

**ORIGINAL VOWS OF
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA
SUTRA**

Chapter One

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.

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Chapter One

Spiritual Penetration

in the Trayastrimsa Heaven

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

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture One

July 11th, 2020

WHY AM I TEACHING THIS SUTRA?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Create the Auspicious Conditions for Propagating the Practice of Ksitigarbha

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transform Natural and Man-Made Disasters in the World

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bodhisattva, great Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, to you I pay homage!

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

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, you generate great aspirations,

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

With supreme wisdom, you manifest boundless qualities.

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

LIBRARY AT LARUNG GAR

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

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

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

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

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

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE *Ksitigarbha Sutra*

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

Not Included in Siksananda's Translation List

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No Sanskrit Version Being Found

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

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

Necessity of Clearing up Doubts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE TITLE OF THE SUTRA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha continues,

Living beings keep reincarnating in the five realms,

Afflicted and tormented by various sufferings.

By taking refuge in and revering Ksitigarbha,

All sufferings can be eliminated.

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

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

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

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE TRAYASTRIMSA HEAVEN?

Chapter One

Spiritual Penetration in the Trayastrimsa Heaven

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

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



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

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

The Buddha's Great Aspirations

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

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

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

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

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

The Five Degenerations

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

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

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

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

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

We Are Beings in the Degenerate Age

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

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

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

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

Lecture Two

July 13th, 2020

HAVE FAITH IN THE Ksitigarbha PRACTICE

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

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

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

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

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

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

REPAY YOUR PARENTS' KINDNESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING ENVIRONMENT CLEAN

The Magnificence of the Trayastrimsa Heaven

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

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

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

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

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

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

Internal and External Environments Are Equally Important

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Serving the Community Brings Positive Result

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SIKSANANDA AND BUDDHISM IN XINJIANG

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Develop Rational Faith in Buddhism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE TATHAGATA'S LIGHT AND SOUND



At that time, the Tathagata smiled and emitted hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of clouds of great light. There were clouds of light of great perfect completeness, clouds of light of great kindness and compassion, clouds of light of great wisdom, clouds of light of great prajna, clouds of light of great

samadhi, clouds of light of great auspiciousness, clouds of light of great merit, clouds of light of great virtue, clouds of light of great refuge, and clouds of light of great praise.

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

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

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

common vehicle, the numerous clouds of great light emitted by the Buddha can be understood as a way to dispel the darkness of ignorance in the minds of sentient beings.

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

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

In some situations, the light of the Buddha can be seen directly. For example, when you feel blessed from making a pilgrimage to a holy mountain, very possibly you will see some auspicious signs appearing externally. But in most cases, the light of the Buddha cannot be seen directly. For instance, when the strength of love, compassion, joy or impartiality arises in your mind, or when you

attain certain level of wisdom and samadhi, it is the light of the Buddha illuminating your mind, even though it cannot be seen by the naked eyes. In whichever case, the light of the Buddha equally shines upon every sentient being at all times.



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

wisdom, the sound of great wisdom, the sound of the lion's roar, the sound of the great lion's roar, the sound of cloud thunder, and the sound of great cloud thunder.

After emitting countless light, the Buddha then released various wondrous, subtle and pleasant sounds. One can imagine the scene as a kind of modern musical light show. When the Buddha was about to turn the Wheel of Dharma, he first emitted great light and then gave forth different sounds. Such sounds may not necessarily be the sound of a conch shell or the like that we can hear. They have a broad spectrum that covers six paramitas, four immeasurables, and the realization of ultimate truth, etc. Those who are fortunate enough to hear can be blessed by any of these sounds which would raise the corresponding quality in their minds. For example, when the Buddha gave forth the sound of perfection of meditation or the sound of perfection of prajna, the concentration or wisdom would increase in the listeners' minds. This is one method the Buddha used to benefit sentient beings.

When some people hear a particular kind of sound, it can generate both mundane and transmundane noble qualities. In 1986, the second year after I came to Larung Gar, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche decided to visit a great number of monasteries mainly in the Kham region, with the purpose of encouraging those who wanted to go with him to Mount Wutai for pilgrimage in the

following year to recite Manjushri's mantra 100 million times. In the way, His Holiness said, an auspicious origination to spread the Dharma could be created.

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

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

However, people's responses toward the sound were different. Most people were touched by the sound of mantras and joined

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

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

ATTENDEES OF THE DHARMA ASSEMBLY

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

their existence. A number of western politicians did not believe in supernatural phenomena either but they admit later in their biographies the existence of ghosts and spirits when they described their personal experience.

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

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



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

People who are addicted to taking drugs are possibly controlled by the Ghost King Controlling Poisons. The large number of young people who use drugs legally or otherwise are controlled by these kind of ghosts. They will suffer terribly and gradually lose their freedom and self-control.

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

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

Lecture Three

July 14th, 2020

TRY TO BE INSPIRED BY THE TEACHING

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

Secondly, while studying the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, do not settle for superficial understanding but instead you should really engage in it and strive to gain familiarity with all the teachings within this sutra and thus allow you to receive immense benefits. While everyone may spend the same amount time listening to this teaching, those who really engage deeply into the study will benefit way more than those who do not. Although some of you may have learnt this sutra before, by and large, one needs to study a scripture repeatedly in order to be well-versed in its contents so that one would be able to apply it in practical use. That is why here at Larung Gar, we have monastic teachers teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *The Way of the Bodhisattva* every year. After repeated studies, a student would eventually assimilate these teachings into their beings and apply them in practice.

Given that there are thirteen chapters in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, we need to be really familiar with the content of each chapter after receiving the teaching. For instance, if one were to be asked what the chapter *Spiritual Penetration in the Trayastrimsa Heaven* talks about and why the Buddha preached the Dharma to his mother, one should have a clear answer. Also, in the twelfth chapter, *The Benefits from Seeing and Hearing*, it explains the inconceivable benefits of Ksitigarbha, whoever hears the name of Ksitigarbha, sees the image of Ksitigarbha, touches the statue of Ksitigarbha or even recalls

Ksitigarbha in one's mind will all gain inconceivable merits. In the last chapter *Entrusting Humans and Devas*, the Buddha entrusted all stubborn and obdurate beings in this degenerate age to Ksitigarbha. This should convince us to seek to develop a strong conviction on how crucial it is for us modern people to pray to this great bodhisattva so that we can be saved from the lower realms.

I felt so elated and joyful when translating these teachings. Normally the working staff in a company would try to build a good relationship with their leader so that it would be more convenient for them to get things done. The same goes to our Dharma practice. If we can establish a good connection with Ksitigarbha by learning this sutra, it will create favorable conditions for our Dharma practice and thus bring much auspiciousness into other aspects of our lives.

EFFICACY STORY: A KSITIGARBHA IMAGE ON A WALKING STICK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

COUNTLESS BEINGS LIBERATED

BY KSITIGARBHA



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

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

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

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

As recorded in the biography of Manjushri or in many Mahayana sutras such as *The Array of Virtues of Manjushri’s Buddha Realm*, this great bodhisattva’s miraculous power and wisdom is inconceivable and he is regarded as the one most supreme in wisdom. He had

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

