here Ajita is another name of Bodhisattva Maitreya, who would be the next buddha in this world after Buddha Shakyamuni. Ksitigarbha respectfully told the Buddha that due to the powerful blessing of the Buddha he was able to transform himself into countless forms to liberate sentient beings in all different worlds and he expressed his deep gratitude to the Buddha. In the meantime, Ksitigarbha reassured the Buddha that he had the confidence and power to guide beings across to liberation, so that the Buddha need not be too concerned for those who are simply too obstinate to tame.

The Buddha appeared to be worried about the living beings in this world because they were untamed and stubborn, and frequently created heavily negative karma. As the Buddha was about to enter nirvana, he was concerned that no one would be there to save these beings from falling into the hell realm. Ksitigarbha fully understood the Buddha's concern, so he promised to continue the Buddha's enlightenment activities of liberating all beings from samsara until the next Buddha comes to this world. It is because of Ksitigarbha's great vows and his miraculous powers that the Buddha entrusted all sentient beings of Jambudvipa to him, and as a disciple of the Buddha, Ksitigarbha also had the confidence and devotion to fulfill the entrusted task.

A deep sense of gratitude to our teacher is always needed for us Dharma practitioners. As we go to a certain place to seek the Dharma, we can only rely on our teachers to learn and deepen our insight into the Dharma. Then gradually our wisdom, compassion, and the ability to benefit others will increase. Without the guidance and instructions from our teachers, how would we acquire the precious knowledge and skillful methods required to tame our minds and better ourselves? As such, we owe our teachers a great debt of gratitude, and these teachers are the source of our spiritual development and achievement. As the saying goes, "One should always remember where one's water comes from." It is not

reasonable for us to think that all our progress is just the result of our own wisdom and efforts. If we are ungrateful and unaware of our teacher's great kindness, it would be impossible for us to become true Dharma practitioners, and even less likely would we be able to benefit others.

I have been in the role of a monastic sangha for quite a long time and I have the honor of being recognized as a khenpo and a lama. In addition, I have engaged in a range of Dharma activities such as teaching and translation without encountering any insurmountable obstacles. All of these are not the results of my own ability but have come from the blessings of the Three Jewels, buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as Dharma protectors. In particular, it was my root guru who bestowed wisdom and compassion upon me and enabled me to achieve all these accomplishments. I am deeply grateful for my guru who made me who I am today.

Then the Buddha told Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, "All beings who have not yet attained liberation are without fixity in their nature and consciousness: Through evil habits they form [unwholesome] karma, and through good habits they form [wholesome] results. Depending on situations, they give rise to good and evil doings. [...]"

It is quite true that the nature and consciousness of beings who have not yet attained liberation are unfixed and capricious. If we are habituated to negative deeds, then we will generate negative karma and experience negative results and vice versa. In the text it says sentient beings could form unwholesome karma as well as wholesome results. It is thus rhetorical that with negative habits one would accumulate negative karma and bear negative results while virtuous habits could lead to wholesome results.

In fact, good or bad habits are largely determined by the circumstances and environment one faces. These include the conditions we have chosen to stay in, the education we have received, and the people we associate with. As a proverb goes, “He that lives with cripples learns to limp.” If we stay with negative friends and get used to negative habits, such negative influences will eventually change us into a bad person. This is why we need virtuous friends and teachers to protect and strengthen our virtuous roots. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* says, “In the sandalwood forests of the Malaya mountains, when an ordinary tree falls, its wood is gradually infused with the sweet perfume of the sandal. After some years that ordinary wood comes to smell as sweet as the sandal trees around it.”

Also, it is said in *The Forest of Gem in the Garden of Dhamra*, “Sentient beings lack stability in their inner orientation and are affected by circumstances. Under circumstances that are good, they become good. Under circumstances that are bad, they become bad.” So external circumstances can have a major influence on our personality.

Not only are ordinary people easily influenced by circumstances, the same goes for animals. In *The History of the Entrustment of the Dharma Sutra*, there is a story of an elephant whose temperament was changed back and forth by the external environment. In an ancient country, the king used a strong white elephant to trample to death the offenders who were sentenced to capital punishment. After the elephant stable caught fire, the elephant was relocated to another place near a Buddhist temple. The elephant frequently heard monks chanting the Dharma verses such as “Virtuous actions lead one to the celestial realm and non-virtuous actions lead one to the hell realm.” Gradually, the elephant became tender and compassionate. When offenders were sent to it, instead of trampling them as it had done before, the elephant just sniffed the offenders, licked them, and then left.

Upon seeing this, the king was confused and he asked his ministers why that was the case. One of them said, “It must be the temple nearby that has changed its temperament. If the elephant is near a slaughterhouse, its mind would become cruel again as

it sees animals being brutally slaughtered.” The king accepted this suggestion and moved the elephant to a place that was near a slaughterhouse. Soon after, the mind of the elephant regressed back to a savage state, even crueler than before.

As Sakya Pandita said in his *Treasury of Good Advice*,

*Try as one might to reform bad people,
They simply do not become good-natured.
Even if one vigorously washes coal,
It simply cannot be made white.*

Other than those individuals who simply remain untamed and have very evil personality, most ordinary people can be influenced by external circumstances. With this knowledge, ordinary people should avoid distractive environments and negative associations. For instance, one may be confident of not getting addicted to gambling on his first few visits to a casino. However, over the long run, it could become extremely difficult to avoid forming a gambling habit and becoming infatuated with such places.

Among the students I sponsored through college, some of them used to be very ill-disciplined but they became well-mannered as they have received higher education and obtained gainful employment. The opposite can also occur. There was one sad case

where the person was very kind-hearted before, but after college graduation he chose a job that involved inflicting punishment on others. When I saw him again two years later, it was frightening to even look at his eyes. I feel deeply sorry for him.

Dharma practitioners should be even more vigilant with their environment and the people they associate with. Do not ever be overconfident about yourself, thinking that having been learning the Dharma or having been ordained for years you will not be easily influenced by others. You can never be sure. Venerable Atisha once said that only enlightened bodhisattvas who have attained the first bhumi and above would not be subject to negative influences and that before one reached that level that one should always abide in a solitary place and rely on a teacher. The Buddha also said in *The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters*, “Be careful not to depend on your own intelligence—it is not to be trusted.” So ordinary practitioners should not be too confident with their own thoughts since they are all without fixity in their nature and consciousness.

[...] Revolving wheel-like through the five realms of existence with never a momentary rest, they pass through kalpas as numerous as dust particles, confused, deluded, hindered, and [afflicted] with difficulties. They are like a fish that swims in nets while following a long flowing current; now and then it would get free temporarily, only to be caught in the nets again. I would

think with concern about these beings. However, because you will fulfill your past vows, the profound oaths taken kalpa after kalpa to guide wrongdoing beings far and wide [to the other shore], what further cause of worry need I have?"



Driven by positive and negative karma, sentient beings must take rebirths in the five realms of samsara, or normally referred to as six realms. Their transmigration is like a continuously turning wheel without a momentary rest. Thus they would not attain any real happiness but only endless suffering. As Maitreya said, "Just as there is no good smell in a cesspool, there is no happiness among the five classes of beings."

The samsaric situation is described vividly in the text by using an example. Just like a fish swimming in nets that are in a long flowing current, it may break out from the nets for a short while, but it is soon trapped again. Similarly, due to sentient beings' confusion and delusion, most of the time they are trapped in the nets of the three lower realms for numerous kalpas. Occasionally, thanks to their virtuous deeds, they may occasionally take rebirths in the three higher realms. But driven by their negative karma, they will soon again fall into the lower realms and experience endless suffering. No matter how many times they repeat this process, they simply cannot break free from samsara or gain any assurance of liberation.

Given this situation, the Buddha was genuinely concerned for all beings, particularly those of Jambudvīpa. But Kṣitigarbha promised the Buddha that he would accomplish all his vows to save countless wrongdoing beings from the lower realms. Kṣitigarbha made these profound vows not just for one lifetime but for numerous lifetimes kalpa after kalpa. Seeing this great bodhisattva's steadfast commitment and powerful spiritual penetration, the Buddha said that he had no more concern.

That being so, we are truly fortunate to have encountered the precious Dharma and the noble Mahayana teachers who can guide us across to liberation. Such an opportunity is as rare an

encounter as a blind turtle stumbling upon a wooden yoke in a boundlessly vast ocean. It is not by chance that we gain such a precious opportunity, but instead, it is the result of our constant accumulation of merit through numerous lives. If we waste this opportunity and just idle this life away aimlessly, we may never get it again in the future. Even worse, because of our negative karma, we will stay in the three lower realms for countless kalpas. By then, encountering the Dharma and freeing us from suffering will be as difficult as fishing a needle out of a vast ocean.

Therefore, as Patrul Rinpoche urged us in his *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, we must resolve to cast rebirth in samsara aside once and for all with the help of the precious Dharma and qualified spiritual teachers whom we can rely on. In this fleeting life, all Dharma practitioners must resolve deep in their hearts and exert themselves to engage in Dharma practice and gain the assurance for liberation.

A KING'S ASPIRATION

As these words were spoken, in the assembly there was a Bodhisattva-Mahasattva named Concentration Mastery King who said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, what vows has Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva made during the many kalpas past that he now receives profuse praise from the World-Honored One? O World-Honored One, please briefly speak about this."



Then the World-Honored One told Concentration Mastery King Bodhisattva, “Listen attentively, listen attentively. Ponder and remember this well. I will explain them separately for you.

In the Dharma assembly, there was probably curiosity among the attendees on what vows Ksitigarbha had made over the numerous kalpas that now deserved the Buddha’s earnest praises. Among them was a great bodhisattva, Concentration Mastery King, who stood up and asked the Buddha. We should not think that this question and answer had nothing to do with us. In fact, the Buddha answered this question not just for the bodhisattva Concentration Mastery King but also as a special teaching for every listener who was present as well as all future disciples including us.

Before answering the question, the Buddha asked the bodhisattva to “listen attentively” and to “ponder and remember” the answer well. This simple requirement refers to the systematic procedure of studying and practicing the Dharma, which contains three steps: listening, contemplating, and meditating. This standard procedure is highly emphasized in the Tibetan Buddhism because without it one can never truly enter the Dharma and merge one’s mind with the Dharma.

To be specific, through proper listening, one can generate the wisdom of listening to recognize one’s mental afflictions; through

deep contemplation, one can generate the wisdom of contemplation to subdue one's mental afflictions; and through one-pointed meditation, one can generate the wisdom of meditation to uproot one's mental afflictions, the decisive step to free one from the ocean of samsara. In the text, "listen attentively" refers to the first procedure of listening to the Dharma teaching; "ponder" connotes deep contemplation of the teaching; and "remember" means to familiarize the teaching and to transform one's mind with what one has contemplated.

"At a time of immeasurable asamkhyeyas of nayutas of inexpressible kalpas ago, there was a Buddha named All Wisdom Accomplished Tathagata, Worthy of Offering, Truly All Knowing, Perfect in Knowledge and Conduct, Well Gone, Knower of the World, Unsurpassed, Tamer, Teacher of Devas and Humans, Buddha, World-Honored One. The lifespan of that Buddha was sixty thousand kalpas. Before he renounced the household life, he was the king of a small country and friends with the king of a neighboring country. They both practiced the ten wholesome actions and benefited living beings. However, in the neighboring country most people did many evil acts. The two kings conferred with each other and planned to employ many skillful means for them. One king vowed, 'I will attain Buddhahood early and guide all these people across without exception.'



“The other king vowed, ‘If I do not first guide all wrongdoing suffering beings across, causing them to attain peace and happiness and enabling them to achieve bodhi, I shall not become a Buddha.’”

The Buddha told Concentration Mastery King Bodhisattva, “The king who vowed to become a Buddha early is All Wisdom Accomplished Tathagata. The king who vowed to always guide wrongdoing suffering beings across and not to become a Buddha yet is Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva.



In the following text the Buddha talked about two stories of Ksitigarbha in his previous lives to give the audience a glimpse of what kind of vows Ksitigarbha had made in his previous lives. The first story is a good example of different ways to give rise to bodhicitta. In many teachings on bodhicitta, such as Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, three classifications of arousing bodhicitta based on the degrees of one's courage are introduced: a king's way of arousing bodhicitta—the wish to first attain buddhahood for oneself and then to bring others to buddhahood; a boatman's way of arousing bodhicitta—the wish to attain buddhahood for oneself and all beings at the same time; and a shepherd's way of arousing bodhicitta—the wish to establish

all beings in buddhahood before achieving it for oneself. The third type displays the greatest courage. The way Manjushri and Ksitigarbha gave rise to bodhicitta belongs to the third type, as both had vowed to guide all beings to achieve buddhahood and refused to first become a buddha. This attitude is also described in *The Shurangama Sutra*, “The attitude of establishing others in perfect buddhahood before achieving it for oneself is the aspiration of a bodhisattva.”

In this story, the two kings chose different ways of developing aspirational bodhicitta. To some extent, whether one vows to attain buddhahood first or to guide all beings across to liberation before achieving one’s own buddhahood are not that different. These are simply different ways to benefit and guide sentient beings towards enlightenment. What matters most is that as Dharma practitioners, we must arouse bodhicitta deep in our hearts in this present life. In those early years at Larung Gar, as one of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s traditions, on the remarkable day of Chokhor Duchon, His Holiness would confer the bodhisattva vow and encourage everyone to arouse bodhicitta. I believe at that time, every sangha member at Larung Gar had sincerely given rise to bodhicitta relying on the powerful blessing of His Holiness.

His Holiness’ teaching was powerfully contagious and impressive. Whatever he taught, either Mahayana or Vajrayana teachings, he

possessed the ability to bring us into his world of extraordinary wisdom and each of us was fully captivated and concentrated on his teaching. For instance, when he was teaching Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*, we were entirely immersed in the world of Madhyamika and spent all our time and energy contemplating the teaching, reciting the stanzas and studying the related commentaries such as Chandrakirti's auto-commentary, the commentaries composed by Mipham Rinpoche and Gorampa and so on. At that time, all of us had the feeling that we were extremely fortunate to meet the profound teaching of the Middle Way in this life and that we must develop the unshakable conviction of emptiness through comprehensive study.

With the approaching of Chokhor Duchon, I would encourage you to take advantage of this special and auspicious occasion to make the aspiration of bodhicitta. As it is said in *Letter to a Disciple*, "Like a lamp blown by the fierce wind, one's life is instantly destructible and so it is unreliable." Today I am sitting here teaching the Dharma and you are listening to me, but no one can guarantee the same thing will repeat tomorrow. I am not sure how you feel about impermanence but it is a critical principle to me personally. If we fail to make the aspiration on this special occasion this year, who can guarantee that we will still be alive the same day next year? If we can indeed arouse aspirational bodhicitta to enlighten

all sentient beings when we are alive, then such an incredible aspiration will continue to exist in all our future lives, no matter which realm we take rebirth in. That is why it is crucial for each of us to generate a sincere mind of bodhicitta in this very life.

THE ASPIRATION OF BRIGHT EYES

“Moreover, in the past, measureless asamkhyeya kalpas ago, there arose in the world a Buddha named Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata. The lifespan of that Buddha was forty kalpas. During the Age of Semblance Dharma, there was an arhat who guided living beings across by [means of] merit, teaching and transforming them in sequence. He came upon a woman named Bright Eyes who made a food offering to him. The arhat asked her, ‘What is your wish?’

“Bright Eyes replied, ‘In the days after my mother’s death, I performed meritorious deeds for her rescue, but I do not know in what realm my mother has been reborn.’

This is the second story in another previous life of Ksitigarbha. In this life he was a woman named Bright Eyes who once made offering to an arhat. Being a field of merit, an object that is worthy of offering and that can give birth to great merit, an arhat would connect with beings by receiving their offerings and then use



different manners to teach and convert them. After he enjoyed the meal offered by Bright Eyes, he asked what she wanted as a return for her offering. Then the woman requested to know her mother's rebirth as she had performed virtuous deeds to rescue her mother after her death.

In general, when benefactors make offerings to a sangha group or to individual monastic they always have certain wishes that need to be fulfilled. Some may want to stay healthy; some to be wealthy; while others may have a transcendent wish to liberate sentient beings from samsara, and so on and so forth. Knowing this, when accepting offerings from others, monastics should never take it for granted nor squander it carelessly but should instead be extremely

cautious in dealing with offerings, particularly those offerings that are not easy to consume or pay back. Since these offerings often have values and would cost the benefactors significant money or efforts, the benefactors would expect a commensurate return. In some situations the benefactor has a strong clinging to his possessions and may think twice before spending any money, so his generous offerings to a monk or to a guru must be expected with a huge return. If a receiving sangha squanders or misuses the offerings and without offering any proper dedication, negative consequences may await the receiver ahead.

Making dedications by reciting some Buddhist prayers or mantras and sutras is necessary for any monastic to receive any offering. In 1986 when I took the summer retreat in a monastery, someone offered me ten yuan. As a novice monk, I was so afraid to bear any negative karma resulting from the improper use of this little money that I recited a lot of Mani mantras for that person. Now I always spend any money offered to me on meaningful Dharma activities that can bring great benefits to more people so that I can make sure that the offerings would not be wasted.

“Out of compassion for her, the arhat entered into meditative concentration to make observation and saw that Bright Eyes’ mother had fallen into a lower realm and was undergoing extremely great suffering. The arhat asked Bright Eyes, ‘What actions did

your mother do while she was alive? She is now undergoing extremely great suffering in a lower realm.'

"Bright Eyes replied, 'My mother had a habit of only liking to eat fish, turtles, and the like. Of the fish and turtles that she had eaten, she had most often consumed their eggs, fried or boiled, and she would indulge in eating them. I would reckon the number of all these lives to be thousands of myriads and many times over. O Venerable One, please take pity. How can she be saved?'



The arhat felt compassion for her and entered samadhi to observe. Then he saw her mother undergoing extremely great suffering in

the hell realm so he asked Bright Eyes what her mother had done when she was alive. It was possible that with his miraculous power of samadhi, the arhat already knew the answer, but in order to verify it or for some other purpose, for instance, to make the karmic law more convincing to Bright Eyes, he still asked the question. Sometimes the Buddha would also purposely bring up a question while he already knew the exact answer for a good reason.

Bright Eyes honestly told the arhat her mother's previous eating habit which she thought was the major cause for her mother falling into the hell realm because it costed numerous lives. People growing up by the sea usually have the habit of eating seafood such as fish, turtles, shrimps. Some may prefer eating baby fish that are still in the womb of the mother fish, the number of which is hard to calculate, so the karma of killing is much more severe. Nowadays caviar is regarded as a food for the rich and many envy those who can enjoy such a luxury product. However, considering that just a spoon of caviar means numerous lives are involved, enjoying such food would result in an inexhaustible karma of killing that could possibly imprison someone in hell.

It is true that nowadays most people are unaware that fishes, shrimps, and the like are all sentient beings not different from human beings. Ironically, even some Buddhists believe fish and shrimps are edible for vegetarians and eating such species does

not involve killing. Because of their ignorance, many people have accumulated severely negative karma by doing so. Even worse, many people with good incomes get used to ordering the live seafood to be prepared for them to make sure that their dishes are fresh and tasty. Hardly do they know that the wealth they have has conspired to help them create evil karma. It is the same in the Tibetan regions. Usually, a wealthy household that owns many yaks and sheep will create more severe karma of killing than a poor family.

Animal slaughtering involves mostly yaks and sheep in the Tibetan regions. In Tibetan folklore, fish is inedible because Tibetans believe that when a fish dies, it dies unrest and its eyes remain open and thus will remember those who kill it and eat it. Of course, this is only a traditional belief and no related teaching is found in Buddhist scriptures. When I was studying at a traditional school, fish was often provided in the canteen. On such occasions I just chose something else to eat, so during my entire life, I have never eaten fish. For those who have eaten fish, it would be necessary to confess this negative act.

“Out of compassion for them, the arhat used a skillful means. He advised Bright Eyes, ‘You may, with sincere resolve, recollect Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata. Also, sculpt and paint his image. Both the living and the deceased will reap the results.’

“After hearing this, Bright Eyes immediately gave up everything she loved to have an image of that Buddha painted right away. She then made offerings to his image, and furthermore, with a reverent mind, she wept sorrowfully, gazed up at, and made obeisance to him. [...]



The arhat suggested Bright Eyes to make offering and pray to the buddha named Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata by recollecting the buddha’s name. By doing so, she could rescue her deceased mother from hell. This buddha had probably appeared in that world at that time, just as Buddha Shakyamuni is the fundamental teacher in our world. Indeed, performing virtuous deeds for the deceased is necessary and helpful in enabling them to have a better next

life. *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra* says, “Doing virtuous things for the dead is like offering traveling expense for those traveling afar, who will definitely acquire assurance.” Making buddha images or statues, chanting sutras, mantras, or names of buddhas, offering money or meals to monastics, offering waters or lamps to the Three Jewels, all of these will accumulate great merit for the dead so that their negative karma can be lessened, and a chance for a better rebirth can be secured.

Traditionally, Tibetans will perform these acts of virtue within 49 days after the death of their family members. In that way, the dead will be greatly benefited and may even be assured of a rebirth in the Pure Land. Or like me, many people may have lost their parents for a long time, and if they can nonetheless ask the sangha to perform these virtuous activities for their parents, both the dead and the living will receive immense benefits.

Another point is when a family member dies, it is best to use his or her own properties to perform these virtuous activities so as to accumulate merit on behalf of the dead person. Instead of being passed on to the rest of the family, the dead’s properties can be used to free captive lives, print sutras, make offerings to the Three Jewels, and perform many other virtuous deeds. For example, in the Tibetan tradition, when a family member dies, the

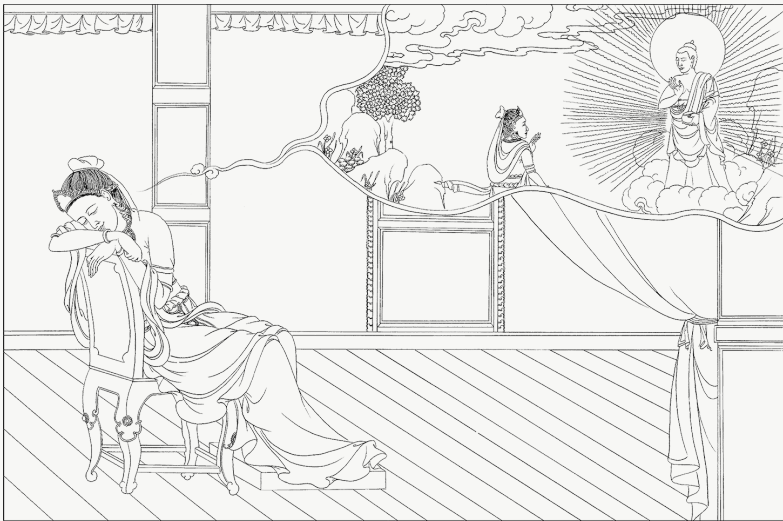
rest of the family would offer the best horse, clothes, jewels or the most cherished things of the dead to the sangha.

Many sutras mention this as the best way to benefit the dead. However, modern people seldom have this idea and instead take possession of the dead's properties as quickly as they can. When a parent dies, the children immediately take the parent's belongings as their own, whether it is a luxury watch, a car, a laptop, a rosary, or other items. Or the children just sell them and divide the money up for their own use. Although someone has died, he may still have a strong attachment to his own properties and if someone takes them away, he may develop a grudge against that person. With this kind of negative emotions, the deceased may not be able to take a good rebirth and could fall into the lower realms.

But if all the properties of the deceased are used to accumulate merits for him, his negative karma can be reduced and he would gain peace and reach a better place for his next life. So here is my suggestion. All properties of the deceased should be used for the benefit of the dead, especially those items that the dead had most cherished. For example, a family of three may own 30,000 dollars, meaning each of them owns 10,000 dollars. If one of them dies, then at least 10,000 dollars should be used to perform virtuous deeds for the dead. However, if only 10 dollars are used for the

dead and the rest is divided up by the other two, then this will not do any good either to the dead one or to the living ones.

[...] That night, in her dream, she suddenly saw that Buddha—his body a dazzling golden hue, [majestic] like Mount Sumeru, and emitting great light. He said to Bright Eyes, ‘Before long your mother will be reborn in your household. She will speak as soon as she can feel hunger and cold.’



“Shortly thereafter, a maidservant in her household bore a child who spoke within three days of birth. The infant, prostrating and weeping sorrowfully, told Bright Eyes, ‘In the cycle of birth and death through karmic conditions, one undergoes the results

[of one's actions] oneself. I am your mother. I have long dwelled in darkness. Since parting from you, again and again I agonized in the great hells. It was through the strength of your merit that I was finally able to be reborn as a person of the lower class, and my lifespan will be short. At the end of thirteen years, I am to fall into a lower realm. Do you have any way to help relieve me [of these sufferings]?’

“When Bright Eyes heard what was said, she knew without a doubt that this infant was her mother. Sobbing and crying sadly, she said to the maidservant's child, ‘Since you are my mother, you should know your own past wrongdoing. What actions did you do that caused you to fall into a lower realm?’

“The maidservant's child replied, ‘Killing and reviling. I was undergoing the ripened effects of these two actions. If it were not for the merit [that you have cultivated] to deliver me from difficulties, my karma would be such that I still could not have been released.’

“Bright Eyes asked, ‘What took place during the ripened effects of wrongdoing in the hells?’

“The maidservant’s child replied, ‘I cannot bear to speak of those torments of wrongdoing. Even in a hundred thousand years I would not be able to describe them all.’



Due to the daughter’s sincere devotion and fervent praying, the Buddha appeared in front of her and told her about the new birth of her mother. All the virtuous deeds Bright Eyes had done were not in vain but enabled her mother to be released from the hell and reincarnate into a human baby who would speak within three days of birth, as the Buddha said, “as soon as she can feel hunger and cold.” However, because the mother’s previous negative karma was too heavy, the merit Bright Eyes cultivated for her could only

bring her a short human life in a family of the lower caste. After that she would have to fall back into the lower realm again.

In order for her mother to have a strong conviction on the karmic law, Bright Eyes intentionally asked her mother what kind of wrongdoing caused her to fall into the hell and what took place in the hell. Thanks to the blessings of the Buddha, her mother clearly knew the answer. In general, sentient beings fall into the hell realm because of two types of wrongdoings: killing and reviling. *Observing the Disciplines of Ten Virtues Sutra* says, “Among celestial beings, the most fragrant is pleasant language; in the three worlds, nothing is more putrid than malicious language.” As in the case of the wrongdoer woman Yue Dili described in the first chapter, this mother probably often slandered the Three Jewels while she indulged herself in killing and eating fish and the like. A sensible person should be very careful with speech as the karma of negative language can be as severe as the action of killing, both of which drive the wrongdoer into the hell realm to undergo indescribable torments for endless years.

“Upon hearing this, Bright Eyes cried and wailed. She said toward the sky, ‘May my mother be forever released from the hells. At the end of thirteen years, may she be finished with her heavy offenses and not go through the lower realms again. O Buddhas of the ten directions, kindly take pity upon me. Please

hear the far-reaching vow that I am making for the sake of my mother. If she can forever leave the three lower realms, the low and mean, and never again be reborn as a woman, then, in front of the image of Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata, I vow that from this day forth, throughout hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of future kalpas in all worlds where there are hells, where there are the three lower realms, I will rescue all wrongdoing suffering beings, causing them to leave the lower realms of hells, animals, and hungry ghosts. Only when the beings who undergo the ripened effects of wrongdoing have all become Buddhas will I myself attain perfect awakening.'



Upon hearing the miserable situation of her mother, Bright Eyes made great vows in front of the image of Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata. There were basically two parts to her vow. The first part involved her mother's well-being and the second part, her own commitment. In my Tibetan translation, I moved the sentences "O Buddhas of the ten directions, kindly take pity upon me. Please hear the far-reaching vow that I am making for the sake of my mother" to the beginning of her statement. I think this makes the text easier to follow but I am not sure if this would be considered a mistake by changing the original sutra.

As we are learning the vows made by Bright Eyes, we should also make the similar aspiration of freeing all mother-like sentient beings from suffering and guiding them to ultimate peace and happiness. Born in this degenerated world, we are burdened with strong mental afflictions and heavy negativities. But luckily, we have met the most compassionate Buddha, bodhisattvas and great masters who would never abandon us miserable beings. They are the most powerful support for us and most supreme objects for us to make our vows. If we make aspirations in front of them, even though we may be just ordinary beings full of delusion, their miraculous blessing will nonetheless enable our aspirations to be fulfilled without fail. Therefore, in order to liberate all those beings who have karmic connections with us, we should follow

in the footsteps of Buddha Shakyamuni, Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, Samantabhadra and Manjushri to make a firm vow that we will not become buddhas until we bring all sentient beings across to liberation!

Lecture Eight

August 3rd, 2020

A FEW WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Larung Gar Is a Place for Acquiring Knowledge

After the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly, I visited several monasteries and nunneries in other Tibetan areas. It was quite a busy trip as I wanted to come back by Monday and continue today's lecture, so I had to travel hundreds of miles every day until late into the night. These monasteries and nunneries are sort of like extensions of Larung Gar because Dharma practitioners there were all from Larung Gar. Due to certain external issues beyond our control, these individuals were unable to stay at Larung Gar and they have been settled over the past few years in these locations. I promised to visit them on a regular basis. Thanks to the khenpos, khenmos and other sangha administrators, all the monasteries and nunneries are well-managed and all the practitioners are diligent in hearing, contemplating and meditating on the Buddhadharma,

with an even stronger faith in the Three Jewels. I am truly happy for them and rejoice in their persistent efforts.

I guess most of us prefer to stay at Larung Gar as long as circumstances would allow. Some Dharma friends even hope to die here as they feel this could assure a good rebirth into the Pure Land. Yet, Larung Gar is not a place to reside permanently but a university to acquire knowledge. After finishing your study, you should leave Larung Gar and share what you have learned with people in different areas. This is the best way for a Mahayana practitioner to benefit sentient beings. If every resident practitioner chooses to die here, I am afraid we would have too many corpses even for the vultures in our Charnel Ground. In the Great Perfection tradition, a great yogi would die in the way of a wild beast, meaning that instead of choosing a fixed place for death, anywhere would be a good place, either inside an isolated mountain or in a crowded big city. We should follow this tradition and do not clinging to a permanent residence. All of us have spent our lives learning and practicing the Dharma, our top priority should be to propagate the Dharma and to benefit others instead of worrying about where we live or die.

Use the Sangha's Possessions Properly

The sangha's possessions should be properly used and allocated in accordance with the precepts explained in the Vinaya and the regulations made by the sangha. It is said that some practitioners live in a dorm room alone that can accommodate two or three persons. It is fine if no other persons need to live there. But it is quite inappropriate if one refuses to share it with others out of one's personal reasons such as a desire to practice alone, or one cannot get along with others. All of you have already learned a lot of Dharma teaching, so you must know that this is a big fault and its karmic retribution will be terrifying if one misuses the sangha's possessions. So please be particularly mindful when dealing with the sangha's property, knowing exactly what you have access to and what you do not.

Regarding the use of rooms, some departments make full use of their allocated rooms, while some do not. I hear that some departments use their extra rooms to store miscellaneous items while not allowing others to use them for their intended purposes. Last year a sangha administrator in my hometown monastery renovated some of the sangha's rooms, and these rooms were again used as storage after the renovation. Such cases are indeed bad examples. This is particularly true at Larung Gar where we have limited rooms available either for dormitory or for office use.

So please do not waste any room you have or occupy any room without a good reason. For miscellaneous items that are no longer in use, it is not appropriate to allow to accumulate and take up extra room. You can offer them to the sangha or put them up for sale. I hope khenpos, khenmos and managerial staff of each department will pay more attention on these matters and make sure that the sangha's possessions are utilized properly.

Live a Simple and Contented Monastic Life

Since Larung Gar is a place for knowledge, everyone should pay his or her full attention to hear, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma while we are staying here. However, there seems to be a trend for some practitioners to seek more comfort. Since new personal cabin construction has been stopped, some practitioners have decided to modify the interior design and decoration of their existing cabins. Although their efforts could not compare to the budgets and efforts city people spend on home design and decoration, I still think we should not dilute our focus with these matters as our main focus is to learn and practice the Dharma. A simple place is good enough for us to stay, and a luxury cabin is not helpful at all in improving our inner qualities.

Another thing is that some practitioners here, especially monks, buy cars for their personal use. Since parking capacity is quite limited

at Larung Gar, some monks ingeniously set up their garages by digging caves at the foot of mountains along the road surrounding Larung Gar. The fact is that car ownerships could bring a host of issues for Dharma practitioners. On the one hand, jealousy and desire could arise when they try to compare their cars with those owned by others; furthermore, the extra time and energy spent to maintain the car could negatively impact one's Dharma study and practice.

Why wouldn't we want to live a simple and contented life? Patrul Rinpoche said in his *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, "If you owned a horse, you would have one horse's worth of trouble. If all you had was a bag of tea, you could still be sure of having a bag of tea's worth of trouble." Personally I am quite content with my current life. The log cabin I live in now was built in the 90's. When we first came here, living conditions were very poor. Most of our cabins were made of mud and if we needed to go somewhere, we did not usually have any transportation and we had to walk. There was no electricity and since we wanted to study at night, we had to walk to the town of Sertar to buy kerosene, which is more than 20 miles away. Yet, we still made great progress in both scholarly study and actual practice during that time. Now one can buy anything here, food, clothes, and all other living essentials. Please bear in mind that you are here not for material comfort but for the cultivation

of virtuous personality, pure precepts, compassion, and wisdom. These are exactly what you should aim for.

Last year, we happened to see an adobe cabin that was built in the 80's. Since we no longer build such crude cabin nowadays, I suggested that we should protect this old cabin with glass as a way to remember the old times here at Larung Gar. Everything is changing, and previous lifestyle is no longer existent after over 30 years. Fortunately, our values of pursuing wisdom and compassion remain unchanged. We should always cherish this spirit instead of getting lost in external temptations.

THE STORY OF BRIGHT EYES

In the previous lecture we have learned that Bright Eyes was very sad for her mother's death. Instructed by an arhat she made offerings to, she prayed to the Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata who later told her about the rebirth of her mother. Then shortly after her mother was reborn in her maidservant's family, this new baby told Bright Eyes her karmic retributions in the lower realm before and after this short human life. Upon hearing this, Bright Eyes made the far-reaching vow for the sake of her mother. She vowed that if her mother could forever leave the three lower realms, she would rescue all wrongdoing suffering beings from the three lower realms and only when all these beings have become buddhas would she attain perfect awakening.

Initially, Bright Eyes made offering to the arhat with a sincere wish to rescue her mother. Starting with such a personal intention, while learning about her mother's miserable situation in the hell realm, she extended her compassion to all beings in the three lower realms and made a much greater vow to liberate all of

them throughout countless kalpas. The bodhicitta generated by Ksitigarbha manifested in the profound vows made in that life. Due to the powerful aspirations Bright Eyes had made, her mother gained liberation and she also enhanced her noble qualities of abandonment and realization.

Though the text says that Bright Eyes vowed to rescue beings in the three lower realms, all beings of the six realms were also included because none of samsaric beings in cyclic existence could forever remain in the higher realms without falling into the lower realms. This is the reality of the wheel of samsara and the core reason why sentient beings need to seek liberation from this ocean of suffering.

Similar to Bright Eyes, we would also be heartbroken when our parents or close relatives and friends pass away and want to help them avoid any suffering in the lower realms. However, it is not enough to just benefit those who are close to us but rather we should have a greater aspiration to benefit all beings and help them attain liberation. Developing such intentions and motivations are of great importance. Indeed, this is the conventional way of generating aspirational bodhicitta as taught, for instance, by the Venerable Atisha. In order for an ordinary practitioner to generate bodhicitta, one needs to first develop a deep gratefulness to one's own parents and a wish to bring them peace and happiness. Then

one can extend this strong feeling equally to every living being because all of them had been one's mother in previous lives. In such a way, one can arouse the bodhicitta that would transform one into an authentic Mahayana practitioner.

"After making this vow, she clearly heard Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata saying to her, 'Bright Eyes, you have great kindness and compassion. It is excellent that you can make such a great vow for your mother. I see that after your mother passes on from the present ripened effect at thirteen years of age, she will be reborn as a Brahman with a lifespan of a hundred years. After that ripened effect is over, she will be reborn in the Land of No Sorrow with a lifespan of incalculable kalpas. Later she will attain Buddhahood, and far and wide she will guide humans and devas as numerous as the sand grains in the Ganges River [to the other shore].'"

After Bright Eyes made her vow, the Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata praised her great compassion and aspiration and then told her the amazing reward her mother would receive after this short life. That is, she would take rebirth as a noble human being for one life which would be followed by rebirth into a pure land called No Sorrow for countless kalpas until she attains buddhahood.



Normally people make wishes to have good health, good looks, longevity or peace. These are all good wishes, but not extraordinary ones. Instead of focusing on one's own welfare, the highest aspiration is to seek to have all sentient beings attain true happiness and ultimate peace, which is bodhicitta. As ordinary practitioners, we can only exertively remind ourselves of this altruistic aspiration of bodhicitta repeatedly to counter our habituated selfish mind. But as long as we train our mind according to the teachings in the Dharma, bodhicitta will gradually and spontaneously arise in our minds without any difficulty and make us realize how narrow and harmful an ego-centered mind is.

The mother of Bright Eyes did commit grave offenses when she was alive. She had not only eaten so many living beings such as fish, turtles, and their eggs, but also held wrong views. Yet, due to the great vow Bright Eyes made as a result of her bodhicitta, the mother's negative karma was purified and she would not have to go through the lower realms anymore. The bodhicitta Bright Eyes generated was so powerful that it brought her mother such huge rewards. As it is said in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*Just as by the fire that will destroy the world,
Great sins are surely and at once consumed by it.*

Sutra of the Heap of Jewels also says,

*Bodhicitta is the most supreme, like Agada medicine,
Which can remove all afflictions and bestow all happiness.*

Agada is a medicine in ancient India that was believed to be extremely effective in curing all kinds of diseases. Likewise, through the incredible power of bodhicitta, all negative karma can be purified, and all happiness can be granted. Generating bodhicitta brings great benefit to both oneself and others, both in this present life and in all future lives. One who has aroused bodhicitta will be very happy life after life because bodhicitta is an efficient antidote

to one's selfishness, the root cause for all sufferings and afflictions we ordinary people experience.

We know that most of our sufferings are due to our blind fixation on our ego which makes our mind rigid and narrow. If we focus on other beings' happiness whole-heartedly, our mind will become open and flexible, tender, and compassionate which would elevate our happiness and foster our spirits. This is a direct benefit of a bodhicitta mind. With sincere bodhicitta arising in our mind, we will instinctively benefit all living beings in an amazing way, particularly those who have a deep karmic connection to us. This is exactly what we have learned in the story of Bright Eyes. If we perform the Buddhist pujas for others, either the dead or the alive, they will be remarkably benefited due to the powerful blessing of bodhicitta just as the great benefit the mother of Bright Eyes had received.

The Buddha told Concentration Mastery King, "The arhat who guided Bright Eyes across by [means of] merit then is now Inexhaustible Intention Bodhisattva; Bright Eyes' mother is now Liberation Bodhisattva; and the woman Bright Eyes is now Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva.

"Throughout many long kalpas past, [Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva] has been so kind and compassionate that he has made as many

vows as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River to guide living beings far and wide [to the other shore].



At the end of the story, the Buddha told Concentration Mastery King that now in this life, the arhat, Bright Eyes, and her mother have all become great bodhisattvas, and Bright Eyes herself is Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Just like what happened in that life of Bright Eyes, throughout numerous kalpas, Ksitigarbha has made as many vows as grains of sand in the Ganges River to guide all living beings in samsara across to liberation.

From this paragraph we learn that making aspiration or generating bodhicitta only once is never enough. As stated in different

scriptures such as the *Fortunate Aeon Sutra* and the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, Buddha Shakyamuni did make vows many times in front of different buddhas in his causal stage. The Buddha made many different vows, many of them he claimed to be his initial vows to generate bodhicitta. Maudgalyayana was curious and once asked the Buddha, “Sometimes you said you had vowed initially in front of this buddha and sometimes you said another buddha, in front of which buddha did you exactly make your initial vows?” The Buddha answered, “I spoke of different initial vows for the benefits of beings in different dispositions. There were good reasons behind these statements. Please do not think that there should only be one time to make an initial vow.” In the same manner, Ksitigarbha had made myriads of vows in front of different buddhas for the sake of all living beings.

Therefore, when we make vows, we should not be satisfied with just making them once or twice. We should emulate Shakyamuni Buddha and Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva to do so repeatedly and untiringly whenever and wherever it is possible, for instance, during a pilgrimage, seeing a Buddha statue, or visiting a great master, we should make great vows deep in our hearts. Gradually, just as little brooks become streams, streams become rivers, and rivers become oceans, our vows can accrue to match those made

by buddhas and bodhisattvas. This is of great importance for every Mahayana practitioner.

GREAT BENEFITS OF TAKING REFUGE IN Ksitigarbha

“In the future, if there are men and women who do not practice good deeds but do evil, who do not believe in cause and effect, and who engage in sexual misconduct, who speak falsehood, who engage in divisive talebearing, who use harsh speech, who slander the Mahayana—beings with karma like these will certainly fall into the lower realms. However, if they meet a virtuous friend who encourages them so that they take refuge in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva within the time of a finger-snap, they will obtain release from the ripened effects [to be experienced] in the three lower realms. [...]

Shakyamuni Buddha then spoke of the benefit in taking refuge in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. He said, “In the future, if any man or woman who does not believe in the karmic law and the Three Jewels, but strongly holds wrong views and perform all kinds of evil deeds such as engaging in sexual misconduct, speaking



falsehood, sowing discord, slandering the Mahayana teaching, such a person will certainly fall into the three lower realms because of their gravely negative karma. However, if this person meets a virtuous friend who guides him to take refuge in Ksitigarbha, he will be instantly released from the karmic retributions in the three lower realms.” Ksitigarbha is therefore an incredible refuge who can help secure one’s future life against falling into the lower realms. Whenever it is possible, we should encourage others to recite the name of Ksitigarbha or read this sutra even just once.

Efficacy Story: Ksitigarbha's Palace of Merit in Hell

There is a story in the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*. In the Song Dynasty, a military governor of Chang'an named Lixi Cui died of dehydration. After he died, he was escorted to see the Lord of Death. The Lord of Death asked Cui if he had done any virtuous deeds when he was alive. He answered that he took refuge in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and made offerings to the monastics. The Lord of Death said, "You have accumulated great merit by taking refuge in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva." The Lord further asked his henchmen by his side, "Has Cui's lifespan been exhausted?" They checked Cui's document and answered, "Not yet." Then the Lord asked Cui, "Do you want to return to the human world?" Cui said, "Yes." The Lord of Death further asked, "Before you return, do you want to see the hells?" Cui said, "Yes, I want to take a look at the hells."

Then Cui started his hell journey with three henchmen of the Lord of Death. First, they went to a big iron city, in which there was a tile-roofed house with an iron gate. One of the henchmen opened it and Cui saw some of his deceased relatives experiencing immense suffering inside the house. They broke out in tears when seeing Cui and asked him to save them. Cui told them to take refuge in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and recite his name. Then they went to

another city where there were burning beds and some monks that Cui knew were sitting on the burning beds. Their bodies were like the coal burning with great fire. Cui asked the monks why they had to experience such suffering. They said it was because when they were alive they had practiced the Dharma only for their own fame and wealth but not in accord with the teaching at all. They asked Cui to save them and as before, Cui told them to take refuge in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and recite his name.

Like this Cui visited tens of hells and inside each of them there were wrongdoers undertaking various unbearable suffering. On their way back, they came to a green-roofed house which looked quite beautiful. The surrounding environment was very pleasant, and on both sides of the walkway there were jeweled trees laden with fruits. Cui asked the henchmen how such a place could exist in hell. One of them answered, "Beings reborn here were those who didn't have faith in Ksitigarbha but just had painted the image of Ksitigarbha. Those who did have great faith all took rebirth in Pure Land or Tushita Heaven according to where they wanted to go."

Then they came to a great jeweled palace, in which there were hundreds of thousands of males and females enjoying all kinds of play. Cui again saw the deceased relatives whom he had just met in the other hell. They greeted Cui delightfully and said, "Thank

you for instructing us to take refuge in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and recite his name. Relying upon his powerful blessing, we were freed from the hell and came here.”

Cui asked the henchmen: “Where is this place?” They told Cui that this palace was named the Palace of Merit. Those beings reborn here were endowed with long life and freed from all kinds of suffering and would attain liberation in the time of Maitreya Buddha. Cui further asked who established such a place. They said it was Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva because this great bodhisattva had promised Shakyamuni Buddha that he would save all beings from falling into the lower realms until Maitreya Buddha appears in the world. In order to save those who were unable to take rebirth in Pure Land and had to fall into the lower realms, Ksitigarbha placed them temporarily in this Palace of Merit. Later Cui returned to the human world and shared with people what he had witnessed in the hell. As a result, a lot of people generated deep faith in Ksitigarbha and took refuge in him.

This story illustrates Ksitigarbha’s incredible powers and blessings. Those who take refuge in Ksitigarbha can obtain great benefits in the snap-of-a-finger. Some may question how those in hell could be liberated so quickly just by taking refuge in Ksitigarbha. It would seem reciting the name of Ksitigarbha is just too easy an action. This can be attributed to the inconceivable mechanism of

the law of causality. When the proper causes and conditions are gathered together, the power of Ksitigarbha will free beings from their ripened effects in the lower realms and grant them peace and happiness.

Be Open to Something Inconceivable

Sentient beings and their karma are inconceivable, so are the blessings of Ksitigarbha. We should not judge and deem something wrong when it seems inconceivable. As ordinary beings, our perceptions and conceptual thoughts are very limited. The scope of what we can imagine or what we can see is quite narrow. Take human vision for example. Human eyes can detect light at wavelengths only in the visual spectrum which is a really small portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. Both ultraviolet light and infrared light are invisible to human eyes. Yet, being invisible does not mean they do not exist. We need to admit that our ordinary sensory faculties are limited and unreliable, as the Buddha said in the *The King of Samadhi Sutra*,

The eyes, the ears, and the nose are unreliable.

The tongue, the body, and the mind are unreliable.

Regarding inconceivable phenomena, modern people seem to be able to only accept some of them. Most people would accept

whatever the scientific research offers them even when they cannot conceive or understand. When it comes to religion, however, they would naturally think those inconceivable statements are just superstitious. Take the Buddhist terms of trichiliocosm and kalpa for example. In Buddhism, trichiliocosm refers to one billion worlds while kalpa refers to a vast period of time. Astronomy says that it is impossible to know exactly how many stars are out there in the cosmos, but for sure there are billions of galaxies that can be observed, which is similar to the Buddhist concept of countless trichiliocosm in ten directions. Geology estimates that the earth has a history of about 4.5 billion years, which is divided into four eons of the geologic time scale, again a similar concept with kalpa. Though concepts such as trichiliocosm and kalpa are similar to those described in Astronomy and Geology, some people still think what astronomers and geologists claim are correct while what is stated in Buddhism is just religious talk without any factual basis. Their confusion may be due to their lack of knowledge in Buddhist philosophy or a simple misunderstanding that mixes some statements fabricated by others with authentic Buddhist doctrines.

As Buddhists, we should not only study the Buddhist doctrines, but also learn about people's various opinions on Buddhism. Most people actually do not have a strong belief in either eternalism or

nihilism but they lack basic knowledge or proper education on Buddhism to understand the true reality of the world. If we can clarify their misunderstandings or confusions, it may be possible for them to develop the right views. Without clarifications, they may simply stick to their wrong views and continue to solidify their biases against Buddhism. In order to prevent this unfortunate misunderstanding, we Buddhists need to provide the general public with understandable clarifications. It is our responsibility to be the others' virtuous friends by sharing the Dharma teaching with them.

As the Buddha said here, instructed by a virtuous friend, beings with heavily negative karma can be released from their ripened effects in the lower realms. Therefore, a virtuous friend is of great benefit to all sentient beings. If we cannot make others take refuge in the Three Jewels and diligently follow the Buddhist path, we can at least introduce the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* to them. For example, when you are on a train, you might start a conversation with people around you and share your snacks to make them feel at ease before introducing them to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. If they can generate faith and take refuge in Ksitigarbha even for a very short while, you have become a truly virtuous friend to them as they will attain great benefits because of you. This is just an example of a bodhisattva's four ways of attracting beings in daily life.

[...] If people are able to revere and take refuge in him with a resolute mind, as well as reverently gaze, pay obeisance, sing his praises, and make offerings of incense, flowers, clothing, jewels of all sorts, or also food and drink to him, they will be reborn in the various heavens to experience excellent, wonderful happiness during hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of kalpas in the future. When their heavenly merit is exhausted and they are reborn below in the world of humans, they will frequently be emperors or kings throughout hundreds of thousands of kalpas and will be able to remember the cause and effect of the sequence of events of their previous lives.



If even wrongdoers with grave offenses can be freed from the three lower realms by taking refuge in Ksitigarbha in the time of a snap-of-a-finger, beings who venerate and pray to the bodhisattva with a resolute mind will certainly accumulate great merit and receive unbelievable benefits. They will be reborn in heavens to enjoy great happiness for boundless time. When their heavenly merit is exhausted, they will be reborn as humans with a good memory of the cause and effect of their previous lives.

During the recent Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly, we arranged various offerings such as flowers and fruits in grand amount in front of the statue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. This shows our great devotion to Ksitigarbha and in doing so, we have accumulated vast merit for ourselves and others. I have stated earlier that only the Ksitigarbha practice is included in our annual Dharma assemblies at Larung Gar but not the practice of Avalokiteshvara or Manjushri. One of the reasons for this is because Ksitigarbha is of great benefit especially for beings in this degenerate age. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva vowed determinedly in front of Shakyamuni Buddha that he would guide beings in the degenerate age to attain liberation. Thanks to the great vows Ksitigarbha made again and again in his previous lives, anyone who prays to him or recites his name and mantra will be freed from sufferings such as famine, diseases and wars, which are particularly pervasive in this degenerate age, and

also have all their wishes fulfilled. In the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*, dozens of benefits from reciting the long mantra of Ksitigarbha were detailed. The Larung Gar sangha also recite the mantra of Ksitigarbha during the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly very quickly and fluently.

Persevere in Propagating the Sutra

“Concentration Mastery King, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has such power of inconceivable, great awesome spiritual penetration to widely benefit living beings thus. All of you Bodhisattvas should remember this sutra. Expound and propagate it far and wide.”

Concentration Mastery King said to the Buddha, “O World-Honored One, please do not be concerned. Through [the power of] the Buddha’s awesome spiritual penetration, we, thousands of myriads of millions of Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas, will certainly be able to expound this sutra widely throughout Jambudvīpa to benefit living beings.”

Having spoken thus to the Buddha, Concentration Mastery King Bodhisattva joined his palms in respect, made obeisance, and withdrew.



After introducing the qualities and powers of Ksitigarbha, the Buddha urged Concentration Mastery King as well as all bodhisattvas present to keep this sutra in mind and expound and propagate it extensively. Relying upon the awesome spiritual blessing of the Buddha, Concentration Mastery King and thousands of myriads of bodhisattvas vowed together in front of the Buddha that they would spread widely the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* in this life and all future lives to benefit infinite sentient beings.

As we know, teaching the noble Dharma to others is an important way to benefit beings. In *The Mahasamnipata Sutra*, the Buddha said:

*For those who are blind and lost on the spiritual path,
You bodhisattvas should open their Eyes of Authentic Dharma.*

As long as the Eyes of Authentic Dharma in sentient beings are opened, they will instinctively know what to adopt and what to avoid, free themselves from their suffering and attain happiness and eventually buddhahood.

When I read this paragraph in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, I felt an immediate conviction to translate this important sutra into Tibetan. Although the Tibetan population is not large, I felt that it was still necessary to spread this sutra widely among Tibetan communities in accordance with the Buddha's direction. The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is already translated into several languages such as Chinese, English, Italian, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese. Propagating and explaining the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* in other languages is very much needed.

A number of Dharma friends are compiling the Chinese lecture notes on this sutra based on my oral teaching. I hope that you can ensure the quality and timely delivery of your work. Lecture notes of high quality are of great benefits to all future readers. On the one hand, the materials in written format can be more easily preserved and shared. On the other hand, some of my audiences may have difficulties in understanding my audio recordings as my

Mandarin is not that standard. Learning this sutra from the lecture notes solves this problem. So, when you are doing the transcription, please make sure that you do not overlook any key point or any details, and make sure that flow is well organized and logical. For those who will translate the lecture notes into different languages, my suggestion is that you should consider the culture of the target readers and use their ways of expression so that they can more easily grasp the meaning of the sutra.

Although we only have a small live audience for the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, let us try our best to share this sutra with different groups of people because this sutra will dispel their difficulties and bring them peace and happiness. As a Mahayana Buddhist, each of you is responsible for spreading this sutra with your best efforts. You may also emulate Concentration Mastery King Bodhisattva and aspire to spread the Ksitigarbha practice to numerous beings life after life. In the course of propagating this sutra, you may encounter only a small audience of dozens of listeners or you may be confronted with unfavorable conditions from time to time. Regardless, you should persevere and not give up. By maintaining this attitude and propagating the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, you will bring huge benefits to many others.

When I first taught Chinese students in the Samye Stupa of Larung Gar more than 30 years ago there were only about seven persons.

During those years, I tried my best to teach them and never quit. Now the number of the Chinese students has multiplied thousands of times. I used to wonder why in western culture there was a lot of emphasis on resilience and perseverance. Be it a national president or a university chancellor, he or she would always try to inspire people to never ever give up. I believe that this is a spirit that needs to be constantly fostered. From my life experience, I feel deeply that never giving up is a vital success factor in any endeavor, either spiritual or secular.

KSITIGARBHA'S SKILLFUL MEANS TO TRANSFORM BEINGS

At that time, the Deva Kings of the four directions all rose from their seats, joined their palms in respect, and said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has made such great vows throughout many long kalpas past. As of now, living beings have not all been guided across. How is it that he makes further immense vows again? O World-Honored One, please explain this for us."

The Buddha told the Four Deva Kings, "Excellent, excellent! Now for the broad benefit of you as well as of devas and humans in the present and future, I will speak of what Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva does in the paths of birth and death in Jambudvīpa in the saha world: How he kindly and compassionately rescues and liberates all wrongdoing suffering beings by way of skillful means."

The Four Deva Kings replied, "Yes, World-Honored One, we joyfully wish to listen."



After the Buddha addressed the question of Concentration Mastery King, this bodhisattva withdrew, and it was the turn for the Four Deva Kings to ask their questions. The Four Deva Kings from the east, west, south, and north asked the Buddha why there are still so many beings who have not crossed over and how Ksitigarbha can make further immense vows again and again.

Sometimes it is normal for us to get confused when seeing others doing one thing repeatedly. Even the Deva Kings seem to be curious about Ksitigarbha's repeated vow-making over boundless time, let alone ordinary people. This reminded me of one time when I visited home after my ordination. I used to read books under the oil lamp till late at night while my family members slept. I

have an uncle who stayed with my family at that time. He was not that devoted in Buddhism. Around midnight, my uncle woke up and complained, “Are you still reading? Go to bed, don’t disturb our sleep! You used to love reading, now as a monk you still read so late, is there an end for your reading?” So, my uncle was very puzzled why I was always reading and studying.

The Buddha praised the Deva Kings’ question by saying “excellent” twice and they showed great delight in listening to the Buddha’s answer. It is true that when people ask good questions, these questions can elicit even more wonderful responses from the wise. Dharma teachers and students who engage in teaching and studying the Dharma need to have an open and flexible mind and be ready to ask any sharp questions for their fellow Dharma friends. In this way, both questioners and repliers can benefit greatly.

I have visited many schools and universities, among which the Hebrew University in Jerusalem stood out. When I was lecturing there, I could see from the students’ facial expressions that they were smart and intelligent, and their eyes seemed to sparkle with wisdom. I had a feeling that they would ask some really good questions and they actually did. That led to some very insightful interactions. In order to have good answers, we need to have good questions.

The Buddha told the Four Deva Kings, “For many long kalpas past and up to the present, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has been guiding living beings across to liberation; nevertheless, he has not yet completed his vows. He has [great] kindness and compassion for wrongdoing suffering beings in this world, and he further sees that, during measureless kalpas in the future, their causes [of suffering] are endless like vines. Hence, he makes profound vows again. In Jambudvīpa in the saha world, this Bodhisattva teaches and transforms living beings by way of hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of skillful means thus:

The Buddha addressed the questions of the Four Deva Kings directly. Ksitigarbha has not yet completed his vows and he sees that the causes of suffering for wrongdoing suffering beings are endless like vines, out of his great kindness and compassion he continues to make profound vows again and again and applies numerous skillful means to guide these beings across to liberation.

Wrongdoing suffering beings in samsara are mostly controlled by their ignorance and delusion. Because of their ignorance, they cannot stop creating karma; driven by their karma and mental afflictions, they have to experience endless birth and death which involve all kinds of suffering that strengthen their habitual tendencies of mental afflictions. Therefore, they cannot break free

from the cyclic existence of samsara and their causes of suffering (karma and mental afflictions) are like creeping vines that spread far and wide. Because of this, Ksitigarbha's great vows to liberate all sentient beings are endless, and even before his great vows are completed, he continues to take even stronger vows.

Meanwhile, Ksitigarbha uses innumerable skillful means to teach and transform sentient beings. He applies different methods to different beings in accordance with their different faculties to directly attack their faults and provide them a heartfelt introspection to renew themselves. In the texts that follow, Ksitigarbha teaches retribution of killing in front of people who like to kill and teaches retribution of sexual misconduct in front of people who engage in sexual misconduct.

To benefit different beings, it is necessary to consider their faculties, dispositions and preferences. Before sharing any Dharma teaching with anyone, it would be best to figure out what they want to hear so that what we say can deeply touch them and inspire them. Without such awareness, your listeners could become confused and eventually get bored with your topic. For example, a Buddhist beginner would not be able to understand such an advanced topic as the difference between Svatantrika and Prasangika, the two sub-schools of Madhyamika. There are some Dharma teachers who do not even take a passing glance at their audience when giving a

Dharma teaching. They just carry on with their favorite subjects and pay no attention to the audience's reactions. In that case, I am afraid that their teaching would not be that helpful to the listeners. When a senior khenpo gives a Dharma teaching in the West and he just follows the tradition and starts his teaching straight away without addressing any of the needs of the audience nor initiating any interaction with them, given the cultural difference and the audience's different focus and interest, it would be difficult to truly benefit the listeners.

I think some of you will have the opportunity to spread Dharma teachings in the West. My experience is that do not attempt to impart Dharma teachings to Westerners by using Eastern thoughts and concepts. You should take into consideration their different backgrounds and cultures. Sometimes an ordinary topic for easterners may be amusing to westerners but sometimes it works the opposite. When I first started giving lectures in the West, I had no experience in using humor with western audience. I frequently got confused as to why listeners did not laugh at my jokes. Similarly, when His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche gave teachings in the West, there were incidences when the listeners unexpectedly burst out laughing while we thought there was nothing funny. Clearly these were due to people's different values, preferences,

dispositions and habitual tendencies. Thus, it is essential to consider each circumstance and situation like Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, who is super adept at employing skillful means to benefit different sentient beings.

“Four Deva Kings, to those who kill, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva would say that [such action] would lead to misfortune and short lifespan. To those who steal or rob, he would say that [such action] would lead to poverty and wretched suffering. To those who engage in sexual misconduct, he would say that [such action] would lead to rebirth as peacocks, pigeons, and mandarin ducks.



The Buddha listed some of the skillful means that Ksitigarbha would employ with different beings. The bodhisattva would tell

people with different bad habits their corresponding karmic retributions so that they can abandon these negative actions. In this part there are a total of 23 types of actions which will bring unwanted results in their present or future lives.

1. Killing

To those who like to kill, Ksitigarbha teaches them that such action will bring them misfortune and short lifespan life after life. Most people consume meat as a dietary habit or purposely for their physical health. Since this causes the massive killing of animals in the meat industry, people who eat meat are directly or indirectly engaged in the non-virtuous action of killing. However, according to the karmic law, anyone who seeks health and longevity should avoid killing. In the *Shastra of the Bodhisattva Bhumi*, it says, “Neither harming sentient beings nor having an intention to harm them is the cause of longevity.”

Each sentient being, even as tiny as an ant, cherishes its own life the most. In the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, it says, “Of all treasures, life comes first. People acquire wealth for their life, but do not sacrifice their life for wealth.” There are some exceptions who work so hard for their career or business who pay no attention to their physical health. In most cases, it is unlikely anyone would be willing to die in the pursuit of wealth. Thus, because every

being regards their own life as the most precious thing, if a person deprives of another being's life, this person creates the most severe karma that would cause him or her to fall into the lower realms. When this person is able to be reborn as a human, he or she will still have poor health and a short life.

Some people might wonder why they are still sick after they have performed a lot of virtuous acts. The reality is that one's karmic consequences can be caused by the karma from his present life or that from previous lifetimes. For me personally, I often think my illness is due to the negative karma from my previous lifetimes as in this life I have not intentionally committed any killing since my childhood. There may have been cases of stepping on small insects accidentally but I am quite fortunate to be able to observe the discipline of non-killing in this life. Some of you might have enjoyed various types of meat before you became a Buddhist, like the mother of Bright Eyes did. In this case, you should purify this negative karma through the practice of confession, otherwise its retributions in future lives will be terrifying.B

2. Stealing

To those who steal or rob, Ksitigarbha teaches them such action will bring them poverty and wretched suffering instead of a life of abundance and happiness. This is how the law of cause and effect

functions: whatever you do to others, you will experience similar results of your actions. For instance, your life will become short if you harm other's life, and you will become poor if you rob others of their wealth.

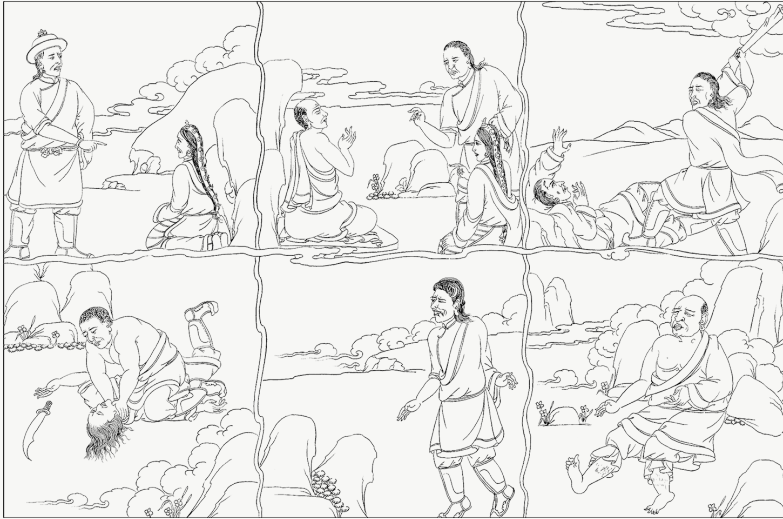
3. Sexual Misconduct

To those who engage in sexual misconduct, Ksitigarbha teaches them such action will lead them to be reborn as peacocks, pigeons, and mandarin ducks. In traditional Chinese culture, mandarin ducks are believed to be extremely faithful to their partners and would die together in pairs. They are regarded as symbols of love and this kind of behavior is an indication of their strong attachment to each other. Birds always represent desire or attachment in the Buddhist teachings. As an example, in the Tibetan painting of the wheel of life, the pig represents ignorance, the snake represents aversion, and the bird represents attachment.

“To those who use harsh speech, he would say that [such action] would lead to quarrels and fights in one's family. To those who utter slander, he would say that [such action] would lead to being tongueless and having a cankerous mouth.

“To those who are angry and hateful, he would say that [such action] would lead to being ugly, deformed, and crippled. To

those who are miserly, he would say that [such action] would lead to not obtaining what one seeks. [...]



4. Speaking Harsh Words

To those who speak harsh words, Ksitigarbha teaches them such action will result in constant quarrels and fights among their family members and friends.

5. Slandering

To those who slander, Ksitigarbha teaches them such action will cause them to be tongueless and have cankerous sores in their mouth in their future lives. Those who suffer from tongue cancer,

oral cancer, or cankerous sores could be receiving retributions from slandering.

6. Anger and Hatred

To those who are angry and hateful, Ksitigarbha teaches them such action will make them ugly, deformed and crippled. In Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*, it says,

*Wrath disfigures face and form and leads to evil states;
It robs the mind of judgment to distinguish good from ill.*

Those who are angry and hateful will become ugly and deformed in the present and all future lives. Their anger will lead them to non-virtuous actions, and worst of all, they will be unable to act sensibly because anger and hatred will cause them to be unable to discern between good and bad. Driven by such strong emotions, one will lose complete self-control. The results of anger and hatred are therefore truly terrible. It is said in many sutras that angry and hateful sentient beings will be reborn as poisonous animals such as scorpions and vipers and their hatred becomes the poison.

7. Miserliness

To those who are miserly, Ksitigarbha teaches them such action will cause their wishes to be unfulfilled. We see in our daily lives

that some people seem to never get what they want. For example, they would not be able to get into their dream schools or sign up for the courses they want; they cannot get a job they like or find an ideal partner; or they are always dissatisfied with the places they live. These could be the result of the stinginess they showed in their previous lives. When they had wealth, they were miserly and did not show generosity.

The above examples show the skillful means used by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva to teach and transform sentient beings. These words, though simple and obvious, are effective antidotes to our mental afflictions. We should contemplate and apply these teachings in our daily practice to cope with our negative emotions and behaviors. For example, knowing the karmic retribution of speaking harsh words, we should reflect on it deeply and frequently, and make corresponding changes in our speech. Also, now that consequences of hatred and miserliness are clear, we should constantly examine our thoughts and mental states to avoid these negative emotions. Without such reflection and introspection, theoretical or literal understanding alone would not help us tame our mind.

Scientists in a number of disciplines have made conclusions similar to concepts articulated in Buddhism, for example, a person has no self, any phenomenon has no solid existence, or the mind projects the world we live in. Yet, are these scientists able to

apply their knowledge to deal with their own mental afflictions and solve their own suffering from sickness and death as many Dharma practitioners have accomplished in their spiritual practice? The answer is no. While scientists may only remain on the level of theoretically understanding their knowledge, accomplished Dharma practitioners are able to independently apply the Dharma teachings into their practice through contemplation and meditation, leading them finally to the actualization of the teaching.

There was another story in the sutra where an experienced illusionist would conjure up a beautiful woman. Although he clearly knew this woman was not real, he was still not able to control his powerful desires towards this woman, thus generating mental afflictions and negative karma. Similarly, if we do not put the Dharma teaching we learn into practice step by step, and if we simply regard the teaching as an intellectual exercise and separate it from our own life, we would not be any different from these intelligent scientists or smart illusionists who cannot overcome their own ignorance and stop their samsaric journey.

Shakyamuni Buddha had attained full and complete enlightenment. He was, therefore, omniscient and had precise knowledge on everything worldly and transcendental. Then why did the Buddha preach mostly the teachings on the Four Noble Truths, emptiness, buddha nature and so on rather than scientific and technological

knowledge that modern people attach more importance to? It was because the Buddha was trying to free sentient beings from samsara, not solidify their delusions in samsara. In order to do so, the Buddha focused his teachings on the path of enlightenment and liberation, spending most of his life elaborating the emptiness of both person and phenomena. All the Buddha's followers are urged to apply his teachings to uproot their ego and ignorance and thus awaken themselves and others.

For matters that were not related to liberation, the Buddha followed the general world views. In the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, or the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha said, "I do not argue with the world. It is the world that argues with me." This is a profound statement. On the one hand, one can say Buddhism is an inclusive religion that can be compatible with many cultures and traditions as well as modern science; on the other hand, this statement also asserts that anything within this illusory world is not as crucial as the Dharma teaching that enables one to break free from this illusory world. In order to achieve this goal, it is essential that we learn and practice the relative truth such as the karmic law of cause and effect, and the ultimate truth such as emptiness and buddha nature.

As followers of the Buddha, we cannot simply learn the Buddha's teachings as an intellectual matter, we need to also exert ourselves

to actualize these teachings into our life and practice. Without actual practice, we will never grasp the profound meaning of the Dharma even if we have learned all the theories and principles of the Five Treatises and earned the most advanced degree in Buddhism. As Kadampas said, “A horse can run through the gap between the mind and Dharma teachings.” Without practice, the blessing of the Dharma would not ripen in our mindstreams and will not help us tame our minds.

I hope that all of you will be able to apply what we have discussed in this lesson on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* to cope with your mental afflictions and tame your mind. Uprooting mental defilements is a difficult task but there are methods to fix them. The Buddha’s teachings are direct antidotes to the three mental poisons of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. As long as we persist in Dharma practice, our minds will be gradually tamed and merged with the Dharma teaching. Eventually we will be able to free ourselves and others from this illusory world of samsara and attain ultimate peace and happiness.

Lecture Nine

August 4th, 2020

We now continue with the teaching on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Historically, we see that the Ksitigarbha practice has been held in high regard by many great masters as well as ordinary Buddhist followers. Even among those who did not take refuge in the Three Jewels, many were also interested in the Ksitigarbha practice and were sincerely devoted to Ksitigarbha. As I said before, I will not elaborate too much on the sutra itself because its word-by-word meaning is not difficult to understand and that there are many good commentaries on this sutra. However, in order to propagate the Ksitigarbha practice to an even wider audience, it is still helpful for us to study together. In every lecture, I will share with you stories of the efficacy of Ksitigarbha so that our conviction to this great bodhisattva can be deepened and strengthened.

EFFICACY STORY: A KSITIGARBHA STATUE IN A TEMPLE

Today, I would like to talk about a story that happened in the Tang Dynasty. In a temple named Kai Shan, there was a one-meter-high statue of Ksitigarbha but no one knew who built it. A local governor whose family name was Deng died of a minor illness at the age of sixty-one. After one day and one night, he revived and demanded to go to the Kai Shan Temple. Upon arriving, he asked the monks to show him that one-meter-high Ksitigarbha statue. At first, those monks had no idea about this statue. Then according to Deng's description, they found it among many statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas, which was not displayed in their shrine hall. After paying homage to the statue by prostration, he asked the monks whether he could bring the statue to his home. This aroused the curiosity of the monks and they wondered why he was doing so.

It turned out that after he died, he was brought to the Lord of Death. The Lord of Death said to him, "You cannot die because upholding

and spreading the Dharma is your calling. You should go back to the mortal world as soon as possible, but since the horrible situation of the hell realm remains foreign to mortal people, do you want to take a look in person?" Upon his acceptance of the invitation, he was brought to the city of the hell where the eighteen great hells and numerous smaller ones were located.

The hells were all bursting with raging flames, and wrongdoers inside were experiencing all manners of indescribable suffering. However, in each hell there was a monk trying to save them by giving them proper teachings. On his way back, the monk came out from the hell city and asked him, "Do you know who I am?" Deng said no. After a long while, the monk said, "I am the Ksitigarbha from the Kai Shan Temple. In the past, in order to save suffering beings from the lower realms, Master Zhi Man, a student of Master Zhi Zang, built a statue of mine in that temple. Following the master's request, I came to the hell every day to instruct wrongdoing beings. Upon hearing my teachings, those with relatively strong virtuous root could attain liberation from the hell; those with less virtuous root would have the seed of liberation planted in their minds; those with little virtuous root or even strongly holding wrong views would not generate slightest regret and thus had to stay in the hell for endless time. In the human realm those with little virtuous root are still possible to be

transformed. However, once they fall into the hell, even buddhas and bodhisattvas have no way to liberate them because their minds simply remain unmoved like wood and stone.”

Ksitigarbha further told him, “You are blessed by the power of the Dharma, so you will not undertake sufferings in the hell. Please go back promptly to the human world and let people know this situation.” This was what Deng experienced during that one day and one night, and then Deng said to the monks, “Not certain whether this was true or not and I dared not tell anyone until I could see this statue in this temple. It looks exactly like the monk I saw in the hell realm. This is why I want to invite the statue home.” Hearing this, the monks said joyfully, “Excellent! It is your faith that called Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva to appear personally. Instead of taking the statue home, you may have another Ksitigarbha statue identical to this one made for people to worship so that we can bring great benefits to others.” Then Deng followed the suggestion and made an identical statue, which inspired many people to take refuge in Ksitigarbha.

This story tells us that having a Ksitigarbha statue indeed can produce immense positive power for a whole community. If it is placed in a city, then the whole citizenry will be benefited. If it is built in a monastery, the entire monastery and the surrounding areas will be benefited. If it is worshiped in a household, then

the whole family will benefit. So it is that we should try to build a Ksitigarbha statue wherever it is possible, or at least place a Ksitigarbha statue or image in our shrine room. It does not matter from which tradition you choose the statue, either Han Buddhist tradition or Tibetan Buddhist tradition. As long as you have faith in your Ksitigarbha statue, it will grant you unbelievable blessings. Their different postures and ornaments will not affect their power and blessing at all.

Take the image of Buddha Shakyamuni for example. There are slight differences in the Buddha's form and posture among different schools and some statues are sculpted standing while some are seated. When I visited Thailand, I noticed that the Buddha's ushnisha is depicted much more pointed in the Theravada tradition than in other traditions. But this difference certainly will not affect my devotion to the Buddha, not even in the slightest. The same for Guru Padmasambhava: in most cases Padmasambhava is drawn seated, but in *The Prayer in Seven Chapters to Padmakara*, the Second Buddha, Padmasambhava is depicted as standing. Besides, in the Eight Manifestations of Padmasambhava, some are ordained while some are not. Avalokiteshvara also takes on different forms. We need to understand that the appearance of a deity in a variety of forms is essential to inspire beings with different faculties and preferences. Whichever form you prefer, you can make offering

and pray to the deity in that form to deepen your faith in it. And as long as you have devoted faith, it makes no difference how a deity appears or which posture the deity adopts. Faith is the most important thing for us to cultivate, and in order to deepen and strengthen it, we need to hold a pure faith toward any kind of Buddhist statues or images.

Some of you who are younger may doubt the immense benefit a Buddhist statue can bring. Some even believe worshipping an image of a Buddhist deity is the same as idol worship. This is quite understandable if these younger individuals have not received an inclusive education on different cultures and religions. For instance, if a person has never learned about Confucianism and holds a rigid view based on his own culture, this person may feel the statue of Confucius is irrelevant. Similarly, those who lack a historical understanding of American freedom and liberty may not feel the Statue of Liberty has any meaning. However, these personal opinions can vanish if people are opened to learning more about the profound cultural heritage, religious significance, or philosophical foundation behind these images and see that a statue from a different tradition could convey high value in regards to its art, culture and religion. One should not make any rash conclusions without first gaining good knowledge of the background of a tradition.

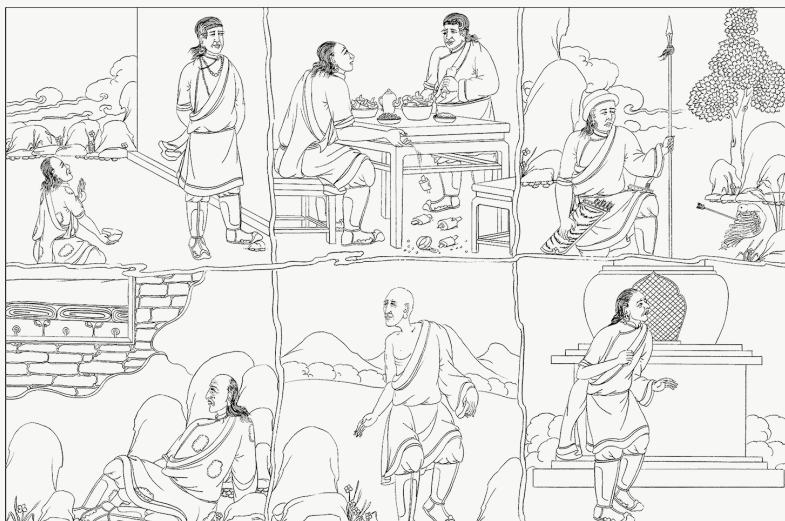
Today, there are individuals with only a sophomoric understanding of religious culture who would reject or even denigrate certain religious art. This only shows their ignorance and imprudence. If one's education since childhood is inclusive and diverse, and supported by religions and spirituality, one's inner qualities and morals will thrive together with one's intelligence. However, the widespread acceptance of the theory of evolution over the past few centuries has led to the rapid growth of materialism and to the great detriment of spirituality. The separation of religious institutions from the state in many countries has also led to the withdrawal of spirituality from public education. Historically, European countries were theocracies and most educational institutions were run by the Church. Similarly, in some Muslim countries the governments were run based on certain aspects of Sharia. Unfortunately, some religious leaders abused their authorities and instead of improving the welfare of their countrymen, they used religious doctrines to control their people in order to fulfill their own selfish interests. Their approaches were often cruel, unreasonable, or even illegal. Because of its irrationality and uncertainty, theocracy has since lost much of its credibility among people and more and more countries have chosen to be secular. As a result, religious education is no longer offered as a public service and sometimes even banned from schools.

This is the historical backdrop on why modern people are less familiar with religions and spirituality. With this understanding, we should avoid making rash judgement on statues with cultural or religious attributes that we are not familiar with simply based on their appearance. We should bear in mind that as an ancient art that has been existing for so many centuries in human history, these statues are by no means as simple as they look. They could carry great cultural and religious significance that we have yet to learn and that they deserve our respect.

Now let us continue with the text of the sutra where the Buddha is talking about Ksitigarbha's skillful means to teach and transform sentient beings who have committed various negative deeds and are suffering from their corresponding retributions. In the previous session, we have talked about seven types of negative deeds, now we continue from the eighth type of negative deeds.

KSITIGARBHA'S SKILLFUL MEANS TO TRANSFORM BEINGS

[...] To those who are immoderate in consuming food and drink,
he would say that [such action] would lead to hunger, thirst, and
throat diseases.



8. Eating Immoderately

To those who are gluttonous, consuming food and drink immoderately, Ksitigarbha said that such action would bring them hunger, thirst and throat diseases, esophageal cancer for example, as their karmic retribution.

Speaking of people who eat and drink without limit, the viral mukbang videos on the internet come to mind. In these “eating broadcasts”, people, usually skinny ones, film themselves eating a staggeringly huge amount of food, e.g., piles of shrimps and lobsters in one meal. Although this type of “limitless” eating and drinking is already a negative deed, what is worse is that in addition to consuming food excessively themselves, some of these people also try to persuade others to emulate them. Since mukbangers usually eat meat, they are not only encouraging others to squander food, they are also causing more creatures to be deprived of their lives. It is sad to think how they could escape the karmic retributions described in the text. Patients suffering from severe throat diseases are unable to take even a drop of water or eat a mouthful rice. These miseries could be the ripened effects of their excessive consumption and waste of food in this or previous lives.

“To those who indulge in hunting, he would say that [such action] would lead to derangement from terror, and then loss of life. [...]

9. Hunting

To those who indulge in hunting, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to become crazed and die in terror. Not only would the death be miserable, people who suffer from the retribution may even see themselves hunted by animals. Master Chin Kung once talked about his personal story of hunting. Before he became a Buddhist, starting at the age of sixteen, he spent three years hunting and fishing with his father. According to his account, he was a crack shot and never missed a shot so they killed a lot of animals and ate a lot of fish. Then his father got a rare panic disorder at the age of 45, and very soon died in a crazed state. Later, Master Chin Kung had a chance to read the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. While reading this sentence, “To those who indulge in hunting, he would say that such action would lead to derangement from terror, and then loss of life”, he realized that the way his father died was exactly the horrible retribution for the hunting and fishing. Then the master vowed not to kill, be a vegan for the remainder of his life, and to sincerely confess the severe negativity he had committed.

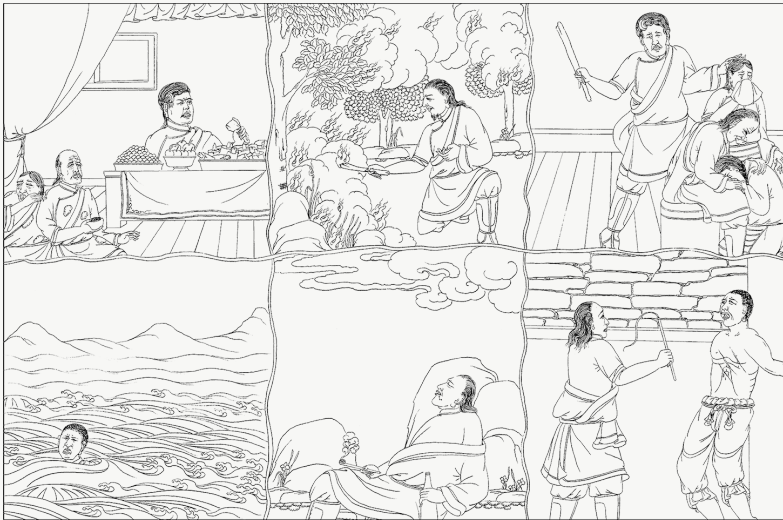
As is the case with everyone, even great masters could have performed negative deeds before they turned to Buddhism. But what is extraordinarily important is that they would sincerely confess their misdeeds and make a thorough change once they realized their faults. This could be something that had happened in their real life or merely an intentional manifestation that would inspire and transform ordinary beings. In Master Chin Kung's story, it was his father's death that deeply touched him and inspired him to believe in the karmic law and follow Buddhism. As we are learning these teachings taught by Ksitigarbha, we should also reflect deeply in our hearts on our daily behaviors.

People who suffer from mental disturbances can be so out of control that they have to be institutionalized in psychiatric facilities where extreme methods such as electric shock therapy is used to help them regain control. Such tragic conditions could be the karmic retribution from excessive killing in their present or previous lives. Those who have indulged in hunting willfully should sincerely confess this negative karma before it ripens into effect.

When I was a child herding yaks, one of my neighbors was a hunter. When we herded yaks together, he would teach me how to set traps with ropes and iron wires to capture prey. But I just pretended. After he laid his traps, I would sneak back and destroy them. I was

glad that although he wanted me to become his student, he never succeeded.

[...] To those who are contrary and perverse to their own parents, he would say that [such action] would lead to being killed by natural disasters.



10. Unfilial to One's Parents

To those who are mean to their parents, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to suffer from untimely death, being killed in a natural or man-made disaster, such as lightening, tsunami, earthquake, landslide or car accidents.

A while back, a car with six students drove into river from a mountain road near Sertar. This tragedy happened at around 2 a.m., leaving one student severely injured and the other five together with the driver dead. About an hour before the accident, the students called their parents and asked them to wait up for them. However, not long after the call, maybe because the driver was too sleepy, the car drove directly into the river. Among the six students, only a girl was able to grasp a branch in the river and gradually pulled herself to shore. She was injured badly and because the accident happened in the middle of the night, she was not discovered until the next day. All the others were washed away and drowned.

In this example, even in the same accident, different people can have different experiences. The outcome for the people is mainly controlled by their individual karma. When bad things happen like this, some may get angry and say, “Why was it me? Why is this happening to me? Why does everyone else have peace and happiness but not me?” However, if we understand the principle of causality, we will see that everything we experience is a karmic result of our past actions. The karma generated in our past lives are stored in the form of seeds in our all-ground or alaya consciousness. At the proper time and conditions, they will ripen into effects, meaning that we will have to experience its result regardless. Since

the karma everyone has generated varies, each person's experiences in this life are also different.

Therefore, everything we experience, good or bad, pleasant, or unpleasant, is the result of a series of obvious and unobvious causes and conditions. Our experiences are just the manifestation of the continuity of causes and conditions. In Buddhism, this continuity of causes and conditions is described as the infallibility of cause and effect of one's actions. As the Buddha said in many sutras, "One's karma will not vanish naturally even after hundreds of thousands of kalpas." People who first hear about this principle might think it is a fabricated religious concept and it is too ridiculous to accept. Anyone is certainly entitled to examine the law of causality as long as it is based on careful study and research; however, if we jump to a conclusion simply because the concept is not in line with our entrenched thinking, then it is a pitiful sign of our ignorance. If we follow the Buddha's teaching and study it in depth, we will be fully convinced of the validity and profundity of the principle of causality.

Personally, whatever challenge or difficulty I encounter, I will try to deal with it with all efforts. But if it still cannot be overcome, I would accept it without any frustration because I know it is the ripened result of my previous karma and I have no doubt about it. This mindset works for everyone because the karmic law applies to

everyone. It is useless to deny or ignore it. Say if someone contracts a rare disease and cannot be cured, one should accept it as the result of one's karma: "Getting such an incurable disease must be the result of the evil karma I created before. Now that the result has ripened, doctors cannot help me, even the Medicine Buddha cannot help me either. I can only purify this karma through my own confession." This would help keep one from feeling beleaguered but rather to face the disease peacefully.

It is essential to internalize the principle of cause and effect as we navigate our lives. Since life is not static, everyone experiences aging and death, thriving and decay, and successes and failures. Despite being invisible to us and impossible for us to discern through our conceptual thoughts, all of these are under the operation of the principle of cause and effect. All we can do is to deeply study and contemplate the related Dharma teaching, such as the teachings of Ksitigarbha provided here, and then to absorb them into our minds to transform our thoughts and behaviors. By doing so repeatedly, we will eventually gain an unwavering certainty towards the principle of karma, which, in nature, is a profound wisdom that can help us easily confront all kinds of challenges in life.

“To those who set fire to mountains or forests, he would say that [such action] would lead to death from derangement and confusion. To those who are cruel parents or stepparents, he would say that [such action] would lead to being likewise abused in the present life. To those who net or trap young animals, he would say that [such action] would lead to separation of parents and children.



11. Setting Fire to Mountains and Forests

To those who set fires to mountains, forests, or woods, whether intentionally or unintentionally, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to suffer from mental disturbance. In the worst

case, they may even try to kill themselves out of their insanity because their previous actions deprived numerous birds and animals of their lives. Committing suicide is often the result of mental disorders. If the person's mind is functioning normally, he or she would regret this action.

12. Abusing One's Children

To those parents who are malicious to their children or stepchildren, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to be abused in the present life or they may be reborn as the children of cruel parents and suffer abuse in their future lives. If an individual is being mistreated by their parents or stepparents as a child, this could be their karmic retribution for having abused their children in their previous lives.

13. Trapping Young Animals

To those who like to catch young animals, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to experience the separation of parents and children. Here in Chinese "young animals" mainly refers to young birds. When a mother bird hatches a newborn bird, she must love it deeply. If someone traps or even kills the baby bird, this cruel act would make the mother suffer the unbearable loss of her baby. In this case, the karmic result of that person is that

he will experience the same suffering of losing his own children or being separated from his parents while he is young.

“To those who slander the Triple Gem, he would say that [such action] would lead to being blind, deaf, and mute. To those who slight the Dharma or look down on instruction, he would say that [such action] would lead one to remain in the lower realms for an interminably long time. [...]

14. Slandering the Three Jewels

To those who slander the Three Jewels, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to be blind, deaf, and mute. Since the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are auspicious objects of veneration, denigrating them generates severe negative karma that brings about the impairment of these senses.

We should sympathize with people who suffer from physical impairment. While feeling sad for them, we should examine whether we have denigrated the Three Jewels. If we have committed such negativities, the karma has been stored in the form of seeds in our mindstreams. And if we don't burn the seeds in this life or even worse, strengthen their viability by creating more karma instead, then these seeds could ripen into effects very soon and we would

have to bear the resultant suffering life after life which could be even more miserable than those we pity now.

Having encountered the authentic Dharma and been taught how to confess, we must purify our negative karma as soon as possible. Otherwise, we will only be trapped in the lower realms with no way for us to break free from samsara. As it is said in the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*, “If people who committed negativities can expose and confess their mistakes, they are called the courageous ones who have gained purity.” So, the practice of confession and purification is very necessary and urgent for all of us and should not be delayed for any reason.

15. Slighting the Dharma and Instruction

To those who slight the sacred Dharma and instructions, as well as to those who defame qualified Dharma teachers, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to take rebirth in the three lower realms for an interminably long time.

[...] To those who abuse the property of the sangha, he would say that [such action] would lead one to revolve through the hells for millions of kalpas. To those who defile those living the holy life, or who make malicious accusations against the monastics, he would say that [such action] would lead one to remain in the animal realm for an interminably long time.



16. Abusing the Property of the Sangha

To those who destroy or misuse the property of the sangha, Ksiti-garbha said that such action would keep them in the hell realm for millions of kalpas. Knowing this consequence, one should be extremely cautious when dealing with the property of the sangha. In a sangha community, it is necessary to have a sound accounting and management system so that all sangha members are clear on what kind of property they can have access to and what they cannot, and to properly control the use of the sangha's money.

For proper financial control, there should be at least an accountant, a cashier, and a supervisor to manage the money together. Any

amount of money that flows in or out should be recorded clearly with signatures of the three persons and accounting reconciliation should be done on a regular basis. Since these are all volunteer work in our sangha, it is best to keep their service period to no longer than five years in case they have become less attentive after working for a long time. In addition, accounting records must be kept appropriately and audited periodically by other sangha administrators. Oral explanations alone would not be sufficiently convincing if allegation of corruption is raised. In case someone is accused of embezzlement, he should ensure that valid evidence can be provided to vindicate himself.

The karmic retribution for people who misuse the money of the sangha is that they will stay in the hell realm for hundreds of millions of kalpas, an incredibly long period of time. The length of even one kalpa is already unimaginable, let alone the length of hundreds of millions of kalpas. One can easily imagine what a horrible retribution it is.

As lay practitioners, you should verify the authenticity of all related information, including the project itself as well as the bank account that would receive your donation before you donate money to a certain project. If someone asks you to transfer money to his or her personal account for making offerings to the sangha or for freeing captive lives while not providing you with any valid

receipt or the like, you should be on guard against being deceived. Monastics at Larung Gar are especially prudent in receiving donations. At Larung Gar, anyone who is found to have solicited money from others in the name of this academy will be expelled. I have never solicited funds for any project at Larung Gar or in my own monastery. So, if you hear someone say that either I or other gurus at Larung Gar are short of money for certain project, it is very likely a fraudulent claim.

17. Defiling or Accusing Monastics

To those who defile monastics who lead a pure life, or those who viciously accuse monastics, Ksitigarbha said that such action would lead them to remain in the animal realm for an interminably long time, which is a horrible retribution.

“To those who scald, burn, behead, chop, or otherwise harm living beings, he would say that [such action] would lead to repayment in kind in samsara. [...]

18. Harming Living Beings Brutally

To those who scald sentient beings, burn them alive, behead or chop them, or harm them in any brutal way, Ksitigarbha said that such action would cause them to suffer from the same treatment in the future. For instance, if we scald living beings with burning

water, we may have to experience being scalded with hot water for the next five hundred lifetimes. Or if we burn living beings with fire, say, we roast lobsters, crabs, fish, snakes, and other animals for food, then we will be killed in the same way in the future.

Once upon a time, the great master in Han Buddhism, Zhi Gong, was invited to a wedding ceremony. Seeing the scene in the venue, he cried out, “What a samsara show! The grandson is marrying his grandmother. The cows and sheep sit there as the guests and the relatives are boiled in the pot. All the guests say congratulations, but I say: Suffering it is! Suffering it is!” It turned out Master Zhi Gong saw with his divine power that the bride was the reincarnation of the grandmother of the bridegroom; the guests in the ceremony were the reincarnations of the cows and sheep the family had eaten; the meat used to serve the guests were taken from animals that were the reincarnations of their late relatives.

In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, there described a similar story that Arhat Katyayana encountered. One day while the Arhat Katyayana was out on his alms-round he came across a man with a child on his lap. The man was eating a fish with great relish and throwing stones at a female dog that was trying to get at the bones. What the master saw with his clairvoyance, however, was this. The fish was the man’s own father in that very lifetime, and the dog was his mother. An enemy he had killed in a past existence had been

reborn as his son, as the karmic repayment for the life the man had taken.

Therefore, as we cause other beings to suffer so will we be repaid in kind. This is how the principle of cause and effect operates. In *The Shurangama Sutra*, it says, “If a man kills a sheep to eat its meat, the sheep will be reborn as a human being and the man, after his death, will be reborn as a sheep to repay his former debt. Thus, living beings of the ten states of birth devour each other and so form evil karma which will have no end.” From these teachings we can see how horrible the cyclic existence of birth and death is.

For those who are living an easy life and have never had to experience misfortunes, they may doubt the principle of cause and effect. However, since the principle of cause and effect is an infallible universal law, it is necessary for everyone to develop a strong conviction in it. Being profound in itself, one way to comprehend it is by means of the theoretical understanding of emptiness, which can provide us with a support to trust the function of karma. As we mentioned in the previous lecture, Aryadeva said in his *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.*

In Chandrakirti's auto-commentary to *Introduction to the Middle Way*, he explained, "The Buddha stated that the workings of karmic consequences are inconceivable, so he discouraged speculation about the workings of karmic actions and results, otherwise ordinary beings could end up denying karmic consequences and demolishing the relative." Although the karmic law is too concealed for us ordinary beings to fathom, we can rely first on the teaching of emptiness to gain conviction in the Buddha as well as the Buddha's teaching. With such conviction, we would then be able to accept the Buddha's teaching on the principle of cause and effect so that we can become proper vessels for higher practices, as in the case of unsurpassable Vajrayana. This is why great masters in the past always attached great importance to contemplating the four outer preliminaries, which are: 1) the difficulty of finding freedoms and advantages; 2) the impermanence of life; 3) the defects of samsara; and 4) the infallibility of the cause and effect of our actions. Without a conviction on the karmic law and the defects of samsara, we would never become qualified practitioners who can realize the true reality of emptiness or buddha nature.

Since the emergence of Buddhist modernism in the late 19th century, many forms of reformed Buddhism came into vogue around the

world, especially in the West, e.g., the United States and the United Kingdom. Followers mostly believe in parts of the Buddhist concepts such as emptiness, compassion, or impermanence, yet discard the fundamental tenets in Buddhism such as the law of cause and effect, past and future lives, the existence of samsara, and so forth. In some part of India, there was Buddhist reformation as well, as in the case of Navayana Buddhism. The founder created his own doctrines and thought the teaching of the Four Noble Truths was flawed. He also believed that the concept of no-self was in contradiction with karma and rebirth which he considered superstitions. There are many well-known celebrities, including best-selling authors, who are followers of this kind of reformed Buddhism. It is fine for people not to accept Buddhist teachings, but it would be strange for someone to claim to be a Buddhist and yet refuse to believe in karma, reincarnation, and samara. Buddhist practitioners should be on guard against such a mentality.

[...] To those who violate the precepts and rules of eating, he would say that [such action] would lead to rebirth as fowls and beasts suffering from hunger and thirst. To those who unreasonably destroy things and deplete resources, he would say that [such action] would lead to insufficiency and lack in what one seeks.



19. Violating Precepts

To those who have taken certain set of vows such as the vow of individual liberation, the bodhisattva vow and the eight one-day vows but violated any of them, Ksitigarbha said that such action would lead them to become fowls or beasts suffering from hunger and thirst. An example would be if someone has taken a vow to not eat after noon but he or she still eats in the afternoon or even later, this person would take rebirth in the animal realm and experience hunger and thirst. This means that many animals today are probably the rebirths of people who had violated their precepts when they were alive. There are also many people who suffer from

hunger and thirst, which could be the retribution for their negative karma generated through violation of the precepts.

20. Destroying Things and Depleting Resources Unreasonably

To those who like to destroy things at random or deplete resources arbitrarily, say, sabotage public facilities, road, greenbelts, and other's belongings, Ksitigarbha said that such actions would cause them to experience insufficiency and failure in getting what they want.

“To those who are conceited and arrogant, he would say that [such action] would lead to being lowly and servile. To those whose divisive talebearing causes dissension and disorder, he would say that [such action] would lead to having no tongue or being ‘a hundred tongues.’ [...]

21. Being Conceited and Arrogant

To those who are arrogant and vain, Ksitigarbha said that such actions would lead them to be lowly and in an inferior and servile position. In some societies, there are established social classes, e.g. the caste system in India, while most others have unspoken rules and norms around social status. Some people are born into noble or upper-class families and possess attributes such as intelligence, appearances, and abilities that would outshine their peers. Others



who are born into unprivileged families and lower classes are rarely endowed with any outstanding qualities. These individuals could be the result of the ripened effect of being arrogant and conceited in their previous lives. However, if these people can practice the Dharma diligently and revere the object of veneration wholeheartedly, they will be reborn as noble ones in their future lives.

22. Divisive Talk

To those who like to instigate conflicts and disorder through divisive talk, Ksitigarbha said that such actions would make them tongueless or turn them into beings with multiple tongues. Those

who are born with festered tongues or tongues like those found in snakes are probably experiencing the ripened effect of their negative karma of sowing discord among others.

With this warning, we should be mindful of our speech in order not to accumulate negative karma through mindless talking. If we often gossip, talking about others' faults, then severe negative karma will accumulate in the process. On the contrary, if we often say words of praise, praising others' qualities, praising the Three Jewels and so forth, tremendous positive karma will be accumulated. That was why practitioners in the past used to say, "Chat less and recite more buddha's name." Some people are dominated by their negative karma and make quick judgments on everything and everyone at sight and constantly disparage others. Those who are mindful of their speech, no matter how badly they have been wronged, will always try to make sense out of it and behave decently to avoid creating negative karma out of speech.

While being mindful of our speech in everyday life, we should also pay attention to our choice of word while writing books and posting messages on social media which have allowed anyone to become an online writer and reporter. Those who freely post abusive or silly and meaningless messages are not only disturbing others, they are also creating a lot of negative karma. Since the internet has provided more opportunities and a bigger forum

for speech, one's words and thoughts can now influence more and more people. We should therefore be especially aware of our words on social media. If we are going to post a message on a social media such as Weibo or make a TikTok video, it is best to create content that would deliver positive energy and be beneficial to others. If a positive post gets a high click-through rate, hundreds of thousands of people will be benefited. In the same manner, if a post expresses only one's bad moods, negative comments, or complaints gains wide exposure, it will bring harmful influences to numerous people and create severely negative karma for the content creator and others.

Some people really like to express their moods and feelings on the internet and such an act can easily invite judgment from others. Many people today tend to closely monitor their social media and can be quite judgmental when it comes to other people's posts and behaviors. "Well, he posted this today, I bet he will post that in a few days." "This person must be in a bad mood recently." "He must be in high spirits recently." In some extreme cases, there are those who tweet more than a hundred posts a day to complain about this and that. Many of us will certainly think that there is something wrong with this person because a normal person would not behave this way.

I seldom browse social media posts except for the WeChat Moments of a few Tibetan khenpos. Their posts are always about their devotion to Buddha Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava and so on. From their posts I can feel the peace and contentment in their minds and I am sure their friends seeing the posts will feel the same way. As a Tibetan saying goes, “Before you speak one sentence, you should first assess the crowd.” It is important to speak words suitable to the circumstance and listeners. Despite that, it is unavoidable that our words would sometimes accidentally invite misunderstanding from others. Still, we should try to be mindful with our words at all times in order not to sow discord or create disharmony among others. It would be terrifying otherwise to experience the suffering of being tongueless or having multi tongues.

[...] To those who hold false views, he would say that [such action] would lead to rebirth in borderlands.

23. Holding Wrong Views

To those who hold wrong views, Ksitigarbha said that such action would lead them to take rebirth as ignorant beings in places where Dharma teaching was unknown. As a result, they would have no idea of what they should and should not do, and thus continue to commit negative karma that would lead to endless suffering.

Therefore, it is crucial to rid oneself of any wrong views when there is an opportunity to study the Dharma.

Here Ksitigarbha described a total of 23 types of negative deeds and their respective retributions. Although we have not heard these teachings directly from Ksitigarbha, we should use them to observe our daily behaviors and thoughts because we can commit these wrongdoings so easily in daily life. It is certainly difficult for us ordinary people to completely avoid acts such as giving rise to wrong views, never gossiping about others, or being never arrogant. Only enlightened bodhisattvas can reach this perfect state. Nevertheless, we should be vigilant to avoid committing the more severe ones such as killing, violating precepts, or willfully usurping the property of the sangha.

Some Buddhists are very careful with their words and deeds and always talk sensibly and act prudently. From these behaviors, we can conclude that they must have clearly accepted the teachings on the principle of cause and effect. If someone never pays attention to his or her actions, and engages in gossip or slander frequently, it indicates that this person has either never received teachings on karmic laws or is simply overwhelmed by his or her negative karma.

As Buddhist practitioners, we should be persistent in trying to transform our words, acts and thoughts for the better and not go back to our old behaviors. It is insufficient to just pay attention to our speaking during the several days of receiving a teaching, to the point of even wearing a “silence” badge on our clothes, and then regress to our old behaviors after the teaching fades from our memory. As authentic Dharma practitioners, we need to absorb these teachings into our beings to guide our behaviors for our entire life. Such is the stable personality that we practitioners should cultivate.

Stability is an important attribute as it helps a person win trust from others. When we evaluate a person, we would often consider whether he is stable or not, especially when we look for a volunteer to do a certain job. If someone is stable, one’s body must be stable, one’s words reliable, and one’s view steadfast. Then why is it that some would often change their minds? On the one hand, they could be swayed by their strong negative karma; on the other hand, it is likely that they do not realize their own problems and instead just follow their ego-driven emotions. A good way to understand oneself and recognize one’s own problem is to rely on virtuous friends. There is a verse in Sakya Pandita’s *Treasury of Good Advice* that reads:

*Even though one may lack wealth and attendants,
With intelligent friends one achieves one's goals.
If this is the case even for animals,
Needless to say, it is so for humans.*

Therefore, having a trustworthy friend is especially important for anyone. However, many today do not have any close or reliable friend and they often suffer from loneliness and social isolation. According to a survey done in the West, the number of close friends a person has on average is decreasing and because people today are preoccupied with themselves and have no time to care about others, finding trustworthy friends has become increasingly difficult. As a consequence of increased self-centeredness, it has become more and more difficult for people to be altruistic and considerate of others, and hence difficult for them to become a trustworthy friend to others.

The strong and pervasive influence of self-centeredness has its roots in the global mega trend of individualism that has increasingly prevailed in human society over the past couple of centuries. Traditionally, cultural concepts such as being loyal, trustworthy, filial to parents, and loving friends were rooted in the minds of many people around the world, and every country has her own moral tradition. However, the rise of individualism has shifted people's attention to themselves over others, as in the case of

their friends, spouses, parents, as well as communities. Modern education encourages self-actualization and uniqueness.

As a result, many people isolate themselves from others and cherish their own time. Although this may seem desirable in the beginning, in the long run they lose their passion and opportunity to share their joy and love with others, and worse, they destroy their social relationships and build barriers to their friends. This is why some individuals have become a lonely island all unto themselves and are unable to find a trustworthy friend to talk to when they are emotionally down or confronted with challenges in life. Because of this cultural context, people with an altruistic motive may even be viewed with criticism, skepticism and suspicion on why they would help others before they are able to completely take care of themselves.

Given such realities, it is necessary to create more opportunities to let people learn about Buddhist concepts such as the principle of cause and effect and altruism. If the principle of cause and effect, such as Ksitigarbha's teachings given here, can take root among them, people will be more willing to observe the ten virtues with confidence and become more righteous, reliable and trustworthy. On the other hand, if people have no idea about the consequences of their actions and thoughts, and just do whatever they feel good without any discipline or introspection, it would be difficult for

them to become a kind person with noble qualities. As many great masters have said, a good personality endowed with the ten virtues is the fundamental root of spiritual practice, without which one cannot succeed in any spiritual practice, nor take rebirth in the celestial realm or in the Pure Land of Bliss.

The way to help people discover the value of the principle of cause and effect is through education. Although there are exceptional people who are born with altruism, honesty, and trustworthiness, these qualities need to be cultivated through teaching and instruction for most people. Sadly, modern education now offers mostly a package of knowledge and skills which is devoid of moral and ethical principles. Growing up in such an educational environment, most will end up being trained as smart individualists.

As Buddhist practitioners, we should learn about the overall situation of the world and the thought processes of modern people so that we can gain a better understanding of their needs and offer them appropriate help through Dharma teachings. Meanwhile, since the influence of individualism is pervasive and we are not immune, even though we are currently immersed in the Mahayana teaching of altruism and compassion, we also need to reflect deeply in our hearts on whether our selfish inclinations have been weakened or not. The principle of cause and effect deserves to be highly valued by everyone. If someone realizes its importance and acts

accordingly, clearly knowing what kinds of behavior should be adopted and what should be abandoned, this person will be greatly benefited. It is my sincere wish that through learning this sutra, each of you can develop a firm confidence in the principle of cause and effect and then further take it as your responsibility to spread the teaching to each and every fortunate person you encounter, just like Ksitigarbha is doing with all his skillful methods.

THE BUDDHA'S ENTRUSTMENT TO THE FOUR DEVA KINGS

“Living beings of Jambudvipa such as these—the evil habits in their karma of body, speech, and mind bear fruits, giving rise to hundreds of thousands of effects, of which I have now spoken in general terms. What the karma of such beings of Jambudvipa brings forth is different; accordingly, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva uses hundreds of thousands of skillful means to teach and transform them. These living beings are to undergo ripened effects like the ones mentioned first, and then fall into the hells, where they pass through many kalpas without a time of release. Therefore, you should protect people and protect their countries. Do not allow living beings to be deluded by these many [kinds of] karma.”

After hearing this, the Four Deva Kings wept and sighed sorrowfully, joined their palms and withdrew.



After briefly explaining how Ksitigarbha educates those beings with various negative habits, the Buddha said that he can only describe in general their countless karmic effects and the innumerable expedient methods Ksitigarbha uses to instruct and transform them. Sentient beings who commit these negativities will first receive their respective retributions mentioned above and then fall into the hells without a time for release. Therefore, the Buddha entrusted beings of this world to the Four Deva Kings to protect them from being deluded by their karma and committing more negativities, otherwise these beings will fall into the hell realm and experience immense suffering for endless time.

Upon hearing the Buddha's words, knowing that sentient beings are undergoing great suffering due to their ignorance and delusion, the Four Deva Kings wept compassionately and promised to follow the Buddha's instruction to save sentient beings. In addition to this sutra, the Four Deva Kings also vowed to protect beings of Jambudvīpa in other scriptures such as the *Extensive Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni* and the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*. In the Buddhist tradition, at the entrance of a Buddhist monastery, the images of the Four Deva Kings who are to protect people from committing negativities are usually displayed.

From the Buddha's explanation of how Ksitigarbha teaches beings, we can see that this great bodhisattva is expert in giving proper

teachings according to the propensities and dispositions of sentient beings. This is the key point we should consider when sharing the Dharma teaching with others. The content of our teaching must correspond to the preferences and needs of the listeners. If people are afflicted with anger, it would be better to give teachings related to anger such as its negative impact and the way to ease it; if they are filled with greed, we may start by teaching them the defect of such grasping and the appropriate way to accumulate wealth, etc.

An approach that often leads to failure in spreading the Dharma is to believe that whatever we like applies to everyone else. Take the teachings of hells: If we talk about the existence of hells and their unbearable sufferings to someone who has not even heard about the six realms of samsara and has not yet taken refuge in the Three Jewels, the most likely outcome is that we would simply scare this person away from following Buddhism. In the early years at Larung Gar, there was a khenpo who was a debate expert. I would often pass his yard when I went to carry water. One time I heard him teaching a bunch of children about the respective opinions Je Tsongkhapa and Master Gorampa held toward a question. But the thing was those children were all playing by themselves and they could not care less about who Je Tsongkhapa or Master Gorampa was.

Therefore, knowing the mindset and preferences of your potential audience is always necessary in order to give them a proper and beneficial teaching. This should be a primary concern in your future Dharma activities. I too have been making efforts in this regard. When I traveled overseas to give talks in different countries and universities, no matter where I went, I would do my homework to learn about their local traditions, their cultural taboos, the likes and dislikes of the locals, so on and so forth. If my schedule were too tight for me to do detailed research, I would chat directly with the locals whenever possible. Often on my way from the airport to the hotel, I would learn a lot from the driver about the local customs and habits. This was quite helpful to me as I prepared for the talks I was going to give.

Since we cannot cover a very large part of the sutra in our daily lectures, I hope that every one of you can internalize every day's teaching and use it to bring about the corresponding change. For instance, your conviction in the infallibility of the karmic law and your appreciation of the greatness of Ksitigarbha's work in teaching and transforming sentient beings should be deepened by today's lecture. Furthermore, you should be inspired to follow the example of Ksitigarbha and vow to enlighten sentient beings with various skillful means. Such an aspiration should not be made only once. Even Ksitigarbha himself had made vows as

numerous as the grains of sand in multiple Ganges rivers. For us ordinary practitioners, making aspirations just a handful of times is undoubtedly not sufficient. We should aim to strengthen the power of our vows by repeating them again and again.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Names of the Hells

“Does hell exist?” some might wonder. It is acceptable and indeed encouraged to have questions when exposed to a foreign idea. Question leads one to truth. If you follow your doubt and delve deep into it, once you resolve it through rigorous and thorough investigations, you will have gained great benefits.

To deny the existence of hell just based on one’s perception is illogical and invalid. Buddhist scriptures have never claimed that hell is a visible object to the eyes of ordinary human beings. What is more, we can never be sure that we will be able to perceive everything that exists in this universe.

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture Ten

August 6th, 2020

Today, we are going to study the fifth chapter, *The Names of the Hells*. Speaking of hell, many Asian people, whether Chinese, Tibetans, or people from other ethnic groups, can accept it or at least not despise it. Especially here at Larung Gar, the existence of hell is widely embraced. In contrast, many in the West do not quite accept the idea of hell. Of course, there are exceptions. Many elder generations of western Buddhists do embrace this concept, such as the senior disciples of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Dudjom Rinpoche. They have no doubt about the existence of hell. Whereas younger generations of westerners do not quite accept it. Similarly, in the East, young Tibetans who have grown up in the cities and have only received modern education simply feel hell is an unbelievable and unacceptable concept. Such cases do exist.

WHY DO WESTERNERS TEND TO REJECT HELL?

Why do so many westerners tend to reject the existence of hell? One reason may be that they favor optimistic concepts. When positive topics such as confidence, courage, integrity, hope, and the like are being discussed, they are welcomed. But when an actual place of torment and suffering such as hell is discussed, most of them would feel frustrated and try to deny its existence. According to a Pew Research Center survey, westerners prefer to talk about heaven rather than hell. Compared to the number of those who believe in heaven, much fewer believe in hell. Even among those who believe in hell, just a tiny percentage view hell as a horrifying place full of irons and flames.

Another reason could be historical. For nearly 2,000 years, adherents of certain western religious traditions have tried to gain followers through threats that said that they would otherwise be condemned to hell unless they joined. What was worse was

that these people often engaged in improper behaviors, such as initiating conflicts and riots for their parochial or selfish purposes, causing immeasurable harm to innocent people. Because of this historical background, those who have knowledge about the history of their religion's past actions would feel uncomfortable or even offended about when the Buddhist concept of hell is taught to them. They tend to believe the Buddhist teaching of hell is incompatible with their common belief and is just another type of doctrine to threaten people.

In fact, while some religious traditions mention heaven and hell in their scriptures, others do not even believe in heaven and hell. The concept of hell that they have claimed are often merely their personal interpretation, with few reliable grounds to be found in their authentic scriptures. In the *Bible*, while the heaven and hell are mentioned, there are few detailed descriptions as are found in Buddhist teachings. Also, there is no relevant teaching on reincarnation. It merely states that if one commits sins, one will fall into the hell, and if one does good, one will ascend to the heaven. Basically, entry into heaven or hell is determined just by whether a person believes in God, and after this human life, everyone will exist either in heaven or hell for ever. There seems to be no third alternative. Just as what is said in a metaphor used in Vajrayana for pointing out the importance of keeping samaya, for a snake that

has crawled inside a length of bamboo, there are only two ways out—straight up or straight down.

In the past few years, some scholars and masters in the West have invited me to their institutions or Dharma centers to teach. Initially, I felt that I should share fundamental philosophies such as reincarnation and the existence of hell with them. Since everyone is wandering in the six realms, when one's negative karma ripens, he will most certainly experience hell. However, when I described hell to teachers and students in colleges or the so-called Buddhists, from their facial expressions and attitudes as well as their shared comments, I could tell that they are not quite open to the idea. Sometimes, when I started to talk about hell, someone would just leave right away, unwilling to listen. From such experience, I understood why some Buddhist masters and scholars strongly advised me not to touch upon the topics of hell while giving speeches in their centers or colleges.

One more reason for the rejection of hell in western societies could be the influence of Darwin's ideas. In the past, quite a large number of people in the West were religious. But later under the impact of evolutionism, many people became secular and believed in atheism and materialism, which have now become the mainstream beliefs of modern society.

Generally, religions are less embraced in many countries worldwide now than in the past. While many countries promote the ideas of equality and freedom, proclaiming that every citizen would have the freedom of speech, when it comes to real life, this freedom will not be without any restriction. It is true that this freedom does not mean anyone can do whatever they please and each country or state may have its own interpretation of freedom, equality and democracy that is subject to its own political framework. In particular, regarding to what degree of freedom should be enjoyed by religions, political leaders are always quite cautious because the appeal of religions could result in influences that far surpass the influence of political leaders, political parties, or political ideologies. For this reason, throughout human history, most governments deal with religious issues cautiously. In general, teachings on religious philosophies are required to conform to the mainstream cultures and views in a society. Particularly, in modern universities and schools, influenced by the idea of atheism, religious teaching is strictly restricted and performance of religious rituals is also not allowed.

From a historical perspective, it is quite understandable why so many people are not open to religious traditions. There were many instances when the influence of a particular religious tradition became so great that its adherents began to utilize its many resources

and all manners of methods to overthrow the government and take over a country. There were many such examples in history, especially with certain western religious traditions that advocate the unification of the church and state. During the past centuries, many wars and conflicts were initiated among different religious groups and led to disastrous bloodshed. Therefore, it is not surprising that many people have developed a critical view towards religions. It is indeed not illogical for them to remain conservative toward religions, not to mention their denial of the existence of hell.

Comparatively speaking, Buddhism is different in that there is hardly an instance where Buddhists were encouraged to take control of a country under a selfish drive. This was because it would go against the core doctrine of Buddhism, especially the Mahayana spirit of compassion and altruism. But to many, because there were cases in which religious groups promoted their ideas for the sake of individual benefits, they tend to think that Buddhism, as a religion, is of no exception. Generally, people use their past experiences to forecast the future because events occur usually in a pattern, so it is reasonable that politicians and historians would have a preconceived idea for religions.

DOES HELL EXIST?

“Does hell exist?” some might wonder. It is acceptable and indeed encouraged to have questions when exposed to a foreign idea. Question leads one to truth. If you follow your doubt and delve deep into it, once you resolve it through rigorous and thorough investigations, you will have gained great benefits. Regarding the existence of hell, one common argument is, “If hell exists, why can’t I see it?” To deny the existence of hell just based on one’s perception is illogical and invalid. Buddhist scriptures have never claimed that hell is a visible object to the eyes of ordinary human beings. What is more, we can never be sure that we will be able to perceive everything that exists in this universe.

As a matter of fact, our visual senses are really quite limited. There are many things in this world that cannot be perceived by our naked eyes, such as ultraviolet rays, infrared rays, electronic waves, and so on and so forth. While these things do exist and have been utilized to facilitate our life, they are invisible to our naked eyes. Furthermore, according to modern physics, the universe consists of

ordinary (or visible) matter, dark matter, and dark energy. Ordinary or visible matter makes up about 5% of the universe, taking up only a small proportion, compared with dark matter and dark energy, which composes 27% and 68% of the universe respectively. Although scientists may still argue about the exact proportion of each component, there is no question that dark matter and dark energy make up the bulk of the universe.

Moreover, the universe can be analyzed on two levels: the microscopic world and the macroscopic world. While the boundary between them is not so definite, most scholars refer to the macroscopic world as substances that are visible to naked eye, while attributing to the microscopic world small particles that are invisible to the naked eye, such as atoms, molecules, quarks, etc. Even though our naked eye cannot sense it, the microscopic world does exist in its variety and can be observed by means of modern techniques. Take for example the tip of a needle. To our eyes, it is almost the smallest component, but indeed it is made up of countless iron particles. According to the analysis in the *Abhidharmakosha*, an iron particle is 49 times larger than the smallest indivisible particle.

In addition to these material matters, there are also forms of lives that remain imperceptible to us, including like ghosts, rakshasas, yakshas, as well as such mysterious creatures as dragons. Some of them belong to the animal realm and some the hungry ghost realm.

Within the six realms, we ordinary people can only see a small portion of sentient beings. Or just based on modern science, only a very small ratio of the entire universe can be seen and detected by us. There is no doubt that the objects that can be perceived by our eyes, which according to the *Abhidharmakosha* appear in the form of either color or shape, are indeed far less than those that cannot be detected.

That being the case, it is worth contemplating whether hell exists or not. Some maintain that hell exists, simply because it is taught in the scriptures or because of their personal unordinary experiences. Some state that they see no reason to accept the existence of hell, despite the fact that they cannot affirm its non-existence. Both attitudes are not justified. If we want to either prove or negate a scientific hypothesis, reliable data or evidence should be provided in support of the specific argument. However, up to now, there has not been any valid evidence found by any scientific researcher to invalidate the existence of hell.

In most cases, hell is believed to be non-existent simply because it is not seen or reported. But as we just explained with the example of dark matter and energy, this is never a justifiable argument. In the past, the existence of dark matter and energy remained secret to us. But through the development of modern science, our knowledge and understanding of what was unknown is getting

more complete and further deepened. Following this logic, it would be subjective and arbitrary to negate the existence of hell because our current scientific resources have failed to detect and demonstrate its existence. As a matter of fact, the world of hell is beyond the detection of today's scientific measures. It is quite unlikely for a scientific researcher to detect hell, unless he himself commits crime and falls into it, the experience of which would be the best proof. But certainly, this is not what we want to happen.

According to Buddhist Logic, a statement for proving that something is absent or non-existent because of not having observed it is two-fold: things that cannot appear and things that can appear. If the subject is a thing that can appear to our perception, say a bottle, the statement that "there is no bottle here because I have not observed one" is justifiable. However, if the subject is a thing that cannot appear in our perception, like a ghost, a valid statement would be "I am uncertain if there is no ghost here because I have not observed one, since it cannot appear to my perception." So, from the point of Buddhist Logic, if the subject is something that we can see, we can conclude its non-existence by merely not seeing it. But for things like nonhuman spirits and hell that are not within the scope of our perception, the same deduction would not be true.

In the time of the Buddha, many nonhuman spirits would attend the Buddha's teachings, but the ordinary audiences did not know their presence because they cannot see them. Sometimes, the Buddha would require these spirits to make their presence visible, otherwise they would not be allowed to receive the teaching. Then, the spirits revealed their forms to the public, which frightened many bhikkhus present. Likewise, when we are giving Dharma teachings, it is very likely that there are non-human spirits, such as rakshasas, yakshas, ghosts or the like, among the audience. Though we cannot see them, it does not mean that they are not present. Because they are undetectable to our sight, it is insufficient to disprove their presence merely by our visual observation. It is just like you cannot deny the existence of energy or waves, like sound wave or electric wave, with the argument that "I don't see them or touch them."

Indeed, there are many things or phenomena in this world that is beyond our senses and understanding. In such cases, it would be more sensible to consult authentic teachings of the sages and analyze in depth by means of valid inference. So, keep an open mind to the fact of hell and probe into it. This is the action of the wise. During the process, instead of engaging in a mere theoretical study, we should cultivate a deep conviction on the subject. If we remain indifferent to the horrible suffering in hell, we may

commit negative deeds that would lead us down to hell. But if we have generated a firm belief on hell and karma, we will be wholeheartedly cautious in what to do and what not to do.

For this reason, reading more scriptures and treatises about hell is helpful and necessary. The *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection* describes the horrible situation in hell in great details. The related teaching can also be found in other texts such as *The Buddha Speaks of the Boundless Samadhis on Contemplating Buddha*, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and Longchenpa's *The Great Chariot*, the commentary on his *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*. Notably, the latter cites quite a lot evidence from authentic texts like the *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection* and *Letter to a Disciple* to expound on the situations in hell.

While these descriptions are terrifying, there is no need to be afraid of reading them. As the saying goes, "Bodhisattvas are cautious of causes, while ordinary beings are afraid of results." Bodhisattvas know that they will receive retribution if they accumulate negative karma so they are cautious in avoiding it. It is just like a sensible man knows the consequence of breaking the law, as such he will keep himself within the bounds of the law and never exposes himself to the risk of being imprisoned. Conversely, the foolish acts recklessly and unscrupulously, and eventually put themselves into prison.

In reality, the hells described in the scriptures represent only a small portion of all different forms of actual hells that exist in samsara. If you have difficulty visualizing the myriads of situations in hell, think about prisons in our human world. Even now, in the 21st century, in this civilized modern world, there exist still numerous prisons where prisoners are experiencing very different forms of punishment or even torture. The situations of prisons in different countries, from those in Europe to those in Africa, are quite different. If you visit these prisons, you will gain a new perspective on what hell can be and how the wide variety of suffering in hell could actually exist.

It is likely that for some readers the descriptions of hell in this chapter would be new and difficult to comprehend. I hope, however, with the introduction above, that you would be willing to keep an open mind and try to understand and accept it because it would help you be more vigilant in abstaining from negative deeds and to better discipline yourselves. For those listeners at Larung Gar who have been influenced by traditional Chinese cultures, folk ideology, as well as Dharma teachings, it may seem that I am wandering off the text because most of you can easily accept the existence of hell and would not find the concept of hell repulsive and unacceptable. Still, the key point I want to make is that we

must develop an unwavering conviction on the reality of hell to help us better discipline our thoughts and behaviors.

EFFICACY STORY: MIRACLES OF THE IMAGE OF KSITIGARBHA

Here is a real story about the miracle of a painting of Ksitigarbha. During the Liang Dynasty in the sixth century, in Deyang County of Han State, there was a Buddhist temple called Shan Ji (“Good Peace”). Along its eastern eave gallery, there were two paintings of Ksitigarbha and Avalokiteshvara on the wall, drawn by the great painter Zhang Sengyou. The painting of Ksitigarbha was of great blessing. When people prostrated to it, miraculous light would radiate from it. Later, during the time of Emperor Gaozong of Tang, at 664 AD, monks who appreciated the extraordinariness of this painting made many copies of it and distributed them to worshippers. When people venerated the copied image and made offerings to it, it magically radiated light just as the original painting. Because of this, a lot more people copied this image and so it was further circulated.

At that time, an official had also copied that image of Ksitigarbha, and had been devotedly venerating and making offerings to it daily. At about 666 AD, this official was appointed as the prefectural governor of the Zi state. He set off to his post by boat, and there were nine other ships along the way. One day, they encountered a sudden strong storm. While all the other nine ships sank in the roaring waves, the ship in which the official was remained safe and sound. Being convinced that this miracle must have been the compassionate blessing of Ksitigarbha, the official became even more devoted to Ksitigarbha.

Years later, at 687 AD, Empress Wu Zetian heard about the incredible blessing of this Ksitigarbha image, so she requested the royal painters to copy the painting for worship and again the copy emitted light. Then in 766 AD, during the reign of Daizong of Tang, when a master from Baoshou Temple came to worship the painting, he saw awe-inspiring light radiating from it, so he reported this to the emperor. Marvelled at such a miracle, the emperor venerated the image with sincere devotion. It was believed that when a bodhisattva manifests miraculous light, the country will be prosperous and her people will be at peace. Then there was the time when the wife of a businessman had been pregnant for 28 months but was unable to give birth. Once she saw the image of Ksitigarbha radiating light, she decided to also copy this image.

When she was copying the image, she wished for Ksitigarbha to solve her difficulty. Then that very night, she gave birth to a lovely boy. Because of all these and other examples, the painting of Ksitigarbha was renowned as “Bodhisattva of Radiating Light.”

From these stories, we can see that the painting of Ksitigarbha carries great blessing and even its copies are able to bestow people blessings. That being the case, it is meaningful to replicate and circulate thangkas or statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas that are known to bring great blessing. Their blessing will continue even with their copies. Personally, I have distributed to the sangha members at Larung Gar many excellent images, like that of Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Buddha Shakyamuni, and Dharma protector Tsiu Marpo, whose original images are all endowed with great blessing. Nowadays, as the technology in making replicas is so advanced, it is certainly worthwhile and much easier to widely promote these noble images than in the past.

It may be difficult to replicate the status that Buddhism enjoyed in the Tang Dynasty. For almost 300 years, only one of the twenty two emperors resisted Buddhism, all the other twenty one emperors were strong believers. This could have contributed to the prosperity enjoyed by the whole country during the Tang Dynasty. Art and culture flourished, and the people enjoyed a better quality of life

than before. According to many historical studies, the Tang Dynasty is considered a golden age in Chinese history.

As a matter of fact, the level of religious belief can greatly influence the development of a country. If the whole country, from the royal members to the normal people, embraces the authentic Dharma and practices virtue, then happiness will pervade the country. If the majority of a country goes against goodness and virtue, and does not care about the karmic law, misfortunes will promptly and endlessly befall the country. Therefore, it is essential that we create an atmosphere that encourages virtue and morality within a society and within each family. It is a natural law that virtuous cause brings about pleasant results. If everyone in this world, from each individual to each group and each country, practices virtue and engages in altruistic behaviors, the whole world will be filled with peace and happiness. However, if everyone, from people in the bottom of society to the presidents, pursues only self-interest without any concern for others, and behaves improperly or even wrongly, we will only beget suffering instead of happiness. Such is the karmic law.

WHERE ARE THE HELLS?

Chapter Five

The Names of the Hells

At that time, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “Benevolent One, for the sake of devas, nagas, the fourfold assembly, as well as for all living beings in the present and future, please speak about the names of the hells, where wrongdoing suffering beings of Jambudvīpa in the saha world undergo ripened effects, and bad consequences [that they experience], so that living beings of the Age of Declining Dharma in the future may know of such results.”

In the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, we can often encounter great bodhisattvas we are familiar with. In this chapter, the main characters are Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha and Samantabhadra. In this instance, Samantabhadra made a request to Ksitigarbha, asking him to speak about the hells for the sake of the eight classes of gods and demons such as nagas and devas, the four groups of Buddha’s followers



which are monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, and all sentient beings in the present and future, particularly those in the time of degenerations, so that they will know that one's severely negative karma will force him or her to fall into the hells and experience immense suffering.

It is worth mentioning that saha world is the entire world that Buddha Shakyamuni guides and tames, in which there is Jambudvipa, the human world where we live. While the text in English is "wrongdoing suffering beings of Jambudvipa in the saha world," the original Chinese version is ambiguous, which literally is "wrongdoing suffering beings of the saha world and Jambudvipa."

When I translated it into Tibetan, I interpreted it as “wrongdoing suffering beings of the saha world, especially those in the Jambudvipa,” which I think is clearer.

Most people who live in this world do not know the existence of hell. Because of this, they commit many negative deeds that will lead them down into hells. Compared to them, we are fortunate to know the causes of falling into hell before the end of this life. With such knowledge, those who are sensible would certainly not dare to engage in misdeeds that would result in a rebirth in hell. This is why great Tibetan Buddhist masters in the past loved to frequently teach about the suffering of hell. Each time they gave such teachings, both listeners and they themselves became more cautious in not going against the karmic law. Therefore, it is quite necessary to build a knowledge of hells and an understanding of the karmic process. As it is said in the sutras,

*If you want to know the cause in previous life,
Reflect on what you experience in this life.*

If you want to know what you did in your previous lives, just reflect on how your present life is. If you are enjoying a happy life, it indicates you had accumulated merits in your previous lives; if you experience a lot of suffering, you must have committed misdeeds in your previous lives.

Ksitigarbha replied, “Benevolent One, now through [the power of] the Buddha’s awesome spiritual penetration and through your strength, that of the Mahasattva, I will speak in brief about the names of the hells and the ripened effects of wrongdoing, the bad consequences.

“Benevolent One, to the east of Jambudvīpa there are mountains named Iron Encircling. Dark and abysmal are these mountains, without the light of the sun and moon. There is a great hell there called Extreme Incessant, and a hell named Great Avīci.



Ksitigarbha replied that it was indeed through the power of the Buddha’s spiritual penetration and Samantabhadra’s strength that

he would briefly address the names of the hells and the karmic retribution of people's misdeeds. First, to the east of Jambudvīpa there are mountains called Iron Encircling, which is pitch black and very deep where even the light of sun and moon could not penetrate. Located there is a great hell named Extreme Incessant, and another hell called Great Avici.

According to some scriptures, the Avici Hell is the Extreme Incessant Hell. They explain that Avici is a Sanskrit transliteration, in which "A" means not, never, and "vici" means interval, intermission, or ceasing. In other scriptures such as this sutra and *The Shurangama Sutra*, the Extreme Incessant Hell and the Avici Hell are mentioned as two separate hells.

The Extreme Incessant Hell, as described in the *Long Agama Sutra* (*Dirghagama Sutra*), is a place where everything one experiences is distressingly bad—every object one sees is nasty, every sound one hears is unbearable, every odor one smells is disgusting, every food one tastes is awful, everything one touches is insufferable, and everything that comes to one's mind is evil. This is the experience of beings in the Extreme Incessant Hell.

The Avici Hell, as taught in the *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*, is a place entirely engulfed in blazing fire and bodies of sentient beings there are burning all over and all the time. The

fire is so ferocious that when touched by its flame, even the entire Mount Meru are burned out immediately. Despite that, bodies of beings in the Avici Hell keep on burning while remaining alive and yet cannot be freed from this extreme suffering.

Where are the hells? There are many different claims. According to the text here, hells are in the Iron Encircling mountains, whereas other texts like the seven books of Abhidharma believe that hells exist down beneath the ground. There is a claim that they are located under the Gangdise snow mountain. Why are there different claims? It is because the karma of beings differs from each other so they experience hells in different places. According to the Mahayana teachings, such as the *Wish Fulfilling Treasury*, where the negative karma of hell ripens is where the hell exists. As *The Way of the Bodhisattva (Bodhicaryavatara)* points out,

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

In fact, there is no such a universal god or a creator who deliberately creates the hell and constructs it with iron. The guards of hell are

not born from anywhere, nor are the instruments of torture forged intentionally. When one's negative karma ripens, hell appears to him concurrently. Therefore, hell is just an illusory phenomenon that appears to a deluded mind, just as it is the case with the six realms such as the human world, the high heaven, and others, as well as the pure lands, that they are all illusory appearances without any solid existence.

Some question this interpretation, "How can they be just an illusion? Is the earth not solid?" The fact is that this is entirely consistent. For instance, in quantum mechanics, it was discovered that the result of an observation is subject to the observer, and whatever perceived is more likely an illusory appearance endowed with uncertainty. According to Buddhist Logic, what we see, say a cup, is only existent and valid to our direct perception. Although it seems to be an actual existence in front of our naked eyes, if we go deeper, even from the perspective of the Basic Vehicle, either the Sarvastivada School ("Doctrine That All Is Real"), the Sautrantika School ("Follower of the Sutras"), or the theory of Abhidharma, the cup is nothing more than a collection of numerous small particles. So, the cup itself is empty of nature, devoid of an independent and intrinsic entity.

If someone wonders, "How can such a solid thing be empty! If so, why can't my hands penetrate through it?" Again, science provides

relevant explanations in this regard. For instance, according to the Pauli Exclusion Principle, no two fermions can be in the same state or same configuration at any one time. It means that atoms are effective at blocking other atoms from occupying their space. This is why our hands cannot go through another thing, say, a computer, while both are almost entirely empty space.

What does this mean? It indicates that things we see with our own eyes are not as they appear. Because of this, *The King of Samadhi Sutra* says, “the eyes, the ears, and the nose are unreliable,” pointing out the fact that our ordinary perception is not valid for the true reality. We habitually trust our sight or hearing, but with careful examination, we will realize that what we perceive as real is in fact illusory and that we are living in a world that only exists in our deluded mind. All phenomena are, as taught in Buddhist teachings, as illusory as dreams, mirages, spinning fire wheels, and the like.

As we can see, the findings of modern physics is consistent with these Buddhist analogies. It is just that many people are too preoccupied with their mundane life that they seldom bother to give this a deeper thought. Meanwhile, science has not yet delved sufficiently deep into the more subtle aspect of the ultimate truth, i.e., the emptiness of all phenomena. It is not a matter of intellect, but is something that has to be realized through actual practice. If

scientists apply themselves to spiritual practice, they will personally realize the very nature of emptiness. It is necessary for everyone to delve deep into the ultimate truth through both philosophical teaching and actual personal practice. Because when we talk about such deep teachings as the existence of hell, most people who have not developed a conviction on the Buddha's words would develop doubts and discriminative thoughts. In such cases, remind them that their conceptual thoughts are not necessarily reliable. What you think right may not be right, and what you think wrong may also be the opposite. As *The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters* says, "Be careful not to believe your mind; your mind is not to be trusted."

NAMES OF DIFFERENT HELLS

“Furthermore, there is also a hell named Four Corners, a hell named Flying Knives, a hell named Flaming Arrows, a hell named Squeezing Mountains, a hell named Piercing Spears, a hell named Iron Carts, a hell named Iron Beds, a hell named Iron Oxen, a hell named Iron Clothing, a hell named Thousand Blades, a hell named Iron Donkeys, a hell named Molten Copper, a hell named Pillar Embracing, a hell named Flowing Blazes, a hell named Tongue Plowing, a hell named Head Chopping, a hell named Feet Ablaze, a hell named Eye Pecking, a hell named Iron Balls, a hell named Quarreling, a hell named Iron Axes, and a hell named Much Anger.”

Here Ksitigarbha listed more names of the hells, and each name suggested the kinds of suffering that would take place in that hell.

Four Corners Hell: One commentary says that this hell is surrounded by iron walls, and within it torrential rains of flame and

burning iron pour down, smashing the bodies of wrongdoers to pieces and crushing them to nothing. We can imagine that this hell is enclosed by four walls with raging flames and beings are trapped inside with no escape.

Flying Knives Hell: In some scriptures, it is also called Spinning Blade Hell. In this hell, iron blade wheels fly down from the air like raindrops. So sharp are they that the flying spinning blades would slice the bodies of sinful beings into countless pieces.

Flaming Arrows Hell: In this hell, infinite flaming arrows pierce into the heart of every inhabitant. Beings in this hell die and revive tens of thousands of times and keep experiencing the same suffering repeatedly and perpetually.

Squeezing Mountains Hell: Due to the ripening of beings' sinful karma, mountains appear on both sides of them, catching them in the middle and crushing them into ashes. However, after a while, the mountains separate and these hell beings revive and then again experience the same suffering. This process continues on endlessly. It is the same as the Rounding-Up and Crushing Hell mentioned in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Piercing Spears Hell: In this hell, sharp spears pierce through the beings' bodies countless times from all different directions.

Iron Carts Hell: In this hell, beings are forced to pull heavy iron carts. According to the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, Buddha Shakyamuni's first time of generating compassion is in this hell, which is also quoted in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It says:

In a previous life, the Buddha was born in a hell where the inhabitants were forced to pull wagons. He was harnessed to a wagon with another person called Kamarupa, but the two of them were too weak to get their vehicle to move. The guards goaded them on and beat them with red-hot weapons, causing them incredible suffering. The future Buddha thought, "Even with two of us together we cannot get the wagon to move, and each of us is suffering as much as the other. I will pull it and suffer alone, so that Kamarupa can be relieved." He said to the guards, "Put his harness over my shoulders, I'm going to pull the cart on my own." But the guards just got angry. "Who can do anything to prevent others from experiencing the effects of their own actions?" they said and beat him about the head with their clubs. But because of this good intention, the Buddha immediately left that life in hell and was reborn in a celestial realm. It is said that this was how he first began to benefit others.

Iron Beds Hell: In this hell, beings are laid down on giant beds, and trapped by scorching ironing net, with no way to escape.

Iron Oxen Hell: In this hell, burning bulls, far scarier than those furious bulls in Spanish bullfights, trample and stomp on the bodies of hell beings, or spear their horns against those beings. Even more scary is that their eyes and mouth would emit flames, scorching whoever comes into contact with them.

In fact, there are a variety of animal hells besides this one. Those hell animals are many times larger than the ones we see in our daily life and are particularly terrifying. What kinds of animal hells beings fall into depends on what kinds of animals they slaughtered in their previous lives. That is how karma functions, reflecting a person's actions like a mirror. If one frequently kills cows or bulls, one will suffer in Iron Oxen Hell. If one enjoys killing birds, one will suffer in the hell where iron birds come to peck at their eyes and flesh. If one kills dogs, snakes, frogs, crabs, etc., one will fall into the hell with the animals they have killed. In addition, one will suffer the same kind of fate as what we have learned in the last lecture, becoming these animals in the future and slaughtered by others.

Iron Clothing Hell: In this hell, beings' whole bodies are wrapped in burning iron clothing or iron monastic robes. Covered by such burning iron garments, sinful beings' entire skin, flesh, muscles, and bones are all destroyed and burnt. Imagine how extremely painful that is!

Thousand Blades Hell: In this hell, beings are slaughtered by hundreds of thousands of knives and blades.

Iron Donkey Hell: It is like the hell of Iron Oxen. If in the previous lives, one killed donkeys, one falls into this hell and is tortured by burning iron donkeys. There are several similar hells where beings are tortured by burning iron animals.

Molten Copper Hell: Molten copper is poured into the mouths of suffering beings in this hell as a retribution.

Embracing Pillar Hell: Hell beings have to hold on to burning iron pillars akin to some ancient torture instruments which would incinerate all their outer skin, internal organs, and their whole bodies.

Flowing Fire Hell: Flames pour down like water and consume all beings there.

Tongues Plowing Hell: Wrongdoer's tongue becomes infinitely vast and an oxen will plow furrows back and forth on top of the tongue.

Head Chopping Hell: There are knives that keeps smashing and hashing beings' head. What agony! It would seem it is better to die immediately, even if it is to be beheaded right away than to survive this way and be consumed by such constant agonizing suffering.

Feet Ablaze Hell: Fire is raging everywhere, and all beings there will have to step on it with bare feet to be burnt.

Eyes Pecking Hell: Birds would peck at beings' eyes, brains, and other parts of body. The birds may be vultures, eagles, or even chickens and geese sinful beings used to kill.

Iron Balls Hell: Wrongdoers must swallow burning iron balls which would ignite their whole bodies.

Quarreling Hell: In relevant commentaries, there seem to be no clear description of this hell. Literally speaking, it sounds like a place where beings are extremely hostile to each other and attack each other in a particularly heinous way, which resembles in some ways the Ephemeral Hells. The Ephemeral Hells take a variety of forms, depending on the karma of sinful beings. There is one case of Ephemeral Hell that sounds like a Quarreling Hell. The story speaks about a monastery housing many monks. When the bell rang around midday and the monks gathered to eat, the monastery would turn into a house of burning metal. The monks' begging bowls, cups and so forth would change into sharp weapons and the monks would start quarreling, fighting, and beating each other with them. Maybe the Quarreling Hell is like this story where inhabitants keep arguing and fighting with each other vehemently

and no one would compromise. Our usual debate would be a joy compared to this.

In our daily lives, we may sometimes argue with others for good reasons or in order to achieve our goals, but it could lead us to the Quarreling Hell in the afterlife. Therefore, we should be very cautious about these behaviors. Recently, as I began teaching about the nature of hells, I became very scared and reminded myself to be heedful and try to avoid causing any conflict. But sometimes I must argue with other people when we are discussing construction projects at Larung Gar. Just before this lecture, I quarreled a little bit with those project managers and gave them a reprimand. In the end, feeling quite discontent with them, I said, “Ok, whatever! Bye-bye” and left them. Although I have been especially focused on practicing patience these days, sometimes things won’t work out without a proper reprimand. Some of them felt I was angry, but in my heart, I have never had a moment of anger.

My point is, to practice patience is important. If we cannot always stay patient, at least within an hour or a day after we are irritated, we should still try to avoid quarreling with others or exhibiting improper behaviors driven by hatred. To contain our anger and refrain from any negative behaviors are indeed a practice of patience. If we just bear with it a little, our anger may subside after a while. This is a very good method of dealing with anger.

Yesterday I did a training session for Tibetan khenmos at Larung Gar, regarding how they should work with the cameramen as we are planning to record a lecture of each khenmo as a historical documentary. The session was set to start at 11am, and there should be 30 khenmos attending. But by 11am, not everyone was there, so I decided to wait a few more minutes. When it was 16 minutes past 11, still not everyone has shown up. I was about to blow up but then noticing my rising of negative emotions, I reflected and reminded myself to stay calm and not lose my temper. At that time, the expressions of those in charge of the meeting told me that they must have thought I would be raging. Instead, I dealt with the situation in a very peaceful manner. After the training, I felt that it was quite an effective way to alleviate emotions.

People sometimes have strong negative emotions, but if we apply mindfulness and introspective awareness to counter them, they can be excellent opportunities to train our minds. Although we cannot do what Buddha Shakyamuni did in his causal stage when someone cut his flesh into pieces with a sharp knife and he remained undisturbed and even aspired to liberate the person after attaining buddhahood. When others questioned if he was really not at all angry, he vowed that “if it is true that I am not angry at all, may my body recover as before”, and then his body did recover due to

the power of this truthful speech. We may not be able to do this, but we can at least try not to generate negative karma.

Iron Axes Hell: Living beings are put on instruments of torture which cut their heads, hands, feet, limbs, and the torso into pieces.

Much Anger Hell: In this hell, beings constantly hold grudge toward each other, and their hatred is very intense and explosive. For example, certain wild animals or beasts in this world, such as poisonous snakes, tigers, and the like, are very hateful. They would do whatever to seek revenge, even sacrificing their own lives in doing so. Beings in this hell are truly miserable.

If we do not want to fall into this hell, we must cultivate compassion and loving kindness. Some people could be very loving, but once they become angry, they cannot control or counteract their anger. If this fierce negative emotion is not purified properly, it will continue to take effect and cause terrible consequence. According to Mahayana teachings, among greed, anger, and ignorance, anger is the most poisonous. The fault of one thought of anger is far greater than a hundred thoughts of greed. Therefore, according to Mahayana Buddhism, one must make efforts to counteract anger. On the start of the spiritual path, it might be difficult to tame hatred due to the karma and habits from previous lives, but as long as we adjust our mind using the methods taught in Mahayana

teachings, even an irritable disposition will gradually change. This is the power of Dharma practice.

Speaking of this, the Mahayana teaching is indeed extremely precious to all living beings. Our mindstreams can be transformed greatly even if we only listen to one teaching or read one book of Mahayana. Conversely, without its nourishing, one will remain untamed. I heard today that two Tibetan villagers stabbed each other seven times. I wonder if the seeds of Mahayana are in them, otherwise how could they behave like this? Even non-Buddhist people say, “Do not impose on others what you do not desire yourself,” how could they behave so madly! They are unlikely to be Buddhists, and it would be particularly shameful if they are. As Buddhists, even if we may be unable to contribute significantly to Buddhism, try not to besmirch Buddhism. We may not be able to benefit hosts of beings but try not to harm even a single being. This is fundamental to Mahayana Buddhism and should be our guiding principle. If we adhere to this principle our whole life, even if we have not become an excellent practitioner in this life, this will be a source of benefits to ourselves as well as others.

Hatred is a horrible poison and it has harmed countless beings. Every day, Mara Papiyas shoots five arrows of greed, hatred, ignorance, jealousy, and arrogance at sentient beings. Most beings

are more frequently hit by the arrows of greed and hatred, comparatively less by jealousy, and fewer by the other two. Therefore, we must carefully observe the afflictive emotions in our minds and try to apply proper antidotes. For example, when we find we have strong hatred or jealousy, we should pray to the Three Jewels for blessing and meanwhile endeavor to tame it. Because such negative emotions will not only undermine our current practice but also ruin our future lives. If we fail to tame it, even though in this life we may be a monastic or a layperson who seek for spiritual attainment, we may still fall into the Much Anger Hell, Quarreling Hell, or other similar hells in the afterlife. Once we have fallen into a hell, it is difficult to get out. Now when these people are caught by the police, they would wish their case to be withdrawn. Otherwise, they are likely to be brought to the court, tried, and sentenced. Once in, it is difficult to escape the punishment of the prison. In the same manner, for any rational person who is conscious of right and wrong, it is sensible to avoid falling into hell. Otherwise, unless Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva comes to save them in person, it would be impossible to escape. What a terrible outcome!

Therefore, each of us should carefully examine ourselves. As a Buddhist, it would be very unfortunate if we do not think about hell or if we doubt its existence. Although many people do believe it, without regular practice and training of the mind, when negative

karma ripens and afflictions arise, so fiercely like a waterfall bursting out, it would be difficult for them to break through its influence and control their minds. I visited many prisons around the world and was told by many inmates how they acted on the spur of the moment and committed a murder or other crimes. That is why it is so important for us to guard our minds with mindfulness and introspection so as not to fall into those hells mentioned above.

Ksitigarbha said, “Benevolent One, within the Iron Encircling there are hells such as these, which are limitless in number. [...]

Even the names of many hells have been described by Ksitigarbha, the actual number of hells is indeed uncountable.

Let us all recite the name of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva together. On the one hand, we pray to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva to relieve the suffering of sentient beings in hell, and on the other, we pray for the world so that the weather will be favorable and all the natural disasters and infectious diseases, particularly the current pandemic COVID-19, will disappear.

Lecture Eleven

August 7th, 2020

We continue with the fifth chapter of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, *The Names of the Hells*. I remember certain Chinese master made a textual outline for this sutra, and many great masters explained this sutra from different perspectives in detail. But during my teaching, I could not get time to fully read them all. I am so occupied with affairs of the academy that sometimes I could not even chant before and after class with the whole sangha, something I cherished very much. For me, they are the most important daily chanting and practice. That being the case, it is quite difficult for me to find time to look through more references and commentaries before every lecture. Nonetheless, I was able to spend a lot of time to do a comprehensive study of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* earlier when I was translating it into Tibetan. In order to ensure the accuracy of the translation, I tried to clearly understand the meaning of every word so I still have a good memory of my study.

In the last lecture, we talked about a variety of sufferings in different hells. It is clear that we are really lucky to be born as humans, not having sunk into the three lower realms, in particular the hell realm. Sometimes, we do experience various sufferings, both mentally and physically. But however great our suffering is, it can never be compared with the tremendous pain in hell, just like it is said in Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*,

*For one whole day on earth three hundred darts
Might strike you hard and cause you grievous pain,
But that could never illustrate or match
A fraction of the smallest pain in hell.*

EFFICACY STORY: ASPIRING TO MAKE A KSITIGARBHA STATUE

Before this lecture, let us take a glimpse into the meritorious qualities of Ksitigarbha through a true story. In the Han Dynasty, there was a governor who had no faith in the Three Jewels but practiced Daoism. Once, he got sick, and having tried all sorts of treatment, he still did not recover. Then, his wife, who was a Buddhist, prayed and consulted Ganesha, a protector of Buddhism, and got the reply that “If he determines to make a statue of Ksitigarbha within a day, he will recover.” When she told this to her husband, he did not quite believe, “I can make such a statue as required. But I will only be convinced and do it unless something miraculous happens.” Before the next day, he passed away. Feeling heartbroken, his wife wailed and prayed that he could return to life. At that time, there was much argument about his death. Some Buddhists said that he died because he did not take refuge in Ksitigarbha, while for some who disbelieved Buddhism, the man’s death confirmed their doubt and disbelief.

Anyhow, after one day and night, the man came back to life and started to wail vigorously. Prostrated by grief, he asked for a knife and frantically tried to cut his own tongue. Seeing this, his wife tried to comfort him. Gradually, he calmed down and said to her, "You are really a virtuous companion! Without you, I would have fallen into hell. You saved me and prolonged my life. It is you who are able to show me the path of liberation." "Please tell me what happened," the wife asked, having no idea of his experience during that one day and one night.

Weeping bitter tears, he explained, "When I died, the henchmen of the Lord of Death appeared and escorted me to the Lord. When we arrived, the Lord of Death seemed quite displeased with the henchmen. He said, 'This man has made an aspiration to make a Ksitigarbha statue. His virtuous aspiration has not yet been fulfilled, why did you take him here!' Saying this, he ordered them to be beaten with iron rods. Then, the Lord said to me, 'Thanks to the kindness of your wife, you have aspired to make the statue of Ksitigarbha. I tell you, anyone who takes refuge in Ksitigarbha will have all their wishes fulfilled. You should go back to the human world and complete your aspiration.' So, I was sent back and revived. Now I realized my faults. Because of my disbelief, I have slandered the noble bodhisattva. That is why I was to cut my sinful tongue to purify such a severe negative karma."

Hearing this, his wife exhorted him, “Pick yourself up from where you fell. Your negative karma will not be purified even if you cut off your tongue. Let us make the statue of Ksitigarbha. This is the way to rectify your error and it will also benefit other beings.” He listened to this advice and completed the Ksitigarbha statue within one day. Afterwards, he kept making offerings to Ksitigarbha and always encouraged others to take refuge in Ksitigarbha.

There have been many similar stories that recounted how people were escorted to the Lord of Death after death and how they were then saved and came back to life under the blessing of Ksitigarbha. But each story gives us a different inspiration. From this story, we learn that even if one has no faith in him, just a vague aspiration of making a statue of Ksitigarbha can protect one from retribution in hell. The powerful blessing of Ksitigarbha is indeed inconceivable. On the one hand, he is able to change even definite karma (the effect of which is usually hard to alter), a unique ability that many other noble deities do not even possess. On the other hand, Ksitigarbha is powerful in protecting beings from falling into hell. If one has a bond with him, then if this person falls into hell, Ksitigarbha will definitely come to rescue. Therefore, it is important to rely on Ksitigarbha’s blessing.

For this reason, we shall all resolve to build statues of Ksitigarbha. Nowadays, it is far easier to construct a small statue which will

not cost much at all. If you have the opportunity, you should try to construct a statue of Ksitigarbha and place it in your own shrine, your temple or Dharma center. It will not only benefit you but it will also benefit countless other beings. Furthermore, if you can influence and encourage others to engage in such goodness, the benefit will be even greater.

Another inspiration we can gain from this story is how to atone for our misdeeds. When one extremely regrets a mistake, one may desperately seek all kinds of measures to compensate for it. But what they assume as a way to compensate may actually be reckless and useless. In this story, the husband thought that it was his slanderous speech that gave him negative karma so he wanted to correct it by cutting out his tongue. But as his wife pointed out, self-mutilation is of no use and one should pick oneself up from where one falls.

Similar cases can also be found among several great Buddhist masters in history. According to Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India*, Ashvaghosha used to be an outspoken opponent of Buddhism who openly challenged the Buddhist doctrine. But after being defeated in a debate with the noted Buddhist master Aryadeva, he became a Buddhist. Later, hearing the suggestion of Aryadeva, he composed the *Fifty Stanzas on Following a Teacher* and *Buddhacharita* as the best way to purify his past negativities.

The great master Vasubandhu also had similar experience. In his early years, he followed the Basic Vehicle and criticized Mahayana Buddhism. Later, when guided by his half-brother Asanga into the Mahayana teachings, he realized that he had wrongly judged the noble teaching and wanted to atone by cutting off his tongue. Asanga stopped him and persuaded him to compose commentaries for Mahayana teachings as a way to purify negative karma. Consequently, he wrote many works on Mahayana Buddhism and became one of the greatest Buddhist authorities of ancient India and recognized as one of the Six Ornaments.

For some of you, because of your background and non-virtuous friends in the past, you lacked a proper understanding of Buddhism or especially Vajrayana and thus may have denigrated it. If this is the case, you should try to atone for your misdeeds by propagating the sacred teaching or deity that you have denigrated, like through writing explanations for the teaching or building statues for the deity. In the same manner, if you used to eat crabs, fish, mutton or the like, and therefore had caused the death of many lives, how should you offset the negative karma? You should pick yourself up from where you had fallen. No matter what mistakes you have made in your life, follow this principle and make amends.

As Dharma practitioners, it is crucial to value this human life and to try our best to purify all negative karma while we are still

alive so that we will not fall into the lower realms after our death. Even just the talk of hell could be blood-curdling. For me, when I read about hell or give this teaching, I feel terrified and have to remind myself that “In this life, as well as in the past lives that I can’t remember, I must have created many causes for hell retributions and those negative karmas are already stored in my alaya consciousness. I am all right now because they have not ripened. But once they mature, I will have no choice but fall into the hell realm. Now that I have obtained this precious human existence, even if I entertain no higher hope such as attaining the rainbow body, or other great accomplishment, I must hold the bottom line and purify my negative karma so as to not fall into the hell realm after my death. If I fall into the lower realms and overwhelmed by all kinds of pain, I would only become helpless and hopeless, not even remembering how to chant the simplest mantras to save me from the suffering.”

Thus, sometimes I think to myself, while I have been giving Dharma teachings and engaged in various virtuous deeds, I have not practiced enough. Life is short and I am coming to my later years so it is time to do my own practice. I should find time to take a retreat and purify my negative karma. If I were to ask for permission from everyone, I will never get a chance. Many would say, “You do not have to practice. You should stay to look

after us and give us teachings.” But personally, I am thinking of going to a solitary place in my later years and focusing on the recitation of mantras that can clear away the hell retributions and other negativities. This thought come to mind from time to time, especially now when we are talking about the ferocious torture in hells.

Usually, when hell is being discussed, everyone feels uncomfortable. We will be much consoled when we get to the following chapters, which talk about the benefits of praying to Ksitigarbha and reciting this sutra. There was a Tibetan folk saying, “It is happy to be a monk, but it is painful to learn precepts.” Being a novice monk is simple and free of worries, but it is distressing to study the many precepts and the faults of breaking them. Naturally, when learning about positive aspects, everyone is happy. Especially, when hearing the teaching of the Middle Way or the Great Perfection that points out the nonexistence of everything including afflictive emotions, we all feel great and relieved as if we can do anything we wish and there will not be any worries, even if it is just a theoretical study and we have not personally realized emptiness. Conversely, when discussing the karmic law, we would have quite a different feeling. That is natural!

NAMES OF DIFFERENT HELLS

“In addition, there is the Hell of Crying Out, the Hell of Tongue Plucking, the Hell of Excrement and Urine, the Hell of Copper Locks, the Hell of Flaming Elephants, the Hell of Flaming Dogs, the Hell of Flaming Horses, the Hell of Flaming Oxen, the Hell of Flaming Mountains, the Hell of Flaming Rocks, the Hell of Flaming Beds, the Hell of Flaming Beams, the Hell of Flaming Eagles, the Hell of Teeth Sawing, the Hell of Skin Flaying, the Hell of Blood Drinking, the Hell of Hands Burning, the Hell of Feet Burning, the Hell of Thorns Reversing, the Hell of Flaming Houses, the Hell of Iron Houses, and the Hell of Flaming Wolves.

“There are hells such as these, and within each there are one, two, three, four, or even as many as hundreds of thousands of smaller hells, each with a different name.”

Previously, Ksitigarbha listed a great many hells within the Iron Encircling. Then he continued that there are a variety of more hells and named some of them.

Crying Out Hell: This hell is similar to the Howling Hell and Great Howling Hell, two of the Eight Hot Hells. In this hell, living beings are scalded in boiling water such that their bodies crack, causing unbearable pain. The primary cause for this hell is harboring hatred.

Tongue Plucking Hell: In this hell, beings' tongues are pulled out by burning iron forks, then are plowed on, or their tongues are cut into pieces continuously by blades. Because of their karma, their tongues are chopped off and piled up as high as a mountain. The main cause for this hell, as well as the aforementioned Tongue Plowing Hell, is non-virtuous speech such as harsh speech, idle gossip, lying, and sowing discord, especially speech that besmirches eminent monks and great masters, malign buddhas and bodhisattvas, or slander the authentic Dharma. Such slanderous speech incurs grave karma.

Considering this, try not to violate the principle of cause and effect when speaking. Some people are quite eloquent especially when criticizing other people. They love to nitpick on others and everything seems to be a big fault for them. Perhaps it would be

hard for them to get rid of this habit, and there is little we can do to change them. A monk I knew before used to say, “Don’t care about what others say, their mouths belong to them.” Despite that, the monk himself was overly concerned about other people’s words and always complained about how others criticized him and how he was annoyed. Nevertheless, what the monk said is quite to the point—for those nitpicking ones, it is better to leave them alone. Conversely, some people have a pure mind, and their behavior and speech are always decent and kind. They do not like to talk about the faults of others. In fact, this should be an important characteristic for every spiritual practitioner. It is more important to reflect inwardly instead of finding faults in others.

Excrement and Urine Hell: Here, beings are submerged in the sea of dung and urine, where there are tens and thousands of wiggly worms. Each worm has thousands of iron heads, and each head has thousands of iron beaks, from which spurt flames that engulf the bodies of the hell beings. This is the result of past sexual misconduct, including impure behavior performed in shrine halls or other holy places.

Copper Locks Hell: Certain commentary referred to it as the Black Line Hell, which was described in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* as a place where beings’ bodies would be marked with black lines as guide to cut their bodies up. According to *The Buddha Speaks of*

the Boundless Samadhis on Contemplating Buddha, beings in this hell are locked in their neck or other parts of body by burning copper shackles. If one disguises himself as an expert of the Dharma and uses the Dharma to deceive or control others for the sake of personal fame and gain, then one will fall into this hell. Those who restrict the freedom of other persons or animals, to tie up other beings with ropes or lock them in a room, causing them to suffer, would also fall into this hell.

Flaming Elephants Hell: There are blazing elephants in this hell, which are much more vicious than those drunk elephants in ancient India. Because elephants go crazy and bloodthirsty after drinking alcohol, they were deployed in ancient India as a military force. In this hell, the flaming elephants trample on beings savagely and repeatedly, and when they touch the bodies of those beings, they immediately ignite and burn. This is the retribution for those who like to intoxicate elephants and use them to kill their enemies and win the battle. It is said that alcoholics, drug addicts, or swindlers will also fall into such a hell.

Flaming Dogs Hell: In this hell, beings are bitten and eaten by fire dogs, or experience the pain of burning when they are adjacent to these fiery dogs. Those who rear silkworms and boil their cocoons in hot water to obtain the silk will fall into this hell. It is also the retribution for killing dogs.

Flaming Horses Hell and Flaming Oxen Hell: These two hells are similar to the previous one. Generally, if you have killed certain animal, like horse or ox, you will fall into a hell with particularly terrifying flaming animals of such kind and be tortured by them. For example, in the Flaming Horses Hell, you are forced to ride these horses, and once you ride them, your whole body will burn so that you will suffer great torment. In the Flaming Oxen Hell, the fiery oxen will butt you, attack your body, stomp you to death, or burn you when you ride on them. In these animal hells, as a result of the wrongdoers' ripened karma, they will be tortured by different kinds of animals in a myriad of ways, just like it is in certain video games where many kinds of animals have been designed to interact actively with the game players.

Flaming Mountains Hell: In this hell, there are fiery mountains that burn sentient beings in a way similar to a volcanic eruption. Certain scriptures refer to it as the Rounding Up and Crushing Hell. Beings are forced into a valley with volcano-like flaming mountains along both sides. The mountains repeatedly crash into each other, smashing beings to death, and then the mountains separate, beings revive only to be crushed again. A different account describes mountains in this hell that from the top of the mountains comes a voice asking beings to come up. As they climb up, they are scorched. When they finally reached the top, there is another voice

at the bottom of the mountains appealing to them to go down, and as they go down, they are incinerated again.

Flaming Rocks Hell: This hell is full of rocks with billowing flames, and beings in this hell have to lie down on the burning rocks. Because of their negative karma, they have no clothes and their skin are extremely tender and fragile.

Flaming Beds Hell: This hell is similar to the Flaming Rocks Hell. Beings are forced to lie on a particularly big bed of fire, and their bodies are intensely burned.

Flaming Beams Hell: There are flaming iron pillars or beams in this hell. Beings are hung to the beams or pressed down by the pillars and suffer from constant burning.

Flaming Eagles Hell: In this hell, flaming vultures ferociously peck at the bodies of sentient beings.

Teeth Sawing Hell: There are burning saws in this hell, and they would saw off every part of the beings' bodies, even their teeth. Verbal abuse and slander are the cause for this hell.

Skin Flaying Hell: Beings in this hell experience the torture of skin peeling. Those who often kill animals and peel their skins for profit will fall into this hell. In the past, people often wore leather

jackets and coats, and for that they would kill animals like sheep and foxes to obtain their fur. This is the cause for this hell.

Blood Drinking Hell: The *Long Agama Sutra* describes it as a sea of blood, where beings are drowned in the sea and are forced to drink blood. The *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection* describes this hell as full of iron-mouthed worms that suck all the blood of beings.

Hands Burning Hell and Feet Burning Hell: As their karmas ripen, beings have to touch something fiery with their hands or to step barefoot on something blazing. Once they touch them, their hands or feet get burnt out.

Thorns Reversing Hell: The torment here is similar to that of the Hill of Iron Salmali Trees Hell. Wherever beings go, there will always be thorns directed at them, piercing their bodies. When they go upwards, thorns will point downwards. If they head in the downward direction, thorns will point upward. This is the retribution for violating parents and teachers, as well as adultery.

Flaming Houses Hell: This hell has houses that are engulfed in flame. Beings are forced to stay in them for an exceptionally long time.

Iron Houses Hell: It is a blazing iron structure with many iron rooms, where everything is made of burning iron.

Flaming Wolves Hell: In this hell, beings are devoured voraciously by fire wolves.

Such are the hells, and each of them contains many more minor hells. The number of smaller hells within each hell vary from one, two, three, or four, to even hundreds of thousands. Each of these lesser hells have their own names and their situation and suffering differ. No matter how different these hells are, one will never find any happiness within any of them.

Hearing about these hells and the role of karma, some may feel doubtful and want to reject Buddhism. But any disbelief should be based on sound evidences. If the existence of hells can be reasonably disproved, there is no reason for us to stick to it, since everyone would be happy to embrace a world with only heavens and happiness. However, “hell does not exist” is just a wishful thinking, and as we’ve discussed before, no proof has been found to negate its existence. As human beings, we think we are different from animals and that we possess self-knowledge and self-awareness. Then it is not sensible for us to not spend time to ponder the question, “What if hell exists and the function of karmic law is valid, but I live in a way that create many causes for

hell without being aware of this existence?" It is worthwhile to find time to study this question in depth and figure out the answer while we are still alive and capable.

Great masters in the past were serious about the karmic law. They lamented and were always troubled when they heard teachings about the suffering of samsara. Geshe Phuchungwa read the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* every day from childhood to death. We probably read such a book and just take it as a collection of simple stories without much reaction. But great masters take such scriptures seriously and read them over and over again in such a way as to deepen their understanding on the karmic law of causes and effects.

When we are first exposed to such teaching, we may try to resist it. We would prefer to pretend that it is not true and then choose to continue to live in our old ways. But it is like burying our heads in the sand. The karmic law is the infallible law of the world. No matter how hard we reject it, as long as we create the cause, we will get the effect sooner or later, in either this life or future life. This deserves our careful consideration. Since most people around us do not acknowledge hell and heaven, we may be persuaded to follow them. If what they say is the truth, then it would be perfectly fine for us to conform. But if they are wrong, then we, as human beings, should use our intelligence to at least prepare for our next

life, if not for the benefit of all sentient beings. If we really care about our own well-being, we should follow the karmic law.

NEVER UNDERVALUE THE POWER OF KARMA

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva told Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, “Benevolent One, such are the karmic consequences of beings of Jambudvīpa who do evil. The force of karma is so great that it can rival Mount Sumeru [in height], surpass the immense oceans in depth, and hinder [one’s cultivation of] the noble path.



Ksitigarbha said to Samantabhadra that beings of Jambudvīpa who commit evil deeds do experience such karmic retributions. He pointed out, “The power of karma is extremely great. If it had a shape, it would be larger and higher than Mount Sumeru, and deeper than the great oceans. It obstructs the path leading to Sagehood.” This is a prominent teaching often quoted by great masters from the Han region.

The power of karma is truly unfathomable and immeasurable. Regarding this point, there are extensive teachings on the principle of cause and effect in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It stresses the all-determining quality of karma, pointing out that even Buddhas and Arhats, who have rid themselves of all karmic and emotional obscurations, still have to experience the effects of past actions. Take the Buddha for example. When the armies of Virudhaka, king of Kosala, fell upon the city of the Sakyas and massacred eighty thousand people, the Buddha himself also had a headache due to his past karma. The great bodhisattva Nagarjuna also cannot escape the retribution of his karma. This great master was beheaded by a blade of *kusa* grass because he had killed an insect while cutting *kusa* grass in a past life. So, just as it is said in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*,

Karma has enormous power

That does not run after those who have not created it.

*However, before it is time to ripen into effects,
It neither vanishes nor shrinks.*

The power of karma is boundless and immeasurable, and the nature is that it does not befall those who have not created it. As long as karma is created, it will not evaporate nor shrink. When causes and conditions come together, its effect will find you without fail. The law of karma is infallible. Therefore, even if we had just killed a small insect, we would not get away from the retribution.

A karma is created when the act is complete with the four elements—the basis (or object) for the act, the intention to carry out the act, the execution of the act, and the final completion of the act. With these four elements are completed, one will definitely experience the corresponding result. If not all of the four elements are present, the karma will not be fully created, and the effect will be minor. According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, if an action is done unintentionally, the karma will not be fully accumulated. For example, if you unintentionally stamp on a worm while walking along a country road, or an insect flies into the fire when you are cooking, or some sparrows crash into your car on the road, although their lives are killed, you will not accumulate the complete karma of killing and will not experience the full karmic result of killing. Because you never had the intention to kill them, the

prerequisite for accumulating the karma is not complete. Nonetheless, even if you make a fault inadvertently, it is still necessary to confess, because the function of karma is subtle and its influence is all-pervasive, and there will still be negative influence resulted from your inadvertent fault.

“Therefore, living beings must not underestimate small wrongs and consider them harmless, for after death there will be ripened effects to be experienced to the most exact detail.

We must not take small misdeeds lightly, thinking that it makes no noticeable impact. We would just be fooling ourselves and others while the karma remains. All misdeeds, either minor or major, will manifest their effects after the death of sentient beings to the most exact detail. Not even the tiniest of them will be missed. The *Dhammapada* says, “Think not lightly of evil, feeling that it brings no harm. Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the fool, gathering it little by little, fills himself with evil.” In the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* there is also a similar statement,

*Do not take lightly small misdeeds,
Believing they can do no harm:
Even a tiny spark of fire
Can set alight a mountain of hay.*

Karma is truly scary, so never underestimate even the most insignificant wrong deeds. We will experience the effects of our negative actions no matter how small it may seem. Understanding this point, we should try as much as possible to avoid committing negative deeds. The best practitioner is the one who accumulates no unwholesome karma. Even eminent monks and great masters paid great attention to negative karma. Many great masters of the past focused on avoiding the slightest misdeed. When H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was with us, he would not initiate or engage in any activity that involves negative karma, even if it could be very beneficial from a secular point of view.

It is said that when Guru Padmasambhava came to Tibet to promote the Dharma, a demon came to see him in the guise of a monk, harboring sinister motives. He asked Padmasambhava, “What are you most afraid of?” Padmasambhava said, “What I fear most is *dikpa* (sdig pa).” *Dikpa* is a Tibetan word meaning either non-virtue or scorpion. Here Padmasambhava was referring to non-virtue because he once said even if his view was higher than the sky, his attention to his actions and their effects would be finer than flour. Nevertheless, at the time, the demon thought that the Guru Rinpoche was most afraid of scorpion. Therefore, he turned himself into a giant evil scorpion in front of Padmasambhava and filled the surrounding places with scorpions. Abiding in the state

of Dzogchen, Padmasambhava subdued the scorpion with the subjugation mudra and grabbed it in his hand. So frightened, the demon vowed that he would never again harm the Guru Rinpoche and he later became the most important protector of Samye now known as Pehar. This could be the reason why in some portraits of Padmasambhava, he is holding a terrifying scorpion in his hands.

Great masters in the past often recite the offering prayer of Pehar. I also had some vivid experience regarding Pehar when I visited the Samye Temple. In some Vajrayana practice where one meditates upon the protective sphere, practitioners are required to visualize themselves as a wrathful scorpion to prevent any negative influence from entering the practice space. Nowadays, online pictures of scorpions designed through computer software often do not look wrathful at all, but instead are rather cute. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to use a scorpion seal. I quite liked this idea and considered getting a scorpion seal designed for myself as well, especially when I had some profound experience when I was practicing the sadhana of wrathful Padmasambhava. But in the end, I decided not to do it because it is a symbol peculiar to Vajrayana and may not be acceptable to everyone.

From the above, we can see that even eminent monks and great masters were most concerned with evil karma. Therefore, we

should be cautious in what to adopt and what to reject and try to abandon even a minor “*dikpa*.” It is good that a lot of Dharma practitioners have placed great importance in this regard. But some tend to overdo it. Because they lack enough understanding of the precepts set by the Buddha, they seem to overinterpret the boundary of discipline and become so tense in every aspect of life. This is particularly the case for beginner Buddhists and novice monks and nuns. It does not work in this way either. We should differentiate between good and bad exactly according to Buddha’s teaching, not based on our own subjective judgement.

Beings as closely related as fathers and sons will part their respective ways. Even if they should meet, neither would consent to undergo the consequences in the other’s place.

This clearly explain how karma functions in that each one of us has to experience his own karma individually. Even the closest family members, like fathers and sons, when this life comes to its end, will separate, and go their own ways. Even if they may meet in the bardo or in other forms of life, none of them would be able to assume the burden of the other’s karma. The father cannot undergo the son’s karmic retribution, neither can the son take the karmic retribution of the father. *Sutra of the Buddha Entering into Parinirvana* says,

*When father has fault and misdeed,
The son will not beget the retribution;
When the son has fault and misdeed,
The father will not beget the retribution.*

If a father commits non-virtuous deeds and incurs negative karma, his son will not be able to stand in for him in the retribution and vice versa. This is the principle of karma. Does this feature contradict with what we have discussed before, that one can benefit deceased parents through engaging in good deeds in their names and dedicating the merits to them? It is not contradictory. When we say that no one can take over the karmic retribution of another, it is from the perspective of matured result. When the fruit has already ripened, no one is able to reverse it. For example, if the son has already departed this life and been reborn as a yak, there is no way for the father to replace him and become a yak. When both the father and the son have passed away and enter into the bardo state, there is no way for them to exchange their own life journey since the karma has already ripened. Any result of evil acts, including suffering in the hell, is to be experienced by the person who committed the acts and no one can bear it for him. It is not as if I were carrying a heavy bag on my back and I could ask you to help me carry it. When the karma is already ripened, there is no way to reverse its power. Therefore, when we still have the

freedom to decide what to do and what to avoid, we should try our best not to create evil karma.

Evil karma is the most detrimental to us, as said in the *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*,

*Negative karma leads one to hell,
And consumes one with scorching heat.
Negative karma obstructs nirvana.
There is no greater enemy than it.*

Evil karma leads one to a rebirth in hell, causing unlimited burning pain, and in the presence of evil karma, one can never attain nirvana. Usually people are not willing to face ferocious enemies, but enemies are not the worst things to be afraid of. The most terrifying thing is evil karma, our biggest enemy. As explained in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, external enemies are not the most fearful because they can only cost us one life at most. Negative karma, however, would lead us to suffering life after life.

Everyone should be clear that those who live in misery in this life are experiencing the maturation of their own evil karma from the past. If you experience particularly acute suffering, intolerable mistreatment, or extraordinary mental and physical agonies, you

should remind yourself that this is the result of the evil karma you created in previous lives.

DESCRIPTION OF HELLS IN MORE DETAIL

“Now, through the Buddha’s awesome [spiritual] power, I will speak in brief about the ripened effects of wrongdoing as occur in the hells. O Benevolent One, please take a moment to hear these words.”

Samantabhadra replied, “I have long known of the ripened effects [experienced] in the three lower realms. I hope the Benevolent One will speak about them so that at a later time, in the Age of Declining Dharma, all beings who do evil may hear your words and be moved to take refuge in the Buddha.”

The two great bodhisattvas are very respectful of each other. They replied to each other with words of respect, just like in some Tibetan places, people always reply to others with *“lags so, lags so,”* a respectful way of answering “yes” in the Tibetan language. Ksitigarbha says, “Based on the awesome spiritual power of the Buddha, I will briefly address the karmic retributions in the hells.

I wish I can make it clear to you.” Samantabhadra responded, “I have long known of the retributions in the three lower realms. I am requesting you, the compassionate one, to address the suffering in the lower realms for the sake of sentient beings who would do evil in the future when the Dharma is in decline so that those fortunate enough to hear your compassionate words would be motivated to seek refuge in the Buddha, abstaining from evilness and engaging in goodness, and be protected from falling into hell.”

Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way says,

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

If an ordinary person knows all the sufferings in the cyclic existence of birth and death, particularly the suffering in hell, then both his body and mind would break down. He would be petrified and want to leave this world instantly, daring not to stay anymore for even a moment. But pitifully, ordinary people live blindly, having no idea how much suffering is involved in samsara. Despite that, those who are clearheaded should be able to understand the suffering nature of samsara and the retributions from their previous lifetimes by deduction and the Buddha’s teaching.

Ksitigarbha said, “Benevolent One, the ripened effects of wrongdoing as occur in the hells are like these: In some hells the wrongdoers’ tongues are taken out and then plowed over by oxen. In some hells the wrongdoers’ hearts are taken out and eaten by yakshas. In some hells the wrongdoers’ bodies are cooked in cauldrons full of boiling liquid. In some hells the wrongdoers are compelled to embrace red-hot, burning copper pillars. In some hells fires burn and overtake the wrongdoers. In some hells there is cold and ice at all times. In some hells there is limitless excrement and urine. In some hells there are solely flying caltrops. In some hells there are many flaming spears. In some hells the wrongdoers are struck solely on the chests and backs. In some hells their hands and feet are burned specifically. In some hells iron snakes twine around and strangle them. In some hells iron dogs pursue them. In some hells they all ride on [flaming] iron mules.

Ksitigarbha had previously described some of the retributions in hell and now he added more details which are somewhat similar to what he had said before but are now enumerated in greater details. There are some hells where sinful beings’ tongues are stretched out and plowed through by cattle, which is similar to the condition in the aforementioned Tongue Plowing Hell and Tongue Plucking Hell. In some hells, yakshas pull out hell beings’ hearts and eat



them, and in other hells, beings' bodies are cooked in cauldrons of boiling water. Also, there are hells in which beings are forced to hug red-hot copper pillars, hells in which beings are constantly burned by fire, hells where being are consumed all-pervasively by cold and ice, and hells where beings sink in dung and urine.

In some hells, there are flying caltrops that constantly pierce the bodies of beings. Caltrop is an ancient antipersonnel weapon made up of two or more sharp nails or spines. In some respects, it is like COVID-19 whose outer shell is covered with the spike protein. There are also hells in which fiery spears stab beings and torture them repeatedly, hells in which beings are constantly hit forcefully on the chests and backs by yakshas, wild bulls and the like, and

hells in which beings' hands and feet are burned. In some hells, iron serpents coil around beings from head to toe. According to other references, in those hells, small burning snakes enter the bodies of the beings, filing them and burning them out. There are also hells where beings are chased after by iron dogs who want to bite them, and hells in which beings are forced to ride on flaming iron mules, donkeys or horses who then burn their bodies.

“Benevolent One, there are ripened effects such as these. In each hell, there are hundreds of thousands of kinds of instruments [of torment] of this karmic path, all made of copper, iron, stone, and fire—these four materials are brought on by the many [kinds of] karma.

Most of the hells mentioned in this chapter appear to belong to hot hells. While the retributions in each hell are different, all the torture instruments are without exception made of burning copper, iron, rock or fire. These four materials are the result of the beings' evil karma. Everything in hell, from the ground to water, is a cause of suffering. Conversely, in the Pure Land of Sukhavati, everything is gorgeous and acts only as a source of happiness and bliss. The pools are made of the seven jewels and filled with the waters of the eight meritorious virtues, and the ground is formed from pure gold.

From the Mahayana point of view, every phenomenon is merely the manifestation of one's own mind. The *Wish Fulfilling Treasury* has clearly explained this point and referred to other reliable scriptures such as *The King of Samadhi Sutra* and *Prajnaparamita Sutra*. As we learn from these teachings, we know that both the hell with various torments and the Pure Land with all manners of enjoyments and bliss are merely the manifestations of beings' minds. This is a very profound truth. For those of you who are just exposed to it, you may find it hard to accept. But if you continue to receive and study the Mahayana teachings, always contemplating on their profound meanings and trying to put them into practice, you will realize such truth over time. Every being is living in an illusory world created by their own deluded minds, whether it be the human world, hell, or the heaven. I hope you can delve deeply into such profound truth through your long-term study. As your understanding deepens, you will be able to face everything in life more easily and calmly, be it happiness or suffering.

Nonetheless, before we attain this high level of understanding, it is important to accept that the six realms of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras and gods do exist and that they function under the karmic law. We should be very clear that while some of these existences can be observed by our direct perception, others can only be understood through logical inference and reasoning.

Unfortunately, many people today are drawing conclusions without referring to either direct perception or valid inference. Instead, they acknowledge or deny something based merely on their subjective thought. They like to jump to a conclusion based solely on their personal feelings without bothering to examine issues in a logical and sensible way. If a phenomenon matches their personal feelings and thoughts, they would accept it; if not, they would conclude that it is wrong or a superstition. This is certainly not a scientific approach which instead is grounded on rationality and valid reasoning.

Speaking of this, Buddhism is unique among all spiritual traditions in that it never stresses on solely religious piety. While Buddhism emphasizes devotion, its highest goal is to develop wisdom and to seek the truth. In Buddhism, any theory or opinion that fails the scrutiny of wisdom is not accepted. Therefore, as Buddhists, whenever we are exposed to a theory, whether it is about hell or anything else, we should examine and investigate its rationality and reasonability, instead of making judgements based merely on our feelings. However, many people are quite irrational and emotional, "I like this idea, so it is correct" or "it is wrong because I don't like it." That is only the result of a discursive, unreliable mind. Take hell for example. When you feel doubt about its existence, it is necessary to stay unbiased and ask yourself from different

angles, “What do we do if hells do exist?” “What if they do not exist?” “Is there any way to prove their non-existence and that the teachings of buddhas and bodhisattvas are wrong?” For a rational person, it would be sensible to conduct a prudent investigation before making any conclusion.

Suppose I were to speak in detail about the ripened effects of wrongdoing as occur in the hells: In any one hell there are furthermore hundreds of thousands of kinds of wretched suffering. How much more numerous [are the torments] in the many hells!

Any single hell already has hundreds of thousands of acute sufferings so the sufferings are even more numerous if one were to consider all the other countless hells. As we discussed in the first chapter, there are eighteen great hells, five hundred secondary hells, and hundreds of thousands of minor hells, each with terrifying sufferings.

Years ago, I saw some paintings depicting hells in the Hall of the Ten Kings of Hell when I visited Mount Jiuhua. They deeply touched me and gave me a vivid feeling of how cruel and terrifying the hells were. Nagarjuna says in his *Letter to a Friend*,

If simply seeing pictures of the hells,

*And hearing, thinking, reading of them scares,
Or making sculpted figures, need we say
How hard to bear the ripened fruit will be?*

If just hearing and seeing the pictures of hell would frighten us, how terrible it would be if we were to actually experience the ripened karma of taking birth in hell?

In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, you can always see the image of the Wheel of Life, along with portraits of the Four Great Kings at the entrances of a temple. While the Four Great Kings are painted as the protectors of Buddhism, the Wheel of Life, as a symbolic representation of samsara, is to remind people that if they do not practice virtue, they will fall into the three lower realms. These pictures should inspire all visitors.

Life is transient. We practitioners need to study the teachings in depth, and with whatever we learn, even if it were just a little bit, we should try to apply it to change ourselves in our daily life. Otherwise, we will forget what we have learned. Even if we retain something in our mind, without actual practice, it would be a mere robotic memory and remain only as a theoretical knowledge that we would be unable to apply to our lives even when we need it. In the past, many eminent monks and great masters traveled a long way to pursue the Dharma in faraway places like India. There had

also been many eminent masters from the Han region coming to Tibet to seek the Dharma. Despite their short exposures to these spiritual teachers, they achieved a lot and returned home with deep and fruitful learnings from their journeys and hardships. In contrast, other practitioners had left their homes and stayed with their spiritual teachers in remote places for years or even decades. However, instead of gaining any benefit, disappointedly, they ended up with many wrong views, afflictions, and suffering.

Nowadays Dharma teaching is easily accessible through many means. There is no need for you to go to remote places to pursue your study. But since you have devoted your time and energy in Dharma learning, try to ponder what you have learned after every lesson so that you can derive some benefit from the teaching. Never treat the Dharma teaching like an ordinary speech. Many pay to listen to exciting and fancy speeches but they turn out to be without substance. Such talks are more like a flamboyant show and bring no value to the audience. We all know that time is precious and time is life. We should make the best use of our time. It is important that we treasure every minute and every hour that we spend on learning the Dharma and try to apply the teaching in our life.

“Now through the Buddha’s awesome spiritual penetration and at the Benevolent One’s request, I have briefly described this

matter in this way, for if I were to explain in detail, I could not finish even when a kalpa is over.”

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva said that it was because of the awesome power of the Buddha that he was able to reply to the request of the Benevolent One Samantabhadra. However, he was just able to give a general description. If he were to speak in more detail, he would not be able to finish even in an eon.

Now we have completed the fifth chapter, “The Names of the Hells.” Next chapter is “The Praise of the Tathagata,” followed by “Benefiting the Living and the Deceased.” The latter is my most favorite since it is inspiring and gives us much more hope. It is quite different from learning about hell, that always brings a sense of loss and fear.



CHAPTER SIX

The Praise of the Tathagata

Sentient beings of this world indeed have a close karmic affinity with Ksitigarbha. If they hear his name, see his image, or hear even so much as three to five words, one stanza or one sentence of this sutra, or simply hear the name of this sutra or Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, they can attain great peace and happiness in their present lives. In the future hundreds of thousands of lives, they will be born in noble and wealthy families with dignified appearances.

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture Twelve

August 10th, 2020

EFFICACY STORY: THE BLESSING OF A KSITIGARBHA STATUE

As we have done in this series of lectures, I will share with you a historical efficacy story to strengthen your faith in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. A girl whose family name was Zhang lost her mother. One day, her deceased mother came to her in a dream and had the following conversation with her.

The mother told her, “While I was alive and raising you, I became more and more avaricious and arrogant. Because of this, now I have been reborn as a hungry ghost, undergoing immense suffering.”

The daughter asked, “What kind of suffering are you experiencing?”

The mother answered, “I am repeatedly taking birth as a hungry ghost baby and then always eaten by the mother. Because of their karmic retribution in being extremely hungry, hungry ghost mothers will usually eat their own babies to fill their empty stomach

right after they give birth. However, on the 24th day of every month, I can escape from being eaten because on that morning, a monk will come to the city of hungry ghosts to give food to all hungry ghosts. Since my mother is not hungry, she will not eat me. Other than that very day of every month, I cannot escape the suffering of being eaten.”

Her mother continued, “When the monk is offering food to us, he always chants: ‘I am Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Here I come to your place to offer you peace and happiness. Please generate bodhicitta so you can free yourself from suffering!’ Although I have tried to generate the mind of bodhicitta after hearing his words, my grave negative karma obstructs me from doing it. If you can build a statue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva for me, it will help me escape from the present suffering.”

After the daughter woke up from the dream, she sold all the property of her deceased mother and built a Ksitigarbha statue the same height as her mother’s. Not long after the statue was built, her mother came to her dream again, appearing completely different from last time. She abided in the sky and her body was emitting light. She said, “Thanks to the Ksitigarbha statue you build for me, I have been liberated from the hungry ghost realm and now have been reborn as a celestial being. If you continue to pay homage and make offering to the Ksitigarbha statue with devotion, both

you and I will take birth in the abode of Maitreya and listen to the Dharma in front of him.”

Knowing that her mother was rescued from the lower realm, she was deeply moved and arouse great gratitude of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. People who heard her mother’s story all came to pay homage to the statue and benefited greatly from this statue.

In this story, the mother’s miserable experience in the hungry ghost realm is not rare at all. For instance, in Abhidharma and other scriptures, it is recorded that Maudgalyayana once met a hungry ghost who told him that every day, she gave birth to five children in the morning and another five in the evening. Due to her karmic retribution, she had no choice but to eat them all as soon as they were born. But still, she felt terribly hungry. Sentient beings’ karma manifests in a great variety and is truly inconceivable. In the animal world, there are also some cases of mothers eating their own children. In the human world, such behaviors are clearly unacceptable.

Despite the grave negative karma of the mother that brought her immense suffering, relying on the miraculous power of Ksitigarbha, she could still be freed from the hungry ghost realm and took rebirth as a celestial being. This story gives us a valuable instruction on how to benefit the deceased. When a family member dies, it is

hard for us to learn which realm he or she has taken rebirth or what kind of suffering he or she is experiencing. Nevertheless, if we are able, we should engage in the Ksitigarbha practice by printing and circulating the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, making Ksitigarbha statues, or inviting a Ksitigarbha statue home to worship, and then dedicate such merit to the deceased. In this way, through the inconceivable power of Ksitigarbha's aspirations and blessing, the deceased will gain immense benefit and can be instantly saved if he or she has taken rebirth in the hungry ghost or hell realm.

CALLING FOR DONATION IS NOT ENCOURAGED

Recently due to the study of this sutra, many Dharma friends are inspired and plan to make Ksitigarbha statues or invite a Ksitigarbha statue to worship for their late parents. I sincerely rejoice in such virtuous acts as they will certainly bring great benefits to the deceased, especially if they do it with generosity. Meanwhile, there is one thing I would like to remind everyone. It is never good to disturb others and try to solicit money from them, even if your wish is to accumulate virtue for them. If for the time being your condition is not sufficient to allow you to do certain virtuous actions, e.g., offering meals to the sangha, building a Buddhist statue, or printing sutras, then it is better not to do it than to try to solicit others in hopes of persuading them to make a donation.

Although it is always good to engage in virtuous activities, donors should understand the intrinsic value of a certain action and

donate willingly and joyfully. This would likely take some efforts and it would also depend on people's habitual inclination. We have people today who are very effective in persuading others to make donations for certain Buddhist projects and sometimes leading people to make rushed and unthoughtful decisions that they may later regret. Even worse, in some cases, these people fail to provide any transparent accounting for the donators, even without a valid statement as brief as the total sum of collected money, various expenses, and how much of the donated amount is left, making it difficult to guarantee that the donated money is used in the right place and creating doubt in the overall project. With these concerns, I would not encourage anyone to solicit money from those who you do not know or are not familiar with. Even though you may have an altruistic intention to benefit more people, we need to consider these issues in the real world.

In my opinion, Buddhist activities need to be conducted on the basis of lawfulness and reasonableness. In regard to lawfulness, every country and every region has its laws and regulations to maintain social order, and also within Buddhist community, there are specific disciplines that one needs to observe. As Buddhist practitioners, both monastics and lay alike, we must follow all these rules so that our behaviors are credible and trustworthy. In regard to reasonableness, even if your actions conform with the rules of

society, you should consider other people's feeling, for instance, whether they are willing, or able to accept your Buddhist idea. If you eagerly persuade everyone you meet to donate money for a certain Buddhist project, then it is likely that you could be pushing someone away from you or Buddhism. This is not reasonable nor considerate. Therefore, no matter what kind of virtuous project you are doing, you should always be thoughtful of others' interests, needs, and preferences.

In particular, on no account should one collect money in the name of a guru or a monastery. A person may announce that a certain guru is building a retreat center or that monastery is building a shrine hall and short of money when the guru or the monastery often has no idea about these claimed projects. As a result, such irresponsible actions can lead to serious problems and compromise the reputation of the guru or the monastery.

This type of problems also occurred historically, especially when many Indian monastic teachers came to Tibet during the early and late periods of the Dharma propagation. Since India is the birthplace of Buddhism, Indian monastics always garnered great respect from Tibetans and many people were willing to make offerings to them. Then some Tibetans took it as an opportunity to raise money for themselves by soliciting money from others in the

name of the Indian monastics. Such behaviors brought great harm to Buddhism.

Therefore, even while one is intending to do a virtuous deed, one must pay meticulous attention to one's actions and the corresponding effects. If you are going to use the name of a certain guru or monastery to collect money, you must get permission from them. Otherwise, the karmic retribution awaiting ahead will be horrible. For instance, unless a teacher says clearly that he wants to build a Ksitigarbha statue but he is badly short of money and therefore wants you to collect money for him, it is not okay for you to use his name to call for donation, even if your intention is good and not for your own profit. If you do so, it will be a serious misuse of the name of this teacher.

What is worse, in order to raise more money for themselves, some people would purposely pretend that they have close relationship with a guru and misrepresent what they do as something directly instructed by the guru. To make their words more believable, they may show chat records with the guru, misleading people to make donations. Actually, unless they can provide the exact voice or text message showing that the guru had given them permission to use his name to collect money, a simple call log or chat history is not sufficient proof and we need to be vigilant against such fraudulent activity and avoid any rash donation.

Take myself as an example. There are a great number of people listening to my lectures and their intentions vary greatly. While people with great devotion to Ksitigarbha hope to benefit from my teaching, others may be here merely to find fault in my teaching, still others may be here seeking financial gains. For them, if I talk the powerful blessing of Dorje Phurba today, they will sell Dorje Phurba tomorrow, using my words as the advertisement for their business. These days I talk about the benefit of Ksitigarbha statues frequently, perhaps very soon, someone would be soliciting money from everyone saying that it is my project to make Ksitigarbha statues. Or they may sell Ksitigarbha statues, claiming that those statues are blessed by Khenpo Sodargye and the Larung Gar sangha. I want to be very clear, any information of this sort is nothing but falsehood. It is true that a Ksitigarbha statue can bestow powerful blessing, but if someone intends to make profit from it, the karmic retribution will be severely dreadful.

THE BUDDHA'S PRAISE TO KSITIGARBHA

Chapter Six

The Praise of the Tathagata

At that time, the World-Honored One emitted great light from his entire body, illuminating Buddha Worlds as numerous as the sand grains in hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of Ganges Rivers. He gave forth a great voice, telling all the Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas as well as devas, nagas, ghosts, spirits, humans, non-humans, and others in the various Buddha Worlds, "Listen as I now praise and extol Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva for how he manifests powers of great, inconceivable awesome spiritual penetration, kindness, and compassion in the worlds of the ten directions to rescue and care for all wrongdoing suffering beings. After I enter parinirvana, all of you Bodhisattvas, Great Beings, and all you devas, nagas, ghosts, spirits, and others should employ many skillful means to guard

and protect this sutra, causing all living beings to attain the bliss of nirvana.”



Generally, when the Buddha emits light, the light may come from different parts of his body—the coiled hair between his eyebrows, his fingers, his toes, his upper body, his Ushnisha and so forth. When the Buddha was about to praise Ksitigarbha, his entire body radiated brilliant light, illuminating countless buddha worlds. Then in his wonderful voice, he praised Ksitigarbha to all bodhisattvas and various beings of different worlds for his inconceivable strength and compassionate power of rescuing and caring for all sentient beings throughout the ten directions. Here the text does not mention other buddhas because Buddha Shakyamuni

mainly wanted all great bodhisattvas in different worlds to hear his praise of Ksitigarbha. Then he entrusted this sutra to all of them so that they would protect and spread it in the future with every possible skillful means so that all beings could also attain the bliss of nirvana.

Ksitigarbha gained the Buddha's high praise because this great bodhisattva employed his awesome power, kindness, and compassion to tirelessly rescue and protect miserable sentient beings from their suffering. This is what the Buddha cared about the most. The Buddha did not praise Ksitigarbha for his magnificent looks or any personal skills, but for his great love and compassion for all living beings. This is the most important quality that Mahayana practitioners should cultivate because the core value of Mahayana Buddhism is to benefit sentient beings.

In today's society, praises and awards are often given to those with individual achievements in academics or sports. For us Mahayana practitioners, our focus should be on our altruistic spirit and never neglect it in today's world. If a Dharma teacher were to compliment a student, instead of praising the student's personal progress or wealth accumulation, the teacher should focus on his intention and ability to help and benefit others. Love and compassion are the most fundamental training in the Mahayana path.

In addition to praising Ksitigarbha, the Buddha also assigned an important task to everyone in his audience. He told them to safeguard the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* after his parinirvana so that all future beings will attain liberation by relying on this sutra. The sole purpose for the Buddha manifesting in the world is to save beings from sufferings and bring them to ultimate liberation. As the Buddha's followers, we should practice this precious teaching and extend our love and compassion to every being. Meanwhile, it is also our responsibility to preserve this precious Buddhist sutra by all means so that future beings can get access to them and be enlightened by them.

Before the Buddha entered parinirvana, he spoke *The Bequeathed Teachings Sutra*. It is the last teachings the Buddha gave to his disciples, currently available in both Chinese and English. I am thinking of translating it into Tibetan. This sutra says in the beginning:

When Shakyamuni Buddha first turned the Wheel of Dharma, he crossed over the Venerable Ajnatakaundinya. The very last time he spoke the Dharma, he crossed over the Venerable Subhadhra. All of those whom he should have crossed over had already been crossed over. He lay between the Twin Sala trees and was about to enter Nirvana. At this time, in the middle period of the night, all was quiet, without any sound. Then for the sake of all of his disciples, he spoke on the essentials of the Dharma.

All of you Bhikshus! After my Nirvana, you should revere and honor the Pratimoksha. It is like finding a light in darkness, or like a poor person obtaining a treasure. You should know that it is your great teacher and is not different from my actual presence in the world.

At the end of this sutra, the Buddha said:

From now on all of my disciples must continuously practice. Then the Thus Come One's Dharma body will always be enduring and indestructible.

When reading this sutra, we should be touched by the Buddha's enjoinment right before his nirvana. He urged all disciples to actualize his teaching and to transmit his teaching to future generations, thus his dharmakaya will be present forever in this world. Some might feel it a little rigid or conservative because the Buddha emphasized the Pratimoksha vows in his words, as if he were merely urging his monastic disciples. Actually this is not the case because back in that time, the disciples were mainly monastic bhikkhus. In addition to monastic vows, the Buddha also expounded how to act properly in secular world by following the Buddhist teaching. For example, Buddhists should stay away from seeking fame and profit and it is important to reduce desire and stay content. I would like to recommend that all Buddhists study this sutra and bear in

mind this was the last teaching that the Buddha left in this human world. It certainly has great meaning to us.

After these words were spoken, in the assembly there was a Bodhisattva named Universally Vast who joined his palms in respect and said to the Buddha, “We now see the World-Honored One commending Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva that he has such virtue of inconceivable, great awesome spiritual penetration. O World-Honored One, for the sake of living beings of the Age of Declining Dharma in the future, please speak about the cause and effect of how Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva benefits humans and devas, so that devas, nagas, others of the eight classes of beings and living beings of the future may receive the Buddha’s words most respectfully.”

At that time, the World-Honored One told Universally Vast Bodhisattva, the fourfold assembly, and others, “Listen attentively, listen attentively. I will describe in brief for you the meritorious and virtuous matters of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s benefiting humans and devas.”

Universally Vast replied, “Yes, World-Honored One, we joyfully wish to listen.”



The Buddha told Universally Vast Bodhisattva, “In the future if there are good men and good women who hear Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva’s name and join their palms, sing his praises, make obeisance, or feel great love and admiration for him, these people will transcend thirty kalpas of torments [of offenses].

Before the Buddha continued his words, there was another great bodhisattva in the assembly speaking to the Buddha. On behalf of all present and future sentient beings, he respectfully requested the Buddha to expound on the qualities of Ksitigarbha and his activities of benefitting humans and devas, so that sentient beings,

particularly those in the future degenerate times, would know how to engage in the Ksitigarbha practice and what virtuous result they will reap.

The Buddha first urged the fourfold assembly to listen carefully and attentively, then he started the following teaching in brief. First, he said that in the future, if any virtuous man or woman, upon hearing the name of Ksitigarbha, joins palms together, sings his praises, makes full-body or half-body prostration to him, or admires his qualities and wishes to be blessed by him, this person will eliminate the negative karma created by body, speech, and mind in the past thirty kalpas.

Joining one's palms is a sign of veneration. The ways to do it vary according to different traditions. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* introduces two ways. One can either cup one's hands together in the shape of a lotus bud about to blossom or hold one's hands together like a relic case. Sometimes people just raise one hand to show their respect, which is also acceptable.

With regard to the praises of Ksitigarbha, very good poems have been written by great masters in the past that we can recite to extol Ksitigarbha's qualities. Or one can simply acclaim with a sincere mind, "How inconceivable Ksitigarbha is!" Both are good practice to receive Ksitigarbha's blessing.

We also see that the Ksitigarbha practice has great power to purify our negative karma. Karma is created through one's body, speech, and mind, so the purification of karma also relies on one's body, speech, and mind. The negative karma includes taking life, stealing, and sexual misconduct with respect to one's body, lying, sowing discord, harsh speech, and worthless chatter with respect to one's speech, and covetousness, ill will and wrong views with respect to one's mind. Having faith and devotion to Ksitigarbha, simply by joining one's palms in front of Ksitigarbha, one's negative karma accumulated through body will be purified; by praising Ksitigarbha or reciting his name, one's negative karma accumulated through speech will be purified; and by feeling great love and admiration for him and wishing to be blessed by him, one's negative karma accumulated through mind will be purified.

Some practitioners often feel deep remorse about their previous behaviors when they had not started to learn Buddhism. They used to be owners of restaurants, frequent visitors of brothels, denigrators of religions and people around, the list goes on, through which they accumulated severe negative karma. As a matter of fact, if they sincerely pay homage to Ksitigarbha in terms of their body, speech, and mind, like the ways introduced in this sutra, their negative karma will undoubtedly be purified.

People who lack a deep conviction in the karmic law find it difficult to fully trust Ksitigarbha's power, raising doubts like "How can a body gesture as simple as joining palms purify my negative karma as severe as killing, stealing and committing sexual misconduct created in numerous past lives?" Actually, this is the unfailing words spoken by the Buddha and he is the only one who knows thoroughly the resultant effects of all positive and negative actions. Therefore, if we believe the Buddha's teaching on the painful effects of negative actions, we should also believe his vajra words on the inconceivable qualities of Ksitigarbha, and thus purify our negative karma by faithfully relying on this great bodhisattva.

In samsara, negative karma is dreadful because it brings us immense suffering. However, the merit of positive karma cannot be underestimated since it can save us from suffering. The most crucial thing is that we need to be able to discern our actions carefully, avoiding any negative ones and only conducting positive ones.

There is a story of a Tibetan guru regarding his teaching on karma. When he talked about the merit of virtuous deeds, he used the following example: "When you are at the top of a hill, you should recite the Mani mantra aloud and visualize that all grass and trees on this hill are resounding the mantra with you. In this way, the number of your recitation will be as large as the total number of all grass and trees on this hill, so the merit of your chanting

is inconceivably tremendous.” When he talked about the fault of non-virtuous deeds, he said, “Well, actually everyone must have accumulated severe negative karma. When we eat a bowl of tsampa, it is no different from eating a bowls of aphids because when farmer grow barley, numerous aphids are killed.”

Upon hearing his teaching, an old lady was so puzzled and heaved a sigh. She said, “When you talk about the merit of virtuous actions, even an old woman like me can achieve liberation because I often recite the Mani mantra. Whereas when you talk about the fault of non-virtuous actions, I feel even a guru as great as you could not be liberated because you eat tsampa every day!” Her comments somehow hit the point. Such is the function of karma, and we can do nothing but pay meticulous attention to our actions.

THE MERIT OF MAKING KSITIGARBHA STATUES

“Universally Vast, if there are good men and good women who paint this Bodhisattva’s image or make his image with clay, stone, resin, lacquer, gold, silver, copper, or iron, and then reverently gaze at and make obeisance to his image but once, these people will be reborn a hundred times in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas and will never fall into the lower realms. If their heavenly merit is exhausted and they are reborn below in the world of humans, they will still be kings and will not lose great benefits.

If a virtuous person draws the portrait of Ksitigarbha either on substantial material or on computer, or make the statue of Ksitigarbha with clay, stone, marble, gold, silver, bronze, or iron, and then pay homage to the image even once, this person will take birth in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas one hundred times and never fall into the lower realms. When the heavenly merit is exhausted,



this person will still be reborn as a king in the human world and enjoy great benefits from Ksitigarbha.

Gazing upon and paying homage to statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas is an expression of devotion and humbleness. Out of our veneration and admiration, it is natural for us to pay homage when we see a buddha or bodhisattva image. Some people have very strong faith that whenever they see an image of a buddha or bodhisattva, their tears well up in their eyes and they make prostrations respectfully. There are also some people who, due to their arrogance or ignorance, are simply unwilling to join their palms and show respect to whatever Buddha statue they see. It is unfortunate for them to lose the opportunity to accumulate merit

in front of buddhas and bodhisattvas. As Buddhists, we need to keep in mind that every buddha or bodhisattva image deserves our reverence, regardless of which tradition or school it belongs to and whether its appearance is impressive or not.

In the text, the Buddha introduced three benefits from making Ksitigarbha's image and paying homage to it: 1) never falling into the lower realm, 2) taking rebirth a hundred times in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas, and 3) taking rebirth as kings in the human world after their heavenly merit comes to an end. As ordinary beings in samsara, we could have been born in any of the higher and lower realms countless times, and now as we are fortunate to encounter the teaching on Ksitigarbha, it is essential for us to rely on Ksitigarbha to ensure that we would never fall into the lower realms.

The great tertön Karma Lingpa revealed a cycle of teachings and instructions on the six bardos. He said that his tantric teaching is open for everyone to read, hear and study, and if one has received his terma teaching on the six bardos three or more times, this person will not fall into the lower realms. When I heard this, I was very happy since I had already received the teaching three times from His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, I was relieved that I would not fall into the lower realms.

As stated in many scriptures such as Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, when celestial beings exhaust their merit in heaven, they could fall into hell because of their negative karma. However, for those celestial beings who had revered Ksitigarbha in their previous lives, after their heavenly merit being exhausted, they would be reborn as kings in the human realm and not lose their great benefits.

"Not losing great benefits" means this person, as a king, will continue to hold faith in the Three Jewels, working for the welfare of his country and people through his actions within the Dharma. He will build monasteries, worship buddha statues, make offerings to the sangha, and care for his people with great compassion. He would never cause harm to his people or his neighboring countries for the sake of his own benefit. As a result, during his reign, the country will stay prosperous and auspicious, and the people will live in peace and happiness. A similar statement can be found in *The Just King* written by Ju Mipham Rinpoche.

On the contrary, for kings who have lost these great benefits, they would destroy the representatives of the Three Jewels and tyrannize their countries, bringing indescribable suffering to their people, putting their countries into a tragic state of danger and panic, and worse still, causing wars, famine, and epidemic. Since they are placed in a highly revered position and possess extraordinary power, even a minor decision or action aimed only to fulfill their

own self-interest could produce a very negative impact to their countries, leading to inevitable disasters and causing immense suffering to their people. It would seem much more preferable that they had not become kings so that they could not create such horrible negative karma that will trap them in hell endlessly.

That being said, building and venerating the Ksitigarbha statue is unquestionably important for every one of us to free ourselves from the lower realms. There is a very short sutra called *The Sutra of the Buddha Speaks of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva*, a manuscript of which was discovered in Dunhuang and now preserved in the National Library of France. This sutra says that if there are virtuous men or women who build the statue of Ksitigarbha, copy the sutra of Ksitigarbha, and recite the name of Ksitigarbha, these virtuous men or women will be guaranteed to take rebirth in the Western Blissful Pure Land, and then continuously take rebirths in buddha land forever. In Master Qing Lian's *Commentary on Ksitigarbha Sutra*, he noted that the scriptures said that even building a Buddha statue as small as a grain of barley will purify one's negative karma created in the past eight billion kalpas and bring about eleven types of benefits, including not falling into the lower realms, being born with magnificent looks, and revering the Three Jewels in all future lives.

Knowing the incredible merit of building a statue of Ksitigarbha, we should attach great importance to this virtuous practice. However, for a number of reasons, some people have chosen to downplay this action and consider it as a kind of religious idol worship. Generally, academic Buddhist scholars tend to minimize the practice dimension in Buddhism which includes acts such as building buddha statues or reciting buddha names because they focus on the theoretical elements of Buddhism. However, a lack of conviction in the practice of Buddhism would make it very difficult for one to gain a sound and deep understanding of Buddhist philosophy. On the other hand, some Buddhist practitioners who have deep faith in the practice of Buddhism seem to be always occupied with the recitation of mantras and building statues, etc. but have no interest in learning complicated Buddhist teachings, even dozing off during the teaching because it may be too challenging for them to follow. Lacking a strong theoretical understanding of Buddhist philosophy, it would be difficult for one to continue to make progress on his Buddhist path.

The two situations above are both biased ways of following Buddhism. Since the Buddha's teaching contains both a profound aspect and a vast aspect, in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism, we need to approach Buddhism from both of these aspects rather than neglect either one of them. The

corresponding two virtues, i.e., the conventional virtue that is accumulated from the vast aspect, and the transcendental virtue that is accumulated from the profound aspect, are equally important.

Shantarakshita says in his *The Adornment of the Middle Way*,

*Those who ride the chariot of the two approaches,
Who grasp the reins of reasoned thought,
Will thus be adepts of the Mahayana
According to the sense and meaning of the word.*

When Ju Mipham Rinpoche explained this verse, he said, just as one controls the horse chariot by means of the two reins, one has to hold the right and left reins of conventional and ultimate teaching, or the vast and profound teaching, in order to pursue the Mahayana path without any deviation. If one has entered both the profound and vast aspects of Mahayana Buddhism through this approach, one will be called an adept of the Mahayana. Another analogy of this approach with regard to the conventional teaching and the ultimate teaching are like a pair of wings that enable a bird to fly in the sky. Only when the two approaches are employed together can we soar freely in the space of the truth of all phenomena.

Simply gathering conventional virtue, such as making buddha statues, will not enable one to gain any transcendental progress

because without realizing emptiness, conventional virtue can only lead one to take rebirth in higher realms but will not enable one to break free from samsara. Similarly, a partiality for accumulating transcendental virtue, such as merely delving into the theoretical study of the Middle Way while disregarding conventional virtues will not fulfil one's wish to realize emptiness and become enlightened because the wisdom of emptiness will not have a place to develop and mature. As deluded beings, we are trapped in an illusory world. It is only by following its conventional rule and accumulating conventional merit that we can strengthen our ability to realize its empty and illusory nature and free ourselves from it.

I met a Buddhist who was very interested in the teaching of emptiness and had read *The Adornment of the Middle Way* and *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* many times. He had been following Buddhism for over ten years and practicing emptiness every day. Once I asked him, "Do you recite buddhas names?" "No." "Do you practice bodhicitta?" "No." "Well, what about home shrine? Have you set up a home shrine?" "No." He is a typical example of those who only blindly learn the absolute teaching and neglect all conventional practices such as reciting sutras and chanting mantras. In this case, without accumulating any conventional virtue, transcendental progress would likely be beyond reach.

In a treatise, Patrul Rinpoche particularly stressed the merit of the Three Jewels and urged practitioners to hold sincere respect to the representatives of the Three Jewels, even very minor and ordinary ones. I was planning to translate this treatise into Chinese but it would seem that I was always busy with something else. I cited a few teachings from it when I was teaching the *Lotus Sutra*. As Buddhist practitioners, we should cherish these precious teachings and sincerely revere any image of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

After a Buddhist statue is built, it is important to fill it and get it consecrated properly. In Tibetan Buddhism, great masters such as Karma Chakme Rinpoche and Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche had written about the methods of how to fill a Buddhist statue. Generally, the method of filling a statue in Han Buddhism is simpler than that in Tibetan Buddhism. Many Han Chinese prefer to invite Tibetan lamas to fill Buddhist statues for them. Actually, as long as the required items such as rolled mantra, incense powder, precious jewels are clean and pure, we can follow the standard procedure in both traditions to do it. One thing must be made clear, and His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had reminded us repeatedly, is that pieces of clothes, hair, and nails from a guru cannot be used to fill a statue because it will bring harm to this guru.

Many monastics today do not know how to fill a statue properly and I suggest the monastics among you learn these standard

methods properly since they are not difficult at all. Among the Han sangha at Larung Gar, there is a special group of monastics responsible for filling Buddhist statues. They would be happy to teach those who are interested in learning these traditional techniques. As an aside, it would be a true pity if a precious tradition or heritage is not maintained. Therefore, whatever specialties you may have, do not keep them to yourselves and think of them as a technical or commercial secret. The same principle applies to Dharma teachings. It would be sad and unfortunate if a guru's teaching is not inherited by somebody when he passes into nirvana. As Mahayana practitioners, we should share our knowledge and skills with others so that they can be passed down from generation to generation.

KSITIGARBHA'S BLESSING TO WOMEN

“If there are women who are weary of being women and who wholeheartedly make offerings in veneration to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s image, whether the image be a painting or made of clay, stone, resin, lacquer, copper, iron, or other materials, and if they do so day after day without fail, making offerings to him with flowers, incense, food, drink, clothing, colored silk, banners, money, jewels, and the like, then after the present ripened effect to be a woman comes to an end, throughout hundreds of thousands of myriads of kalpas these good women will never again be reborn in worlds where there are women, much less be one—unless that, through the power of their compassionate vows, they wish to be women in order to liberate living beings. Through the strength of their making offerings to Ksitigarbha and the power of this virtue, they will not be reborn as women throughout hundreds of thousands of myriads of kalpas.



The Buddha continued: If some women dislike their women bodies, they can reverently pray and make offerings to the portrait or statue of Ksitigarbha with flowers, incense, food, clothing, colored fabrics, prayer banners, money, jewels, or other items. By doing so day after day, when their present life comes to an end, for thousands of millions kalpas going forward, they will not even be born into worlds where there are women. Unless they choose to do so in order to benefit sentient beings, they will not be born as women.

I have discussed the issue of gender equality during my trips to different countries around the world and it is clear that it is still a social issue that needs concern. Historical and cultural background are factors that continue to impact modern society on this issue.

Historically, agriculture was the primary means of production in most cultures. Men often shouldered the responsibility of the farming work while women stayed at home raising children and taking care of household chores. As such, men enjoyed more rights and privileges than women who were also socially more restricted. This was common in many countries and societies.

As the world modernized from the agricultural age, to the industrial age, and now to the commercial age, the division of work between male and female becomes less and less conspicuous. Today, women enjoy a lot more opportunities to build their careers and make great contributions to their families and communities. Human society has made much progress and gender equality appears to be a more achievable goal. Given this background, many cannot understand the transformation of a female body into a male body would be a spiritual advance for Buddhists.

According to traditional Buddhist teaching, males have greater capacity in Dharma practice, and compared to males, females tend to have stronger mental afflictions such as desire, anger, and jealousy. In addition, females have to experience childbearing and can be susceptible to gynecological and other types of diseases. Because of this physiological disparity, some women could be fed up with being women, saying things like “It’s so troublesome and tiring to be a woman, I do not want to be a woman anymore!”

Of course not all women share such sentiment. Actually, according to certain uncommon Buddhist teachings in Mahayana and Vajrayana, a female body has special potential in spiritual practice. Some bodhisattvas purposely choose to appear as females in order to please the Buddha and benefit sentient beings with more skillful means. There are many female deities and dakinis in Buddhism whose compassionate activities attract many beings, such as all different Taras. Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *Essence of Clear Light* cites a teaching that says,

O Bodhisattvas!

In order to please the Buddha

Emanate in the form of a female,

And you will always abide in the presence of the Tathagata.

Speaking of people's preference, I would like to mention another point. There seems to be a change in people's aesthetic standard and preferences toward a person's appearance. The distinction between men and women are not as obvious as it used to be. In the old days, a man with strong physique would be the type people liked most, as it delivered a heroic and fearless image. When I was young, I seem to recall that people all loved to see heroes who were full of muscles and strength. In contrast, it does not seem to be the case today and there is more diversity. The so-called

“little fresh meat” idols, meaning young men with fair skin and handsome looks, have become the ideal and fantasy for a lot of people. Sometimes I find it hard to tell if a person is a boy or a girl because of the similarities between their appearances. This is but an example of how people’s preference changes over times.

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, if there are women who are weary of being ugly and frequently ill and, with a resolute mind before Ksitigarbha’s image, they reverently gaze at and make obeisance to him for even just the time of a meal, then throughout thousands of myriads of kalpas they will be reborn with perfect looks and features. If these ugly women are not weary of being women, then for hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of lives they will always be princesses, queens, or daughters of high ministers, prominent families, or great elders and be born beautiful and with perfect features. They gain such merit because they reverently gaze at and make obeisance to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva with a resolute mind.

Further, if some women dislike their plain looks and are bothered by frequent sickness, they can gaze at and bow in front of Ksitigarbha’s image with sincere devotion. Doing this for even just the time as short as a meal, they will be reborn with dignified looks and without any deformities throughout millions of kalpas. If they do



not dislike being a woman, they will always be born as a woman of royal lineage, or marry into royalty, or become daughters of prime ministers, prominent families, or great elders, endowed with perfect features. All these merits are the result of whole-heartedly gazing at and paying homage to Ksitigarbha.

Talking about women's susceptibility to illness, there is a sutra called *Sutra on Transforming the Female Form*, in which the Buddha talked about the physiological distinctiveness of women and its impact on women's body and emotional well-being. It says: "There are a hundred clusters of tiny living things parasitizing in a woman body, whose fluctuation incurs physical pain and mental distress. Thus, women have stronger mental afflictions than men." A modern

interpretation of this statement may relate to the cyclical hormonal changes unique to women that could affect their moods from time to time. Some women may also be very sensitive and could be easily offended. From my personal experience with monastics and lay alike, I have seen drastic changes among some women who can be at once very diligent in learning and contemplating the Dharma but then retrogress badly or even appear to act as a completely different person. I am not saying that no male students act this way but the proportion of men to women appeared much less. This is only my personal observation from teaching and administering the fourfold Han sangha at Larung Gar for more than thirty years. When I interact with female students, I have learned to pay careful attention to all of them because if I had carelessly neglected one of them, it is possible that she would feel sad from my oversight. This does not seem to be as big an issue as with male students.

Monastic nuns who have renounced worldly life and vowed to seek spiritual growth do not seem to be as concerned as worldly people, but there have been instances when I sensed that they were somehow offended and disheartened by my words and then chose not to speak to me anymore. Not only did some of them avoid and ignore me, they also secluded themselves from all other spiritual teachers and friends. I feel very sorry for these people as they used to be good practitioners but ended up leaving despondently,

simply because they were affected by their own mental afflictions. I tried hard to comfort them but sometimes to no avail. I can only accept the fact that everyone has his or her own life trajectory under control of his or her karma.

It is true that both women and men have imperfections and women may be more sensitive to verbal and social challenges. However, it is not appropriate to denigrate women because this is a fundamental violation of the tantric vows. Indeed, while on the phenomenal level, men and women may have differences in various aspects, the Buddha's three turnings of the Dharma Wheel affirm that men and women are absolutely equal and that all beings without exception have the same Buddha nature and enjoy the same potential for enlightenment. All of these are taught by the compassionate lord Buddha Shakyamuni.

For women who seek a more dignified and beautiful appearance, instead of getting plastic surgery or wearing make-up, it would be more advisable to invite a Ksitigarbha statue to your home and pray to him. Remember the ugly daughter of King Pasenadi named Vajra? Originally, she was extremely ugly and her husband locked her up so that nobody could see her. But later because she was bursting with delight and respect upon seeing the Buddha's dignified appearance, through the Buddha's inconceivable blessing,

Vajra became stunningly exquisite. So for those who are dissatisfied with their looks, do not forget to pray to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva!

Lecture Thirteen

August 11th, 2020

TREASURE THE DHARMA TEACHINGS

The timing for the teaching of this sutra is kind of special. Earlier this year, as I was locked down in Chengdu, I finished the translation of this sutra into Tibetan. In the following few months, although we were able to have peace and quiet in this small valley, many serious natural and man-made disasters occurred around the world. Since Ksitigarbha is powerful in alleviating suffering of beings, I feel it necessary to teach this sutra to help more people get to know the meritorious qualities of Ksitigarbha and arouse their conviction to pray to him.

Due to various restrictions, the lecture cannot be live streamed as before so the audience is actually much smaller. It is disappointing that tens of thousands of online listeners could not access this teaching. This is the natural law of impermanence and we have to accept it. To me, I would be satisfied as long as you can complete the study of this sutra from the beginning to the end by either attending the teaching on site or listening to the recording of this teaching.

In Patrul Rinpoche's *The Lotus Garden's Play*, there is a very good story of impermanence. In a beautiful lotus garden, full of lotus flower blossoms, lived many bees, happily enjoying the lotus nectar. One day, a sudden downpour struck, tearing apart the lovely petals and creating a mess everywhere. While many bees die of the disaster, others luckily survived. Likewise, although the pandemic has struck the world like the downpour, fortunately we are still safe and sound.

In this world, the storm of impermanence will unexpectedly befall us in various ways, manifesting itself as a pandemic or something else. Whatever happens, some of you persist in learning the Dharma. This is truly admirable and praiseworthy. For my part, I will try my best to offer you Dharma teachings without any interruption. I am offering the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* which I feel is the best gift for you. Life is impermanent and everything is changing. It is hard to say how much time is left for us to engage in Dharma teaching and learning. Even if there is no dramatic change in the external world, our personal situations, such as health, mental capacity and the like, will continue to change.

Such impermanence is observable in those who used to participate in my teachings. On this date last year, there were quite a lot of people happily listening to my teaching. But now, many of them are no longer here—some have passed away and some have left with various reasons. No one can predict what will happen a year from now, either to me as a teacher, or to you as a listener. So it is important for us practitioners to have a sense of impermanence. Thogme Zangpo always urged Dharma practitioners to contemplate on impermanence because “it is a profound practice that stimulates one to enter into the Dharma, spurs one on to diligently practice the Dharma, and leads one to the ultimate enlightenment.”

Thus, when we are receiving the Dharma teaching, you should not regard it as a normal worldly lecture, like a workshop in a company or a compulsory course at school. If you have that mindset, you are far from being a real Buddhist. The Buddha often taught how rare it is to obtain a human existence, to encounter a qualified Dharma teacher, and to hear Dharma teachings. For every one of you, to receive even one Dharma lecture has required many favorable conditions which do not appear casually without any reason. It was only because you have created auspicious causes in the past that you are now encountering the Dharma, especially the Mahayana doctrine. Since you now possess all the beneficial

conditions that have enabled you to listen to the Dharma, please embrace the teachings with great joy, devotion, and a spirit of perseverance.

It is a pity that some who are attending this teaching would feel that this is burdensome. They think, "If I do not attend the teaching, I will lose out because others are receiving the teaching. But if I attend, it would be a whole hour of tedium and I would rather have a sleep, surf the internet, or have coffee or tea with my friends and enjoy the beautiful moonlight." This kind of thought could occur to anyone. Indeed, everyone has to overcome his own obstacles in order to receive Dharma teachings. Since it is not easy for anyone to follow the teaching every night, I am really grateful for your efforts. It would really be frustrating and impossible for me to teach if nobody is listening. It can be frustrating when I am talking to the camera and making a recording because I am not sure if anyone will watch the recording.

Dharma teaching is the fruit of the collective efforts of both the listeners and the teacher. I feel grateful even if there is only one listener attending because it is your listening that provides me the opportunity to teach. You should also cherish the teaching and immerse yourselves into Dharma study because we never know how long this opportunity would last.

We now continue with the sixth chapter, *The Praise of the Tathagata*. To recap, at the end of the last lecture, we learned that by earnestly praying to Ksitigarbha, people who are weary of their appearance and health could be reborn with beauty and into distinguished families. Now, let us continue.

BE PROTECTED BY GHOSTS AND SPIRITS

Remember to Make Offerings

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, if there are good men and good women who are able to make offerings to him by playing music, singing songs of praise, and presenting incense and flowers before this Bodhisattva’s image, or who are also able to encourage others, one or many, to do likewise, both now and in the future they will be protected day and night by hundreds of thousands of ghosts and spirits who will even prevent evil matters from reaching their ears, much less allow them to meet with disasters personally.

Offerings should be made to Ksitigarbha. Every year at Larung Gar, we hold a Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly, also known as the Dharma Assembly of Samantabhadra’s Offering Clouds. During the assembly, a myriad of exquisite things are offered in the shrine to Ksitigarbha, including beautiful flowers, delicate foods, fragrant



incense, and refined butter lamps, along with melodious songs and chants of verses of praise to Ksitigarbha. This practice was initiated by H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche which conformed perfectly to the teaching of the Buddha given here in the text. By learning this sutra, we will understand the deep intention of His Holiness. When great masters make a decision to do something, there are special meanings which may not be revealed until much later.

Before we started the tradition of the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly at Larung Gar, we didn't play music or make a variety of offerings in the shrine hall. In the days just after my arrival to Larung Gar, the chanting of *Mantra for Multiplying the Power of Recitation* and

The Clouds of Offering Mantras was not included in the ritual. We usually started with just *The Verses of the Eight Noble Auspicious Ones*, followed by *The Seven Preliminaries for Purifying the Mind*, which is the first part of *The King of Aspiration Prayers*.

Later, His Holiness suggested that we add the ritual of *The Clouds of Offering Mantras* before chanting *The Seven Preliminaries*. He also directed that each time we chant that we arrange in advance the five offerings of food items, flowers, pure water, lamps, and incense, and also play music as an offering to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Doing so would bring particularly great merit. His Holiness also added *Mantra for Multiplying the Power of Recitation* at the very beginning of our chanting because this mantra multiplies the merit of chanting by tens of millions fold.

Since then, every time when we have group chanting, we would arrange in advance the five offerings; and when chanting the ritual of *The Clouds of Offering Mantras* and the first two branches of prostration and making offerings in *The Seven Preliminaries*, we would play music. Occasionally, some people who are in charge of broadcasting the ritual would play pop songs or rock music, which have strong rhythms and heavy beats, or once in a while, they would play some political or nationalistic music. It is a bit odd to hear these kinds of music when we are studiously chanting the ritual. Maybe young monks or nuns love such music and feel

that others would also like it. As long as you like it, you can offer it to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Since we began this custom, many monasteries have also followed suit and started playing music with the chanting of *The Clouds of Offering Mantras* and *The Seven Preliminaries*.

It is of great significance to arrange offerings to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Such activity should not be limited just to a certain Dharma practice or assembly. Even when you are by yourself, every time you recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, you should set offerings. Of course, it would be even better if you can attend every teaching here and chant those prayers together with the sangha. But since it is unlikely that everyone would have such an opportunity, you can chant the same prayers that we do before and after Dharma teachings as part of your own daily practice.

A Tibetan-English version of *Larung Daily Chant Book* is available on our English website. Larung Gar has also recently published a new Tibetan version of the chant book which is being distributed to everyone in the academy. Those who understand the Tibetan language can use it for daily chanting. If you don't understand Tibetan, you can still take it as an object of homage since it is the Jewel of Dharma.

If in the future, as a result of factors beyond your control, you may find yourself in a place without even one single Dharma friend, let alone a sangha group, you can chant these prayers yourself every day. Meanwhile, you can arrange offerings and play your favorite music in front of the images of Ksitigarbha or other buddhas and bodhisattvas. This would be a very meaningful practice for yourself and all beings around you.

Be Protected by Ghosts and Spirits

Back to the text, those who praise and make offerings to Ksitigarbha, or exhort others, even just one person, to do the same, will be guarded day and night by hundreds of thousands of ghosts and spirits in this and future lives. They will be protected from all kinds of disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, fire, windstorms, and wars. They will not even hear any evil, much less be personally involved in any tragedy.

Ghosts and spirits here can be referred to as Dharma protectors. In Buddhism, there are two types of Dharma protectors. One type is mild and peaceful beings, mostly heavenly gods such as the Four Great Kings, Indra and Brahma, who have promised to protect the Dharma in front of the Buddha. Another type is rather wrathful, especially the Vajrayana Dharma protectors in Tibetan Buddhism. They are often depicted in unusual postures and appearances,

and some of them look particularly fearful and wrathful, such as the Twelve Tenma Sisters, Tsiu Marpo, Rahula, Dorje Lekpa, and Ekadzati, just to name a few.

There are many Dharma protectors who would specifically guard the Vajrayana teaching. Most of them are ghosts, yakshas, rakshasas or kimnaras who used to be against Buddhism but were converted into Dharma protectors under the power of Padmasambhava or other mahasiddhas. Their experiences of being transformed were similar to Pehar, the protector of Samye. At first, when those great masters tried to promote the Dharma, these ghosts and spirits created obstacles and inflicted damage. However, they were defeated and subdued by the great masters and in awe of the masters' power, they then promised to never harm Buddhism but would henceforth protect it.

While they have become Dharma protectors, their ferocious propensity and habit remain unchanged. That is why their images often appear rather wrathful. That is also the reason that in Vajrayana tradition, when we make offerings to Dharma protectors, we need to provide flesh and alcohol, although we ourselves are vegetarians. Some people do not quite understand why Dharma protectors need these items. It is because they used to be really rude and brutal beings who killed and fed on flesh, and they love drinking alcohol and eating meat. Although they have since promised to

protect the Dharma, it is still hard for them to give up all these habits all at once. Even Padmasambhava did not require them to refrain from eating meat when he put them under oath.

In summary, there are two types of Dharma protectors and both of them will safeguard those who make offerings to Ksitigarbha day and night. They will prevent them from becoming aware of unfortunate occurrences, much less let them experience any misfortune themselves.

The great Chinese master Hongyi had such an experience of being protected from a disaster. When Master Hongyi was a layperson, he enshrined the image of Ksitigarbha at his home and always made offerings to the bodhisattva. After he got ordained and became a monk, he still kept such a habit and wherever he went, he would make offerings and pray to Ksitigarbha. Once, he went to a small temple in the countryside of Hangzhou for a summer retreat. There were only a few people in the temple, an ailing old abbot, two monks, and one lay person. So, in total there were only five persons, adding Master Hongyi. Every night before going to bed, the master would make offerings and pray to Ksitigarbha. One night, he prayed as usual and feeling settled, went to bed. He slept quite well during the night, except that in the middle of the night, he heard footsteps of several individuals from upstairs and the voice of the old abbot. Since the room upstairs was a storage room,

the master thought it was the old abbot who was checking the door and windows to make sure that they were secured. Feeling assured, the master fell asleep again.

The next morning, he got up and went out of his room only to find that the temple was ransacked. Then the two monks came to him and said, "You are fortunate that you do not know what happened last night!" Then, he was told that at midnight, a group of thugs climbed over the wall and robbed the whole temple. They were armed with knives and other weapons and robbed every one of his property. They even forced the old abbot to hand over the monastery's possessions. Having no choice, the ill abbot had to gather himself and led the thugs upstairs to the two hundred silver dollars that had been locked in the cupboard.

After pillaging everyone and taking everything they wanted, even the clothes of the lay person, the robbers came to the room of Master Hongyi. They wanted to pry open the door, but after trying for almost an hour, they failed. Then they wanted to enter from the windows, but they were well closed. They even tried to smash the window, but still could not make entry. Every means they tried had failed. The robbers were exhausted and it was about dawn. Fearing of getting caught, they left. After learning the details of the robbery, Master Hongyi believed he was protected by the incredible blessing of Ksitigarbha.

Master Hongyi shared this personal experience when he lectured on the twenty-eight kinds of benefits, as listed at the end of this sutra, of making obeisance to Ksitigarbha. One of the benefits is “to not fall victim to robbery or theft” and Master Hongyi said his personal experience was the best proof of it. I think spirits provided some of the protection and prevented Master Hongyi from even becoming aware of the sound of the pounding on the doors and windows. This is evidence that “ghosts and spirits will even prevent evil matters from reaching their ears”.

Pray to Dharma Protectors

On a side note, I would like to stress the importance of praying to the Dharma protector. If we pray with a pure mind, we will have their protection and will gain more strength in achieving our goals. Ju Mipham Rinpoche said in *The Treatise on the Modes of Being*,

*A person like this, who is protected by divine beings,
Even when he is by himself,
His capabilities are equal in every way
To many thousands of men combined.*

Therefore, if someone has the protection of Dharma protectors, he or she can possess unbelievable power which equals to the sum of thousands of individuals.

We can see that some people are more capable than others in many aspects—their words carry more weight and they alone can complete a lot of people's work. Why? It is likely that they have the assistance from divine beings. It is particularly important and indispensable to have the support of Dharma protectors in carrying out any Dharma activity. Since living in this age of five degenerations we will inevitably be harassed by nonhuman spirits and encounter all kinds of obstacles in our daily life, we should always pray to the Dharma protectors.

The Han sangha here at Larung Gar has been particularly diligent. Since the founding of the Han College of Victorious Subduing-Mara Land (the name for the Han sangha at Larung Gar given by His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche) to the present, for more than 30 years, we have never stopped praying to the Dharma protectors. Every day, as long as we have Dharma courses, we recite prayers and make offerings to the Dharma protectors.

In a few days, on August 14th and 15th, it will be our yearly Dharma Protectors Festival. The Dharma Protectors Festival is held every year on the 25th and 26th day of the sixth month of the Tibetan calendar. On the first day, we will recite prayers to the Dharma protectors in the shrine hall and the next day we will make full offerings to Dharma protectors at the peaks of the five mountains that surround our academy (also known as Little Mount Wutai).

This tradition can be traced back to more than a hundred years ago, to the time of the tertön Dudjom Lingpa. When Dudjom Lingpa followed the instruction of dakinis and came to Larung Gar, the goddess of the trees of Dzichen Plain, located just west to Larung Gar, created many obstacles, trying to drive the tertön away. Then Dudjom Lingpa subjugated her and threatened to kill her. Being so frightened, the goddess promised that she would never bring harm to him, and so Dudjom Lingpa let her go. But later, the goddess broke her promise and inflicted troubles on the tertön. Being defeated once again by the tertön, she fled elsewhere. The day after, a local official told Dudjom Lingpa that the goddess of the trees of Dzichen had been the best local protector and he suggested the tertön to summon her back. Later that year, on the twenty-sixth day of the sixth month of the Tibetan calendar, the tertön went with a few friends to the mountain peak where he had subjugated the goddess, calling out her name to invite her back. The goddess returned and Dudjom Lingpa made a deal with the goddess that every year on the same day, the sangha at Larung Gar would make offerings to her and she would try her best to protect the practitioners at Larung Gar. Since then, every year on these two days, practitioners at Larung Gar will recite prayers and make offerings to Dharma protectors of the lineage, including the goddess of the trees of Dzichen.

Speaking of the festival, I would like to address a few points. The first is about the attendance rules. Yesterday I heard a notice posted to the sangha saying that certain groups of people, including widows and widowers, those who had abortions, and those who used to work as a blacksmith, would not be allowed to participate. I was given a lot of reasons to justify such a regulation by a few of those running the festival. But I have never heard of such official rule and I do not know who could have passed it to you. It may have been a folk tradition in the past or a personal requirement from certain masters. It is likely a request from the more conservative segment of our Tibetan Buddhist community.

When H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, he did not set any such requirement. Every time the rituals for Dharma protectors were held, we never prevented anyone from attending. Personally, I do not think anyone should be excluded because Dharma protectors are compassionate to all sentient beings. Of course, there are certain special rituals which may have specific prohibitions and I am not saying that they are all irrational; instead, in such instances, we should adhere to these restrictions. But in general, no one should be excluded from these rituals. Abortion is indeed an unvirtuous deed, but if murderers are not forbidden from attending rituals of Dharma protectors, why should those who had abortions be banned? Since this kind of requirement has never existed in all the

years I have been in Larung Gar, I would like to know the origin of this new requirement.

Second, I hope you can observe this tradition and make continual offerings to the Dharma protectors. As the followers of H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, it is important for us to keep the tradition of Larung Gar regardless of where you are. If you have a Dharma center, every year on June 26th of the Tibetan Calendar, you should hold a ritual and arrange proper offerings and prayers to our Dharma protectors. For those of you who are not at a sacred mountain or a desirable place to perform the whole ritual, you may arrange offerings and chant prayers at wherever you are. Personally, I bring with me an offering cup for Dharma protectors wherever I go so that I can make offerings to them every day. If it is inconvenient for me to prepare alcohol, I would offer whatever tea I am having instead. This is sometimes more appropriate because it may not be acceptable nor proper for us monks to buy wines, especially when we are visiting big cities.

If you have studied and practiced at Larung Gar, you need to remember our tradition of making offerings to the Dharma protectors. Even many great Han masters who had come to Tibetan monasteries in the past to seek the Dharma have been persisting in practicing the rituals and traditions of the Tibetan monasteries that they used to stay because of their steady character and close

adherence to their lineage. We know that in this day and age, people can be particularly unpredictable. They may be with one person today and switch to another person tomorrow, and they may engage in one project today and change to another the next day. Because of this instability, they have difficulty making friends and achieving meaningful objectives.

NEVER SLANDER THE NOBLE BEING

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future if there are evil people, evil spirits, and evil ghosts who see good men and good women venerating and taking refuge [in this Bodhisattva], making offerings, singing his praises, reverently gazing at, and making obeisance to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s image, and if those beings then wrongly express ridicule and slander, maligning that such deeds are without virtue or benefit, or they laugh at these people, or they utter slander behind their backs, or they urge others to slander likewise, whether one person or many, or they bear a mere thought of ridicule and slander, such beings will fall into and remain in the Avici Hell, undergoing extremely severe torments as the consequence for their ridiculing and slandering, even after all the thousand Buddhas of the present kalpa have entered parinirvana. Only after the [present] kalpa has passed will they be reborn in the company of hungry ghosts, where they will pass a thousand more kalpas before being reborn as animals. Then they will pass another thousand

kalpas before they may finally be reborn as humans. Even when they are reborn as humans, they will be poor, lowly, and with incomplete faculties. Their minds will frequently be fettered by their unwholesome karma. Before long, they will again fall into the lower realms.



Having faith in Ksitigarbha, virtuous men or women may take refuge in Ksitigarbha, praise and bow to Ksitigarbha, or respectfully make offerings to Ksitigarbha. If upon seeing such virtuous practices, evil beings such as vicious ghosts, malignant spirits, malicious dragons, or wicked people decide to ridicule and slander these virtuous people, they will experience unbearable retributions

life after life even if they commit such negative deeds for an instant, or merely bear one single thought of ridicule and slander.

Since nonhuman spirits cannot speak ill directly of virtuous people and even if they do, people cannot hear them, they may use their supernatural power to influence other individuals to utter slanderous words. Consequently, people with less virtuous roots could be easily moved to jealousy and mock those doing virtuous deeds. They may malign Ksitigarbha and claim that he carries no blessing and the like. Or they may express disdain at virtuous men and women and sneer at their behavior saying, "This is stupid!" "You are an utter fool!" "It is just superstition!" They may also try to influence others to do the same. They may try to organize as many others as possible to cast aspersions on their innocent targets. They may try all possible means that they can think of to achieve this objective, for instance, spreading slanderous statement through the Internet.

All these negative behaviors of slandering Ksitigarbha will have awful consequences, bringing about unimaginably miserable retributions to these individuals. Most of us are fortunate that we have not encountered this kind of unvirtuous friends who vehemently reject Ksitigarbha because there is a chance that we could be influenced by them and turn our backs on Ksitigarbha. If this happens, the negative karma will undoubtedly drive us to the

lower realms. The unvirtuous friends who have influenced us, in particular, will experience endless suffering in the Avici Hell, without being released even after all the thousand buddhas of this Fortunate Aeon have passed into nirvana.

Only after the present kalpa will this being be reborn among the hungry ghosts, experiencing the corresponding retribution for a thousand kalpas. And after that, he will be reborn as animals for another thousand kalpas. And then he will obtain a human body. But due to the lack of merit, he will be poor and lowly, having incomplete faculties, i.e., being blind, deaf, dumb, or handicapped. Not only that, his evil karma will shackle his mind, bringing him constant mental afflictions. He will likely fall back into the lower realms again before long.

Many of those suffering agonizing mental unrest and afflictions possess intact six sense faculties. They are either afflicted by congenital mental diseases or are constantly harassed by non-human spirits. This is likely the result of the negative karma from their previous lives which has firmly imprisoned them. "You reap what you sow," as the popular saying goes, and the "pitiful ones must have their own wrongdoings." In this world, some people suffer from extreme physical deficiency. They are either destitute, lowly, or have deformities and disabilities. At the same time, many who are very well off and have no worry about their livelihood have

a bitter feeling in their minds. These sorts of suffering do not occur without reasons. Think about why people choose to commit suicide. Rationally speaking, suicide cannot solve their problems. However, since they feel so bleak and hopeless, they think there is no other option but to end their lives. Indeed, according to Buddhist teaching, if one commits suicide, then after death, they will have to repeat the suffering of suicide five hundred times.

The reason that one experiences immense suffering this life, either physically or mentally, has to do with his negative karma in previous lifetimes. For instance, a person may have slandered Ksitigarbha or those who worshiped Ksitigarbha. In addition to his current misery, he may have already suffered for a long time in hell, or as a hungry ghost or an animal. Even after he has returned to this human world, he keeps being reborn to poor families and continue to hold wrong views. All of these are the result of his karma which leads to horrible retributions life after life. The *Mahayana Vaipulya Sutra of Total Retention* says, “One who slanders the Dharma incurs grave negative karma that leads one into the three lower realms, with rarely any chance to liberate.” If anyone speaks ill of the Dharma, even just casually and unintentionally, serious negative karma is undoubtedly created.

In *The Buddha Speaks of the Effects of Actions Sutra*, the relationship between causes and effects was discussed, including why the

Buddha had a headache, why he was pierced by a thorn in his feet, and why he was smeared by a woman. This sutra says,

*Any action performed by ordinary people,
Either virtuous or non-virtuous,
Will eventually bring its effect back to the doer,
Instead of falling into decay or vanishing on its own.*

Therefore, we should try to keep a pure mind and refrain from making slanderous speech. We need to stay impartial and not make disparaging judgments even to heretical views. If we follow this principle, we would most certainly not denigrate spiritual masters and the noble Dharma who deserve to be treated with particular regard. Great masters can appear to be quite different from what we usually think: Shavaripa's guru appeared as a hunter, who was actually a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara; when Naropa found his guru Tilopa, the great master was grilling and eating fish; and quite a few great Indian masters' gurus were filthy lay persons. There were many accomplished masters in India, Tibet and the Han regions who flouted conventions and behaved strangely. However, as long as one has a pure devotion to these masters, one will nonetheless receive their blessings and attain enlightenment.

This also applies to Buddhist teachings. The teachings of the Buddha are varied with some having provisional meaning and

others with definitive meaning. Despite their differences, each Dharma has its own efficacy and can benefit specific types of beings. Therefore, we should respect each and every Dharma, each and every Buddhist school and tradition with a pure mind. It is akin to the variety of medicines in hospital. Each medicine has its own potency and effect and for each patient, it is the proper drug prescribed according to his illness that would help him recover. That is why we always have to maintain a pure mind toward spiritual masters and the Dharma teaching.

Universally Vast, those who ridicule and slander others' making offerings in veneration will reap such ripened effects. How much worse [the consequences will be] if beings have evil views and do destructive things!

The sutra says that those who do destructive things would incur much more severe karmic retribution than those who only make slanderous speech. Destructive acts may include burning Ksitigarbha's pictures and thangkas; destroying the statues of Ksitigarbha made of any material such as stone, bronze, or gold; incinerating the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*; or killing those who make offerings to Ksitigarbha, and so on and so forth. Actually, not only images and texts of Ksitigarbha, but also those of other noble ones like Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Shakyamuni Buddha, and

Padmasambhava should not be mistreated, since they are also objects that deserve the utmost respect. These are absolutely terrible acts.

Because of the wrong views held by certain people, such terrible incidents have taken place in history. One case is the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan by the Taliban militants. The Taliban bombed the statues at the beginning of 2001, despite global plea to preserve the statues. Then at the end of that year, their forces were decimated and they eventually lost their control of the country. Some believe that this is a present-life retribution for them. Retributions may sometimes ripen quickly in the present life while sometimes they await in future lifetimes.

Some of you may have conducted similar devastating deeds in the past when you had no faith in Buddhism and were possessed by wrong views. If that is the case, it would be necessary to take action now to atone for such a mistake before you die. The best way to rectify that is to correct the damage you have done, for example, if you had destroyed a holy statue, you would do a new construction of the same statue of at least the same size and quality.

During the Cultural Revolution, many people engaged in such destructive deeds. At that time, in my hometown, some people who used to be Buddhists went so far as to destroy Buddha statues

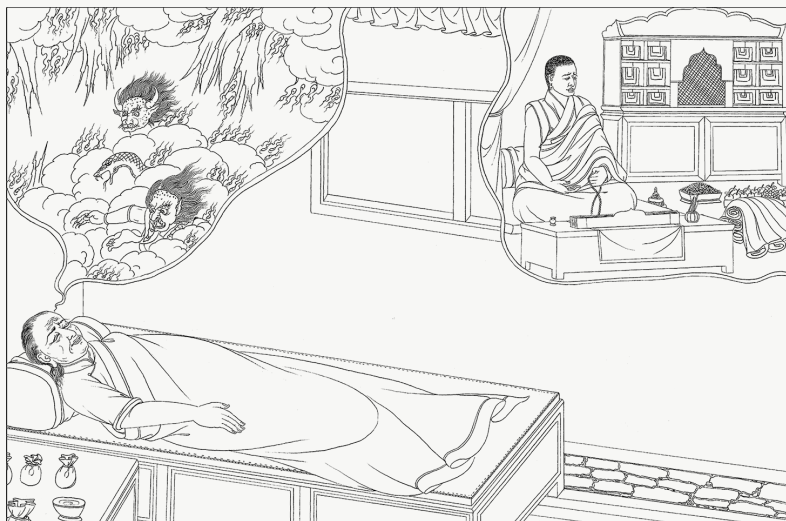
and stupas. Because of these actions, many people risked their lives to bury Buddhist statues, stupas, or texts underground and beneath pine trees to protect them from destruction. When I was herding yaks as a child, whenever I saw a large pine tree, I would dig underneath to see if there was something precious. Sometimes I would find some scriptures buried but unfortunately, they were often damaged by rain. With this childhood habit, when I see a big old tree on the mountain, I would often wonder if there is anything precious underneath.

Since nobody knows what the world will become in the future, it is essential that we employ our mindfulness and introspective awareness as best as we can to safeguard our body, speech, and mind from any non-virtue.

BENEFIT THE DYING WITH KSITIGARBHA'S POWER

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future if there are men and women who are bedridden with a long [illness] and unable to get well or die despite their wishes, and at night they dream of evil ghosts, of family and relatives, of wandering in dangerous paths, or they have many nightmares of wandering in the company of ghosts and spirits; and as days, months, and years go by, their illnesses worsen and they waste away; they cry out in their sleep; they are miserable and melancholy—all these represent cases of karma and [the ensuing] realm of existence under judgment, with the degrees of seriousness still undetermined, making it difficult for these people to die or recover. The ordinary eyes of men and women cannot discern such matters.

I have met some long-suffering patients who have been sick for nine or ten years and their bodies are wasting away. But due to their karma, their suffering continues and they are unable to



recover or die. These patients may be dreaming of evil ghosts who are torturing them; deceased parents, relatives, friends, or karmic debtor (to whom they owe karmic debt) coming to find them; wandering on a dangerous winding road along a precipitous cliff; or walking along a narrow path alongside a rapid river. Often, they may feel pressed by unseen forces against their beds so that they could not get up. As time passes by, day after day, month after month, and year after year, these people linger on in a steadily worsening condition. They can neither get better nor die, experiencing the torture of pain continuously. Often, this suffering leads them to cry out in their sleep.

We may also be like that at the end of our life so we should be prepared for our death. We all hope that when we die, we can take the position of “the sleeping lion”, the posture in which the Buddha entered into nirvana, and just pass away peacefully. When people see us the next morning, they would be assured that we have died peacefully and just chant “Om Mani Padme Hum” for us. It would be so great if we can all leave this world in such a relaxed way and do not bring restlessness and pressure to those around us. But we know that not everyone can die this way. Some of us will have to undergo a period of acute suffering before we die.

Why does this happen? This is because the karma and the ensuing realm of existence are still under judgment, and the degree of seriousness is still undetermined. According to some Buddhist scriptures, every being will have to wait for the judgment from the Lord of Death upon his passing. For those who linger on their deathbed, they are still undergoing the trial by the Lord of Death and until the verdict is in, they can neither die nor recover and have to continue experiencing their suffering. In other words, because the karma of these beings is varied and complicated, and the seriousness of their karma is still uncertain for the time being, their next karmic retribution has not yet matured.

One more possible reason for such suffering is that they may have

kept other sentient beings tormented for extended periods without releasing them nor letting them die immediately and peacefully. They may have restrained beings with ropes or held them captive like Ajatashatru imprisoned his father, King Bimbisara. Others such as some butchers are very cruel. They make animals suffer a lot before finally killing them. These people may then receive a retribution that makes it impossible for them to die immediately or recover fully. This is the law of karma.

Sadly, most ordinary people do not know the complicated functioning of the karmic law and are unable to see a specific cause and its resultant effect in person. Neither can modern medical science diagnose karma. Doctors and medical specialists would conclude that a patient has an incurable condition after trying all medicines and treatments with no apparent effects. We may also experience such a situation at the end of our life. If we were told that we have a strange and intractable disease, we should remind ourselves that, "This is my own karma. I must have caused others to have the same suffering."

"In this instance, this sutra should be recited aloud once before the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and possessions that the sick person loves, such as clothing, jewels, manors, gardens, or houses, should be offered by someone saying clearly in front of the sick person, 'In the presence of the sutras and images

of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, I, so-and-so, give these items on behalf of this sick person to make offerings to the sutras and images, to make the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to construct stupas and monasteries, to light oil lamps, or to give gifts to the sangha.'

"In such way the sick person should be told three times so that he may hear and know of the offerings being made.

In this situation, people may recite this sutra aloud before the images of buddhas and bodhisattvas for the sick person. By the power of this recitation, even if it is just once and depending on the cause of the illness, the patient may recover. Generally speaking, illnesses may be caused by negative karma, or by the imbalance of the four great elements that comprise our body, or by both. Illnesses caused by the imbalance of the four elements can be cured by medical treatment, while those resulting from negative karma can only be appeased through the engagement in virtuous deeds. If the negative karma is minor, without long-lasting influence, then the effectiveness of the sutra recitation will be apparent. However, note that if the sickness is due to one's severe negative karma from previous lifetimes, then merely reciting this sutra once would not cause one to recover very soon.

If a patient is terminally ill with no hope of recovery, people should

enumerate all the objects that the patient cherishes, such as iPhone, iPad, clothing or monastic robes, jewels, bank accounts, cars, or real properties such as houses and gardens, and inform the patient that since he is approaching death, all his possessions will be used in virtuous practices to accumulate merit for him. One should declare loudly in front of the patient, “I (name) for the sake of the sick one (name), will convert these lovely items into money, and use it to print scriptures, to make images of buddhas and bodhisattvas, to build temples, to light oil lamps, to make offerings to monastics, or to hold Buddhist rituals, etc.” List the virtuous deeds that are going to be done on behalf of the patient and say these words three times in front of him. By doing so, the sick person will benefit greatly.

According to the Vinaya teaching, when a monk or nun realizes that he or she is going to die, he or she should make arrangements for their possessions in advance, especially those they are most attached to. The best option is to offer them to the sangha. As a relative of the deceased, if you are handling the objects and properties they left behind, it would be best to offer these items, especially those the deceased valued the most, to the sangha, or use them to fund buddha statues, stupas, oil lamps and the like. This is of great importance.

While the sick person is still alive, it is necessary to inform him in a

loud voice on how you will use his possessions to perform virtuous deeds. It is beneficial for the patient to know what these virtuous deeds are so that he can rejoice over it. If he believes in the karmic law, he would be more than willing to let you do that. Maybe, he may even recover when he agrees to spend his possessions to do good deeds. However, if this person has no Buddhist faith, you will need to be careful to avoid upsetting or even angering him with your idea. For many people without faith, even when they are in a desperately poor condition, they still look forward to recovery, thinking that they will not die and will get better. As such, they will probably not let anyone touch their possessions.

“If his various consciousnesses are dispersed and his breathing ceases, then for one day, two days, three days, four days, or onto seven days, [such offerings] should be stated clearly and this sutra should be read aloud. After this person’s life ends, he will gain release from misfortunes and severe torments that result from past offenses, even the five great violations that lead to incessant torments. Wherever he is reborn, he will know his previous lives.

“[Consider how a sick person can be benefited,] how much greater [the results will be] when good men and good women personally copy this sutra in writing, teach others to copy it,

personally sculpt or paint the Bodhisattva's image, or even teach others to sculpt or paint [his image]! They will certainly gain immense benefits.



When a patient's outer breath stops while the inner breath is still continuing, others should state to him clearly the virtuous activities that would be performed using his possessions, and this *Ksitigarbha Sutra* should be read aloud without interruption for one to seven days. Then after this life, all his negative karma from the past lives, even that from the five crimes with immediate retributions, will be purified. Wherever he is reborn, he will have the supercognition to know his past lives. This is of great meaning for everyone.

Given that even the deceased would gain such great benefit with the help of others, the karmic reward for good men or good women personally copying this sutra by hand, or carving or painting images of Ksitigarbha, or encouraging others to do likewise would be even greater. The *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha* says,

*All who revere and take refuge in Ksitigarbha
Abide in a state free from fear.*

If one truly relies upon Ksitigarbha, one will enjoy happiness anytime and anywhere, and will never be burdened by fear or worry. This is especially the case if one copies this sutra and makes images of Ksitigarbha in person.

“Therefore, Universally Vast, if you see people who read and recite this sutra, who have even a thought of praise for it, or who revere it, you should use hundreds of thousands of skillful means to encourage these people to keep their diligent mind from fading. They will be able to attain thousands of myriads of millions of inconceivable virtues in both the present and future.

It is important to encourage people to persevere in virtuous deeds and not regress by using all sorts of expedient methods. When we see people recite or revere this sutra, or have just a thought of

praise for it, we need to try our best to provide assistance and help them to not regress from such virtuous deeds.

Not regressing is a key trait that we all should have. I am not concerned if you do not work hard when you are just embarking on the spiritual path. What worries me most is that as you move further along the path that you become fatigued and weary and lose your initial enthusiasm to carry on. This happens from time to time. Some individuals display excessive passion at the beginning, such as deep prostrations regardless of the occasion, or extravagant offerings of agates and corals, but just after a few years, they would become stand-offish, regress from the path, and may even slander the Dharma. These are terribly disappointing changes.

I would rather advise Buddhist beginners to save their passion for the long term. As it is said in *The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters*, “Be careful not to believe your mind; your mind is not to be trusted.” Remind yourself that, “My mind is not trustworthy. I might not be so devoted and fervent as I think. I shall take it easy.” It’s better to release your passion gradually, not all at once.

The best is to “keep the diligent mind from fading.” Keep a diligent heart on the path. Whatever virtuous deed you engage in, be it praising Ksitigarbha, generating bodhicitta, working for the benefit of others, or learning Buddhism, persevere at it and never retreat

from your diligence. Please remember this sentence. When learning a sutra, even if we cannot remember all the content, we should try to at least memorize a few very important sentences or phrases as a motto to encourage and inspire ourselves. That is of great meaning.

If one perseveres in such virtuous deeds, one will obtain boundless and inconceivable merits in the present and future lives which even the Buddha cannot enumerate. More merits and benefits of worshiping Ksitigarbha are expounded in the 12th chapter, *The Benefits from Seeing and Hearing*. After learning the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, I am sure many of you will attach great importance to the teaching and practice of Ksitigarbha. At a minimum, I hope to help you resolve your doubts and establish your faith. These are essential goals regardless of which Dharma course you follow.

WHAT TO DO IF WE DREAM OF GHOSTS

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future if living beings when dreaming or dozing should see ghosts, spirits, and other forms who are sad, crying, worried, sighing, fearful, or terrified, these are the living beings’ fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, or other relatives from one, ten, a hundred, or a thousand lives past who are in the lower realms and unable to leave. They have no place from which to hope for the strength of merit to rescue them, and so they plead with their family from their previous lives to use skillful means, hoping that they may thereby leave the lower realms.

We may, while dreaming or dozing, see ghosts, headless spirits and other forms like those in horror movies, who are either sad, weeping, worried, fearful, or terrified. Who are they? They are indeed our fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, and relatives from one, ten, a hundred or a



thousand lives past. Due to their evil karma, they are trapped in the lower realms and unable to free themselves from suffering. So they have come to us looking for help.

When we have nightmares and see some terrifying scenes, we may think that it is evil ghosts coming to harm us. It is not necessarily the case. As the Buddha said here, it could be that they had a close karmic connection with us in our previous lives and now they are suffering in the realm of hells, hungry ghosts, or animals. Since they lack merit and have no others to turn to for help, they are trying to communicate with us, their previous closest family members, and seeking help from us to perform virtuous deeds that would help them get out of the lower realms. They are not

coming to harm us so we do not have to be frightened. If we ever have such a nightmare or dream, we should do virtuous deeds and make dedication on their behalf the next day.

“Universally Vast, use your spiritual power to cause these living kin to personally read this sutra aloud with a resolute mind before the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, or request others to read it aloud, three or seven times. When the sutra has been read aloud for such a number of times, the relatives in the lower realms will gain release, and these kin will never see them again when dreaming.

The Buddha instructed us on what to do if we ever have such dreams or nightmares. We can either recite the sutra ourselves three or seven times or request others to do the same to benefit the deceased who are unfortunately suffering in the lower realms. The key point here is to recite the sutra with heartfelt sincerity. Some have said on the Internet, “I have read the sutra as many times as required but I still have nightmares. What should I do?” I think it was probably because they lacked the “resolute mind” as required. People often say, “sincerity works miracles”. For example, if you only want to get cured of your disease and just chant the sutra in a hasty and impatient way, even if you finish the required number, it would not necessarily work.

Therefore, we should be aware that although reciting mantras and sutras are definitely beneficial, it does not mean that it will be one hundred percent effective in solving your problems. Nothing in this world can be 100% effective. For example, when you are ill and see a doctor, the doctor may prescribe a medicine for you. Will this medicine work? Of course, it has an effect. But will it work 100% in curing you? Not necessarily. The same applies to Buddhist chanting. If you fail to obtain the desired result after chanting a mantra or sutra a certain number of times, does it mean chanting is useless and not worth trying? You can think of it in this way: if you take a medicine for some time, but it doesn't work, will you deny the efficacy of all medicine and never take any medicine again? Of course not. It is important to have a comprehensive understanding in this regard.

When I was translating this part of the text, I posted on my Weibo the Buddha's instruction taught here on January 6th. Then I had nightmares that night. I felt ghosts press down on my body. A ghost with a large size was pressing against my feet, while a child ghost was pressing on my upper body. When their forces became increasingly apparent, I felt scared. So I started to visualize the wrathful form of the Guru Rinpoche and continuously prayed to him. Even with my visualization, the ghosts were getting more turbulent. Then I started to meditate on emptiness, reminding

myself that those ghosts were empty in nature. Still the child ghost was squashing me even harder. At that moment, I yelled “ah” and woke up and the horrible scenes disappeared all at once. It would appear that visualization and meditation work no better than a loud scream. Then it occurred to me that, maybe the Weibo I posted displeased certain ghost spirits or maybe some relatives or friends from my previous lives had come to me asking for help. I made a donation later to the sangha and requested them to chant the sutra on their behalf.

Lecture Fourteen

August 13th, 2020

DEEPEN YOUR FAITH THROUGH INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

Currently, we are studying the sixth chapter, *The Praise of the Tathagata*, in which the bodhisattva Universally Vast asked the Buddha about Ksitigarbha's noble qualities in benefiting sentient beings. The Buddha illustrated how beings who engage in Ksitigarbha's practices can receive inconceivable benefits from the bodhisattva. Listeners who have faith in this sutra will easily acknowledge the supreme qualities of Ksitigarbha. However, those with a lack of faith in the Buddhist teaching may find it hard to accept or imagine these inconceivable benefits.

Developing faith in this practice is crucial to receiving any blessing from Ksitigarbha. To put it in the worldly context, faith derives from interest and passion. It is indispensable when we learn any knowledge or skill, whether it be philosophy, geography, physics, chemistry or any other natural science. If we are not interested in what we are learning, then it is simply impossible to gain anything

beneficial from it. While teaching this sutra, I often share with you stories of the efficacy of Ksitigarbha from reliable records. I believe most of you will be inspired by these stories because you may identify with them and feel the inconceivable blessings of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva.

Relating stories while teaching a sutra is necessary as it helps to deepen our faith in the sutra. In my first year at Larung Gar, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche gave lectures on *The Adornment of the Middle Way* to a few dozen disciples. Having finished this instruction, His Holiness took his Dharma trip to other Tibetan regions and asked another senior khenpo to teach us Maitreya's *The Utaratantra Shastra* and Asanga's *Compendium of Abhidharma*. During his daily lectures, the khenpo shared with us stories of Asanga and Maitreya, which greatly deepened our faith in these two bodhisattvas and their teachings.

In the same manner, when I was teaching the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*, I also presented many stories of these two sutras. To most people, sharing these stories greatly helps to enhance their faith in the Buddhist teaching. For certain western individuals, whose education emphasizes logic and rationality, these stories may not be so thought-provoking since they happened in very ancient times or involved past and future lives quite foreign to them. As I listened to the lectures given by professors and influential figures

in the West, they often tell stories that happened to people around them, such as their parents, friends, or spouses. In all cases, logic is undeniably needed when expressing an idea. However, when we encounter something that transcends our ordinary thoughts, it is necessary to embrace them with a sentimental approach. As we often say, it is better to receive the teaching with a pure mind.

EFFICACY STORY: A REBIRTH IN THE HEAVEN

Today, I would like to talk about another story of the efficacy of Ksitigarbha. There was a high official who was strongly devoted to the Three Jewels. When his wife died in childbirth, he wailed with great sorrow. In order to accumulate virtue for her, he built a statue of Ksitigarbha the same height as his wife, setting grand offerings to the statue and paying homage constantly. One day, his late wife came to him in a dream, wearing extremely gorgeous clothes. She told him about her experience of being saved by the Ksitigarbha statue:

“In one of my previous lives I was a man’s wife. Because I was unable to get pregnant, my husband was very upset and often grieved over not having a child. In order to relieve his grief, I agreed that he took a second wife. Very soon, the second wife got pregnant, and my husband treated her with much love and respect. Seeing this, my mind was so overwhelmed with jealousy that I

planned to kill her. To carry out my plan, I pretended to be good to her and gave her delicate, but poisoned food, so both she and her unborn child died. Because of this severe negativity, I fell into the Incessant Hell and experienced immense suffering for six kalpas. When the karmic retribution in the hell was over, I was reborn as a woman fifty-seven times and each time I died in childbirth.

“This time, thanks to your kindness of building the Ksitigarbha statue for me, my negative karma has been purified and I have taken rebirth as a celestial girl in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas. When this life is over, I will never be born as a woman again. In the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas, there is a Hall of Virtue and on the twenty-fourth day of each month, all the emanations of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva across a billion worlds will gather there and speak the Dharma to celestial beings. They all appear in the monastic form with a golden complexion. One time, they told me that thanks to the Ksitigarbha statue you built for me, I was able to be free from the suffering and take rebirth as a celestial being. Living in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas, my mind is full of virtuous intentions, with no more unvirtuous thoughts arising.”

As she finished her words, the man woke up in delight. From then on his devotion to Ksitigarbha was even greater.

From this story, we know that even one non-virtuous deed can lead to immense suffering for an indefinitely long period of time. However, with the merit of building a Ksitigarbha statue, one is able to be free from suffering and attain peace and happiness. So the blessing of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is inconceivably great. That being said, I have procured Ksitigarbha statues for everyone present, which you can worship at your home shrine. For people outside the valley, if you want to worship Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, you may invite his statue or thangka online or through other means. Compared to the past, it is much more convenient today. There are also many high-quality pictures of Ksitigarbha online. You may simply download and make a copy of whichever one you like most. For Buddhist followers or those who have devotion to Ksitigarbha, it is absolutely necessary to have a Ksitigarbha image in your home shrine as one of the representatives of the Three Jewels. It can bring you inconceivable auspiciousness. Such a dependent arising is beyond the description of ordinary words. It works under the principle of emptiness and interdependence and engenders supreme merits.

Talking about the principle of dependent arising, this story mentions the particular date of the twenty-fourth, which appears in many stories of Ksitigarbha. The twenty-fourth day of each lunar month marks the day being blessed by Ksitigarbha. On this day, he

will appear in front of all fortunate beings to benefit them. Similar to the tenth day of each Tibetan month when Guru Padmasambhava would come back to us, if we pray to him on this day his blessing will be swifter and more powerful than usual. In addition, in both the lunar calendar and Tibetan calendar, and also according to *I Ching (The Book of Change)*, there are many special days that can bring about special coincidences.

BREAK AWAY FROM LOWER POSITIONS

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future if there are various persons of the lower classes, slaves, maidservants, and other people without freedom, who realize [that they are undergoing the ripened effect of] their past karma and wish to repent, they should, with a resolute mind, reverently gaze at and make obeisance to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s image for seven days and recite the Bodhisattva’s name a full ten thousand times. When their present ripened effect is over, for thousands of myriads of lives they will always be reborn among the respected and wealthy, and they will not undergo the suffering of the three lower realms again.

The Buddha continued to tell Universally Vast that for people in lower positions, such as servants, maids, and others who are deprived of their freedom, if they realize that their present situations



are the result of their past karma and wish to confess their negativities, they should earnestly pay homage to Ksitigarbha statues or paintings and devotedly chant Ksitigarbha's name 10,000 times in a period of seven days. If they do so, when their current lives come to an end, they will be reborn into noble families for tens of millions of lives and no longer suffer the agonies of the three lower realms.

Being Deprived of Freedom

Talking about people who are deprived of freedom, we may easily think of those who are confined to prisons, or those who are under the control of or manipulated by others, having no freedom

over what they say or do. There are also those whose minds are possessed by mara or tortured by all kinds of suffering which can also be considered a loss of freedom. Losing freedom can be the worst kind of suffering for people living in this world. As Ju Mipham Rinpoche says in his *The Just King*, “Every form of independence is happiness. Every form of dependence on others is suffering.” If a person is not under the control of anything or anybody, then this person enjoys the greatest happiness in life. If, however, a person is under any control, even if one is only controlled by one’s parents, spouse, siblings, or teachers, then this person is living in pain.

There are some cases where people might think they have lost freedom but actually have not. For instance, when one is under certain forms of discipline, or is being supervised by strict parents or teachers, he has not lost his freedom in its true sense because parental discipline is an essential component of a child’s development and a stern teacher helps a student to cultivate good qualities. Likewise, having accepted certain sets of discipline, Buddhist followers, both monastics and lay alike, may appear to be no longer free to do whatever they want. But in fact, instead of being arbitrary limitations, these Buddhist disciplines provide the guidance for the observers to lead a more moral and noble life.

Reasonable discipline is indispensable for one to truly enjoy freedom. Some may believe that freedom should be completely without limitation, not even subject to law or regulation. To them, freedom of speech means being able to say whatever they want, and personal freedom means they can act solely of their own volition. In actuality, freedom can never be defined nor practiced in this way. It must be accompanied by societal values, rules and law.

According to *Sutra of the Questions of Pratibhanamati*, the Buddha explained that five actions will lead one to the state of losing freedom and becoming a servant: 1) being disrespectful toward one's parents; 2) being obstinate and having an indecent mind; 3) being incorrigible and engaging in evil deeds as one pleases and disrespecting the Three Jewels; 4) stealing the wealth of others; and 5) absconding with the loans one has taken and going into hiding. If a person commits these five actions in his previous lives, he would be deprived of freedom in this life and becoming subservient to others.

If people who have lost freedom or who are born into lower classes attribute their present situation to other people, it is an indication that they are ignorant of the law of cause and effect. Actually, all unfavorable encounters have to do with the negative karma accumulated in previous lives. If we are secondary to others in many respects, not endowed with good looks, have no power,

wealth, or status, cannot get what we seek, or unable to do things well, we should know that all of these are the consequences of our negative karma in previous lives. What we should do is to purify our negative karma by devotedly paying homage to the image of Ksitigarbha and reciting his name. The key here is not just the action but a sincere attitude. Such attitude indeed applies to any virtuous deed we perform such as circumambulating stupas, doing prostrations, and so forth.

How to Chant Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's Name

In the *Record of Sages Who Have Taken Rebirth into the Sukhavati*, there is a story about a monk called Ying Ke in the Song Dynasty. Although a monk, Ying Ke still indulged in drinking and consuming meat. One day he suddenly realized that having violated monastic vows, he was very likely to fall into the lower realms after death. Thereupon, he borrowed a book from his fellow monk which collected stories of those who have taken rebirth in the Sukhavati compiled by a Zen master. He was greatly inspired by these stories. In order for himself to be able to be reborn in the Sukhavati, he locked himself in a room and recited the name of Buddha Amitabha for three days and nights without eating or drinking.

Then, Buddha Amitabha appeared in his dream and told him, “You still have ten years to live in the human world, and you should stay diligent.” Ying Ke said to Buddha Amitabha respectfully, “Since the saha world is very corrupted and impure, it is hard for me to stay mindful all the time. I’d rather take rebirth in the Sukhavati as soon as possible.”

“Well, since this is your aspiration, I will come to lead you there in three days,” said Buddha Amitabha. Three days later, Ying Ke asked the sangha to recite the *Amitabha Sutra* together. During the chanting, he said suddenly, “Amitabha and his holy assembly are coming to pick me up.” After saying that, he rested in peace and displayed the auspicious signs of taking rebirth in the Sukhavati.

It is through his sincere attitude to confess his negativities and his sincere aspiration to take rebirth in the Sukhavati that he was able to receive the blessing of Buddha Amitabha and purify his negative karma. A sincere attitude without any hypocrisy is the key to performing any virtuous deed.

If we can sincerely recite Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s name 10,000 times in a period of seven days, then when our present lives come to an end, we will take rebirth into the nobility for thousands of lives and never fall into the three lower realms. The reason why we can reap such a virtuous result is twofold. The name of Ksitigarbha

itself can grant inconceivable blessings, and the merit of paying homage to his image is also inconceivable. As it is stated in the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*,

*To chant in one day the name of Ksitigarbha
That is replete with supreme qualities,
Surpasses the merit of chanting in numerous eons
The names of the rest of enlightened beings.*

It also says, “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.” Similar description can also be found in Ju Mipham Rinpoche’s *Beautiful Adornment of the Earth*. If the merit of chanting the name of Ksitigarbha in one day is already so inconceivable, then the merit generated from sincerely chanting his name 10,000 times in seven days would be far beyond imagination.

We can chant the name of Ksitigarbha in its Chinese pronunciation, Tibetan pronunciation, or any other language. In Tibetan, it is:

*changchub sempa sempa chenpo sa yi nyingpo la chaktsal lo
cho do kyab su chi o.*

It means,

*Boddhisatva, great Boddhisatva Ksitigarbha, to you I pay homage!
To you I make offerings! In you I take refuge!*

Having obtained our precious and rare human existence, we should aspire to recite the name of Ksitigarbha at least 10,000 times, preferably in Tibetan. If reciting in Tibetan is too difficult to complete, the shorter “Namo Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva” can be chanted.

Many Dharma practices require chanting the name of a certain deity or mantra a definite number of times, such as 10,000 or 100,000 times. To fulfill a required number of recitations is indispensable. When seeing a definite number in Buddhist context, say reciting seven days, twenty-one times or 10,000 times, some people would raise doubt about it. Why must it be seven days? Why must it amount to this number instead of that number? However, they would usually not have any questions when a doctor tells them to take three pills three times every day. Most people acknowledge that medicine dosage is a professional knowledge and they must follow a doctor’s prescription. Indeed, the same applies to Buddhist

practice as well. It does not make sense if people who are not professionals—in medicine and Buddhism—only to accept medical advice without any doubt while questioning the requirement of a Buddhist practice.

Why are some people inclined to hold doubts about a Buddhist practice which may be completely foreign to them? It has something to do with their education on materialism and natural science since childhood. If a person were born and raised in a Buddhist family, he would naturally believe what is said in Buddhist scriptures, while probably raising doubt about the dosage prescribed by a doctor. Most of us are very much influenced by our family, our education, our environment, as well as our culture and traditions. Therefore, it is understandable that some people may have no affinity for or even denigrate Buddhism. Had they grown up in an environment where religious education is celebrated, they would have been more open-minded towards various religions and cultures.

ACCUMULATE MERIT FOR NEWBORN BABY

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future in Jambudvīpa, if Kṣatriyas, Brahmins, elders, householders, and others of various names and clans have new-born infants, boys or girls, they should read and recite this inconceivable sūtra and recite the Bodhisattva’s name a full ten thousand times early on within seven days of birth for the sake of their children. If these newborn children, boys or girls, are due to have misfortunes as a result of their past, they will gain release and be well, happy, and easily raised, and their lifespans will increase. If they had been reborn by virtue of their [past] merit, their well-being and happiness will increase and so will their lifespans.

The Buddha continued to instruct how newborn babies can be protected by engaging the Kṣitigarbha practice. It is of great help for new babies if their families recite the *Kṣitigarbha Sūtra* and chant the name of Kṣitigarbha 10,000 times in the first seven days



after their birth. By doing so, new babies will be released from any severe negative karma accumulated in their previous lives, easily raised and enjoy longevity and happiness. If they were born by virtue of their own merit, their well-being and happiness will be further increased.

A relative of mine brought his newborn baby came to see me in my little hut yesterday. He could not help telling me everything about the baby. "He is just cute!" "He never cries at night." "He is always smiling." I could feel how much he loved the new baby, who has become the entire world to him. I guess all parents must feel the same way about their babies. The best way to take care of their babies is already expounded here by Buddha Shakyamuni.

Following the Buddha's instruction, it will bring immense well-being, happiness and extended longevity to the newborns.

Talking about the way to welcome the arrival of a newborn baby, the customs vary in different places. In the Han region, traditional birth celebrations include a series of events, the biggest celebration happens when the baby is one month old. The family will hold a dinner party, in which friends and relatives will attend with presents for the baby. The most common gift is money stuffed in a red envelope as a token of good luck. However, this probably involves killing since the dinner often has meat and fish. In ancient India, rituals that bestow blessings to the mother and the baby are performed at different stages before and after the baby is born. In the Tibetan regions, when a baby arrives at a household, the family will immediately go to the master of a local monastery and ask him to grant the baby an auspicious name, and to chant prayers and do some virtuous deeds for the baby. Although this tradition is increasingly overlooked by many younger Tibetans today, it remains the main custom for Tibetan people to welcome a newborn baby. Indeed, the name of a person also plays an important role in this person's life and is an integral element under the infallible principle of dependent arising.

Overall speaking, it is necessary for new parents to perform virtuous deeds and create a virtuous atmosphere in order for their

babies to be born and grow. Instructive teachings for prenatal education can be found in both Confucianism and Buddhism. For instance, from the first day of pregnancy onward, if the mother lives in a pure environment, doing meditation and conducting virtuous deeds, the baby will be born with a kind character and a wholesome mentality. In reverse, if the pregnant mother lives in a terrible environment such as in a war, the baby's mentality and character will be different. Therefore, it is important to create a pure and peaceful atmosphere for an expectant mother. Today, when we see grumpy children, people often say that their parents must have a bad relationship during the children's upbringing. Such a presumption is not totally groundless because the living environment of children contributes significantly to their personality development. This is also why Mencius' mother moved three times in order to choose a beneficial environment for him to grow up in.

Following the Buddha's instruction, when we welcome the arrival of a newborn baby, we should bring Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's blessing to the baby by reading the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Of course, a non-Buddhist household would probably prefer a red envelope over a reading of the sutra. Sadly, however, people have increasingly grown apart from each other, even sending an envelope has sometimes become dispensable and is often replaced by a routine

message of congratulation. The bottom line is that doing virtuous deeds for a newborn baby is always important because this can transform the negative karmic bond between the parents and the baby and strengthen their positive karmic bond.

Why Does a Baby Come to a Family?

According to Master Yin Guang, the thirteenth patriarch of the Pure Land School, the birth of a baby in a family is often associated with four causes: 1) to repay past kindness, 2) to repay past wrongs, 3) to repay past debts, and 4) to claim past debts. These causes suggest four types of karmic bonds between the children and their parents.

“To repay past kindness” means that the child had incurred a debt of gratitude to the parents in a previous lifetime and he or she has now come to be born in the parents’ household in order to repay their kindness, so the child is very filial.

“To repay past wrongs” means that the parents had committed some wrong toward their present child in a past lifetime and the child has come to be born in the household to seek retribution. These children are usually spendthrifts and when they grow up, they will probably cause the family’s ruin.

“To repay past debts” means that the child has come to be born in his or her parents’ household because he or she had incurred a debt toward them in his or her past life. When the amount is substantial, the child will be very attentive towards the parents. If the child’s debt is small, the parents will be cared for just enough to ensure that they lack nothing.

“To claim past debts” means that in a past lifetime, the parents had incurred an obligation toward their child who has now been born in their household in order to reclaim what was owed. If the parents did not owe much, the child may die young. If the parents had owed the child a lot, they will have to spend a lot of money and efforts on the education and care of the child.

This coincides with what Arhat Katyayana saw about a family he came across when he was out on his alms-round. The story is described in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. One day, while the Arhat Katyayana was out on his alms-round, he came across a man with a child on his lap. The man was eating a fish with great relish and throwing stones at a dog that was trying to get at the bones. What the master saw with his clairvoyance, however, was this. The fish had been the man’s own father in that very lifetime, and the dog had been his mother. An enemy he had killed in a past existence had been reborn as his son, as the karmic repayment for the life the man had taken.

These four types of karmic links also apply to husbands and wives as well. Often, when a couple quarrels frequently, they may ascribe their difficult relationship to their bad karmic bond in previous lives. However, when they are in a good relationship, they would be too busy enjoying their happy life and give no regard to the fact that this is also the positive karmic bond that they had built in previous lives.

To recap, when a baby arrives at a household, the parents should try to perform virtuous deeds for the baby. If the baby has a good karmic connection with the parents, then such connection will become stronger. If the baby has a bad karmic connection with the parents, by accumulating virtue for the baby, negative karmic connection could be converted.

Apply the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* in Daily Life

I believe that this sutra can be a useful handbook for applying Buddhism in everyday life. Besides developing a theoretical understanding of the profound Dharma teaching, we need to apply the Dharma instructions as the “effective means” to address our everyday situations. For example, how will we deal with the sick and the disadvantaged, and how to provide children with better education and so forth. This chapter offers instructive solutions that can be used in many aspects of our ordinary life. For example,

we have talked about how to accumulate merit for newborn babies so that they could live a better life; how people of lower social status and those who are unfree can improve their situations; how to transform a nightmare; how to help the deceased; as well as how a person who does not want to be further affected by the illness and difficulties of being a woman could do to change her life. I am sure that these issues must concern many of you. In the face of life situations like these, Ksitigarbha can provide us a great help with his powerful blessing.

Some people may be quite satisfied with their present situation. Their circumstances, their looks, their wealth and status, are all pleasing to them. They would say, “This is the best and the happiest time of my life. Thanks to the blessing of the Three Jewels, I’m so happy that even words cannot express my feeling.” To these people, we wish that their happiness thrives with each passing day. On the contrary, some people are simply unsatisfied with anything—the people around them, their body shape, their appearance, even a dish just served to them—you name it. Because they just simply frown at whatever they see and hear, all situations they encounter could become unpleasant and undesirable. Just as it is said in the *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment*, “All appearances have arisen as enemies.” Their situations are also

similar to being in the Incessant Hell, where their six sense faculties only perceive objects of suffering—everything they see is repulsive, everything they hear is grotesque, everything they smell is offensive, and so forth.

To these people, since their present experiences are the ripened effect of their previous karma, even Ksitigarbha would find it challenging to quickly improve their situations. Imagine an ugly person praying to Ksitigarbha seeking beauty in this very life. Since one's appearance is the ripened karmic result from previous lives, Ksitigarbha would not be able to make a dramatic change on it immediately. When sentient beings' karma has ripened into effect or has matured into a result, even Buddha Shakyamuni cannot change it with his miraculous power. Nevertheless, as long as we pray sincerely, virtuous roots will start to grow in our minds which will ripen into virtuous results in the future.

Another point that I want to mention is the importance of “seven” in the Buddhist practice. This number appears frequently in Buddhist scriptures. For instance, in the *Amitabha Sutra*, the Buddha said to Shariputra, “If a good man or woman who hears of Amitabha holds fast to his name even for one day, two days, three, four, five, six, or seven days with a concentrated and undistracted mind, then, at the hour of death, Amitabha will appear with a host of holy ones. Consequently, when their life comes to an end, the

aspirants' minds will not fall into confusion and they will be born immediately in the Land of Utmost Bliss of Amitabha."

Some people may wonder why Buddhist practices or retreats are always held for a period of seven days or its multiples. This is because in Buddhism, seven is a number that builds up the condition for perfection or represents perfection. As a matter of fact, the number seven is not only special to Buddhism, it is also special in other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and many other religions where the number seven connotes such concepts as completion and perfection, exoneration and healing, and the fulfillment of promises. A week of seven days has long been accepted globally in the modern world. When people make a plan to get certain project done, they often schedule their process by week. The number seven thus indeed marks the completion of something.

The four major Dharma assemblies at Larung Gar are also held on a seven-day basis. They are the Vajrasattva Dharma Assembly, the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly, the Sukhavati Dharma Assembly, and the Vidyadhara Dharma Assembly. The first three are all held for seven days. As for the last one, it is a Dharma gathering that focuses on the practice of the sadhana of the *Nine Deities of Avalokiteshvara* composed by Lerab Lingpa, a powerful practice of magnetization. Originally, it was held for seven days just as

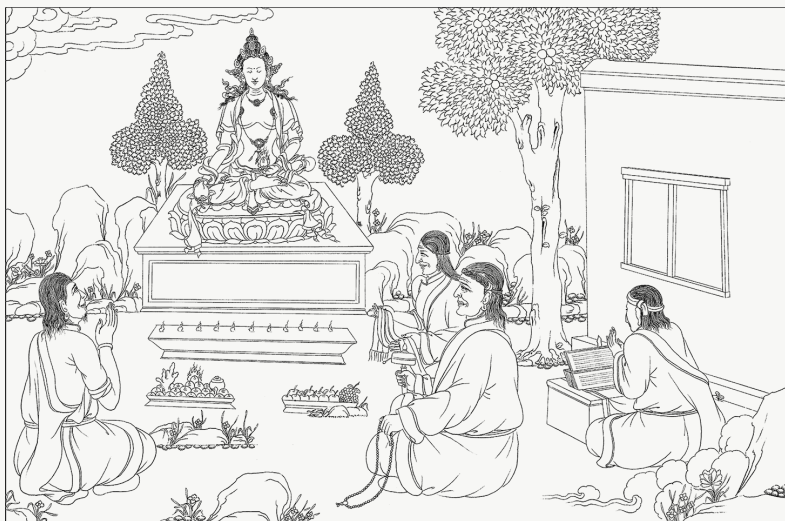
the other Dharma gatherings. However, His Holiness later said that in order to gain freedom over our own body and mind, more importantly, in order to more effectively spread the Buddhadharma and bring happiness and benefit to living beings, we need to strengthen our practice of the magnetizing activity and practicing for only seven days was not enough. He decided that it should be doubled. Since then, the Vidyadhara Dharma Assembly at Larung Gar has been held for fourteen days.

Regarding other great Dharma gatherings held in different Tibetan monasteries, they are mostly held for three to seven days, as in the case of the Vajrakilaya Drupcho, the Drubpa Kagye Drupcho, and the Mahakala Drupcho. Doing seven-day retreat is also very popular in Han Buddhism, such as the seven-day Medicine Buddha retreat, the seven-day Amitabha recitation retreat, and the seven-day Avatamsaka retreat. Of course, all of them can be held for multiple seven days. Because seven is a number that carries auspicious dependent arising for perfection, many Dharma activities are held for seven days or multiples of seven. If you are planning to do a short retreat of meditation or other specific practice, for example, to recite the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it would be best to do at least three days or seven days.

PRACTICE VIRTUES ON SPECIAL DAYS

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future on the first, eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, eighteenth, twenty-third, twenty-fourth, twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth days of the [lunar] month, the offenses of living beings will be compiled and the degrees of seriousness assessed. The acts and thoughts of the beings of Jambudvīpa are invariably karma and wrongdoing. How much more so when they give themselves over to killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech—hundreds of thousands of offenses! If they are able to read this sutra aloud once in front of the images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, holy ones, and worthies on these ten observance days, there will not be disaster or calamity for a hundred yojanas to the north, south, east, and west. Those in their families, both young and old, will be apart from the lower realms now and throughout hundreds of thousands of years in the future. If they can recite this sutra once on each of the ten observance days, in the present life there will not

be untoward dire events and illnesses in the family, and there will be food and clothing in abundance.



As is frequently quoted by many great masters, the Buddha says here that for beings of this world, all their acts and thoughts would invariably be karma and wrongdoing. It is even worse for those who indulge in non-virtues such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. However, if a person recites this sutra aloud once on the ten observance days mentioned in the text, then no calamity, whether natural or caused by evil influences, will come to the four directions of his residence within hundreds of miles. Also, the whole household, including both the elderly and young, will not take rebirth in the lower realms for the present and future

hundreds of thousands of years. Their family members will not suffer any serious diseases nor untimely death, they will be well-fed and well-clad, and abundant wealth will come to them effortlessly. Such is the inconceivable benefit of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Therefore, regular recitation of this sutra is essential.

The ten days in every month are known as the Ten Days of Abstinence. They are considered special because, according to this sutra, on these days a person's crimes will be collected and their degree of seriousness will be assessed. In the same manner, the virtuous deeds will also be collected and assessed. Some other sutras talk about the Six Days of Abstinence, for instance, not including the first, eighteenth, twenty-fourth, and twenty-eighth days mentioned here. In *The Buddha Speaks of the Four Heavenly Kings Sutra*, it says that on these six days, different gods will descend to the human world to examine and take notes of all the virtuous and non-virtuous deeds sentient beings have conducted, and report to the four heavenly kings. Then the four heavenly kings will report to the Indra, and the Indra will then command the Lord of Lifespan to increase or decrease the lifespan of each sentient being according to the positive and negative deeds he has done.

In the following chapter, *Benefiting the Living and the Deceased*, it also says when people die, they will be taken to the Lord of Death who will decide in which realm they will be born according to the

positive and negative karma they have accumulated when alive. This procedure sounds a lot like that of a criminal investigation today. When a person is suspected of having been involved in a crime, the police will conduct an initial inquiry and investigation. Then the prosecutor will decide whether to bring the case to court based on the evidence uncovered by the police. If the case is taken to court, the judge and the jury will decide whether the suspect is guilty and hand down appropriate punishment.

Why do the Buddhist scriptures describe such a procedure? Sentient beings do indeed have this karmic experience. But is there actually a Lord of Death wearing a black hat in the bardo? Actually not. Because human beings are habituated towards experiencing a procedure before a suspect is convicted, when a person dies, such habitual tendency is projected into the external circumstance so that in the deceased's own experience it would appear to him that the Lord of Death and Hell Guards are examining all the virtuous and non-virtuous deeds that he or she has done during the past life before the corresponding sentences are handed down. But this is no more real than just a nightmare in which one falls into hell and is sentenced to remain in a certain hell for a certain period of time. So the descriptions in Buddhist scriptures are often in accord with sentient beings' karmic experience, which in turn is a result of the being's habitual tendencies.

That being so, if modern people die and fall into hell, their experience in the bardo and the ways they are punished in the hell could be different from those in the past. With today's high-tech products, such as smartphone and iPad, so intimately involved in our day-to-day life, it is very likely that after death, modern people will habitually see a computer instead of a book being placed in front of the Lord of Death which records their positive and negative deeds. The whole circumstance in hell could appear very modernized. It is the same with what would appear in our dreams. Before phone or computer was invented, these devices would never appear in anyone's dreams. Since we are now so accustomed to them, they often appear in our dreams. When we die, these devices would be projected into the external circumstances and the investigations and trials would be conducted in a similar manner to how they are done when we are alive.

There are those who do not believe these statements. They do not believe that hell exists or that it can change with times. The fact is that hell is nothing but the manifestation of our own karma. When our present life comes to an end, the karma we have created will ripen into effects and we have no choice but to immediately experience its consequences. This is a profound teaching worthy of deep contemplation.

The timing of the special days is not only mentioned in Han Buddhism, it is also stated in Tibetan Buddhism. In *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*, there is a verse that goes,

*At the full moon and the new moon,
And on the eighth and twenty-ninth days of the month,
As well as on the tenth days of the waxing and waning moon,
By day, by night respectively,
Labor in the practice of approach and of accomplishment,
Confessing and restoring, offering the sacred feast.*

It means on the eighth, tenth, fifteenth, twenty-fifth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth days of a Tibetan month, practitioners should be diligent in the practice of approach and accomplishment, confession and restoration, as well as the tsok offering. As the Omniscient Longchenpa explained, on these six days, our inner wind-mind, channels, and essence-drops are different from the usual, and dakas and dakinis will gather. Especially in the morning of the tenth day and in the evening of the twenty-fifth day (the tenth of the waning moon), the holy assembly of dakas and dakinis will gather around the residences of Vajrayana practitioners. Practitioners should seize the occasion to perform tsok offering, and by doing so, samaya can be maintained in a pure way and attainments are easily accomplished. Anyway, there are especially auspicious

days for accumulating virtues in both Tibetan and Han Buddhism to accumulate virtues. Because these special occasions will create auspicious conditions for our personal practice, we should understand this and take advantage of these opportunities to act accordingly.

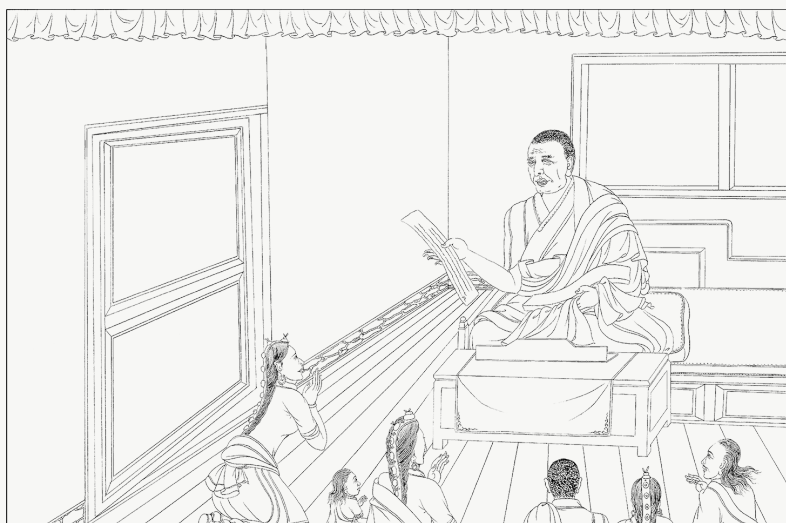
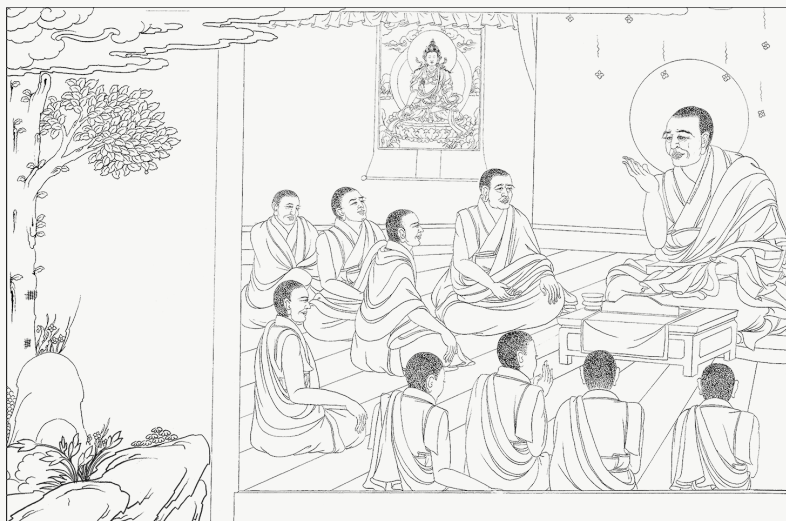
There are individual Buddhists or even Dharma teachers who interpret the Dharma teachings with their own discriminative thinking. Unlike the great masters of the past, they do not have a thorough mastery of the Dharma and are often poorly ignorant of key Buddhist tenets. If they act irresponsibly, they could ruin the Dharma rather than help it flourish. Therefore, I urge them to reflect and keep their own discriminative thinking to themselves rather than spreading it irresponsibly.

A few years ago, I heard that several monastics were giving Dharma teaching to lay practitioners on the condition that their listeners sign a confidentiality agreement to not disclose what they were taught to others. Why was it so? It was because the teaching did not conform to the authentic Dharma but was instead based on their own discriminative thinking, and they were afraid of being discovered. In order to seek personal profit and maintain their fame as a Dharma teacher, they demanded their lay Buddhist audience to keep their teaching secret. The truth is, the more you want a secret to stay hidden, the quicker it will be exposed to others. These

people were ignorant of the basic Buddhist tenets and lacked due respect for the Three Jewels, and yet they pretended to be learned Dharma teachers. Their behaviors could damage Buddhism and destroy the connections others have to Buddhism.

MAKE KSITIGARBHA'S INCONCEIVABLE POWER KNOWN TO EVERYONE

“Therefore, Universally Vast, you should know that through the power of his great awesome spiritual penetration, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has inexpressible hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of instances of benefiting [beings] such as these. Living beings of Jambudvipa have great cause and condition with this Great Being. If these living beings hear this Bodhisattva’s name, see this Bodhisattva’s image, or hear but three words, five words, a verse, or a sentence of this sutra, they will have superbly wonderful peace and happiness in the present life. For hundreds of thousands of myriads of lives in the future, they will always be good-looking and be reborn in respected and wealthy families.”



After giving examples of how Ksitigarbha can benefit sentient beings, the Buddha summarized that Ksitigarbha has accomplished indescribably myriads of instances of benefiting beings. Sentient beings of this world indeed have a close karmic affinity with Ksitigarbha. If they hear his name, see his image, or hear even so much as three to five words, one stanza or one sentence of this sutra, or simply hear the name of this sutra or Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, they can attain great peace and happiness in their present lives. In the future hundreds of thousands of lives, they will be born in noble and wealthy families with dignified appearances.

I believe most of us desire these benefits. Last night, when I got home after my teaching session, there was a young Tibetan man waiting for me at the entrance to my yard. It was already pretty late. He wanted to attend college and he came to me seeking my support so that he may continue his studies. His destitute family could not afford the tuition. His words stirred up my empathy and I could not help but wonder why the world seemed to be quite unfair. Some people are extremely rich and seem to have everything. They live an extravagant and lavish life with money that never runs out. Whereas many others find it a struggle just to cover the costs of basic living, let alone to afford higher education. However, deep down, I know the so-called unfairness never truly exists because whatever we experience is the result of our accumulated karma.

Those who enjoy privilege in all aspects of life must have done something virtuous in the past. If we have faith in the karmic law and create positive karma by building a connection to Ksitigarbha, the benefits it can bring to our present and future lives will be unimaginably great.

Although all eight great bodhisattvas share karmic affinity with sentient beings of this world, it is particularly meaningful with Ksitigarbha and numerous people have devoted their faith in Ksitigarbha. Actually, the most important reason for all buddhas and bodhisattvas to appear in the world is to open the door to the buddha wisdom and show it to living beings, to cause them to awaken to the buddha wisdom, and to induce them to enter the path of the buddha wisdom. We are fortunate to have such an extraordinary opportunity to encounter the precious Dharma and great teachers. Qualified Dharma teachers are like wish-fulfilling jewels that can grant us full enlightenment and ultimate liberation. Therefore, we should undoubtedly seize the opportunity to learn and practice the Dharma and free ourselves from the sufferings of samsara in this very life.

At that time, after Universally Vast Bodhisattva had heard the Buddha Tathagata praise and extol Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, he knelt on his knees, joined his palms, and said to the Buddha once more, “World-Honored One, I have long known that this Great

Being has such power of inconceivable spiritual penetration as well as power of great vows. For living beings in the future I make the request to the Tathagata, so that they may know such benefits. Yes, we receive [this Dharma teaching] most respectfully. World-Honored One, how should this sutra be named, and how should we propagate it?"



The Buddha told Universally Vast, "This sutra has three names: the first is called the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha*; it is also called the *Original Practices of Ksitigarbha*; and it is also called the *Power of the Original Vows of Ksitigarbha*. Because this Bodhisattva has made such profound vows throughout many long kalpas to benefit living beings, all of you should propagate it in accordance with these vows."

After hearing this, Universally Vast joined his palms in respect, made obeisance, and withdrew.

After hearing the Buddha's sincere praise to Ksitigarbha, Universally Vast knelt on one knee with his palms joined, which is a traditional gesture of paying obeisance from ancient India and told the Buddha his motivation for raising the question. Although he has long known Ksitigarbha's unimaginable spiritual power and his great vows, he asked the question for the sake of future beings so that they would know the benefits of paying respect to Ksitigarbha and engaging in the Ksitigarbha practice.

The bodhisattva Universally Vast was not alone in doing so. In the previous chapter Samantabhadra also purposely raised his question to Ksitigarbha in order to let sentient beings be aware of the suffering of lower realms. They all asked questions for the sake of sentient beings. Unlike when I was giving talks at universities where the audience raised many questions to clear their own doubts, these bodhisattvas raised questions to help ordinary beings understand the benefits of Ksitigarbha.

Universally Vast further asked the Buddha how this sutra should be named and how should it be propagated to other sentient beings in the future. The Buddha gave the sutra three names. The first is the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha* because this sutra talks about

how Ksitigarbha originally made his supreme vows, which can be summarized as “not attaining buddhahood until the hell is emptied.” This name is generally accepted by us now, and it is the name I adopted when I was translating it into Tibetan. The second is called the *Original Practices of Ksitigarbha*, because after Ksitigarbha made deep and vast vows, he diligently practiced to fulfill his vows. The last is called the *Power of the Original Vows of Ksitigarbha* because his vows carry unique and miraculous power that can liberate sentient beings. We may also vow to benefit sentient beings and try to put it into practice, but as ordinary beings, our vows may not carry such great power as that of Ksitigarbha’s. But because Ksitigarbha’s vow carries a unique power to liberate sentient beings, by praying and paying respect to Ksitigarbha we would gradually gain such power as well.

The second question on how this sutra is to be propagated is also extremely important. By answering it, the Buddha clearly instructed us on how we should spread this teaching and the Ksitigarbha practice. In brief, we should propagate it in accordance with Ksitigarbha’s vows. Ksitigarbha has taken great vows to benefit sentient beings in all his lifetimes and over countless kalpas. He has never thought about his own welfare, such as his health, happiness, rest, or nourishment. His sole purpose is to bring temporary and ultimate benefits to all beings. As long as this wish

can be fulfilled, Ksitigarbha is prepared to do whatever it takes, even including going to hell. Therefore, when we propagate this teaching, we should try to avoid selfish motivation like finding a companion, or seeking a career or reputation and wealth. Instead, we should propagate this teaching with an altruistic motivation like Ksitigarbha has done to benefits sentient beings. This is the best way for us to propagate this sutra and such a motivation is the purest and bears the greatest power. I hope that we will all emulate Ksitigarbha and vow to benefit sentient beings through the Ksitigarbha practice for the rest of our lives and in all future lifetimes to come.

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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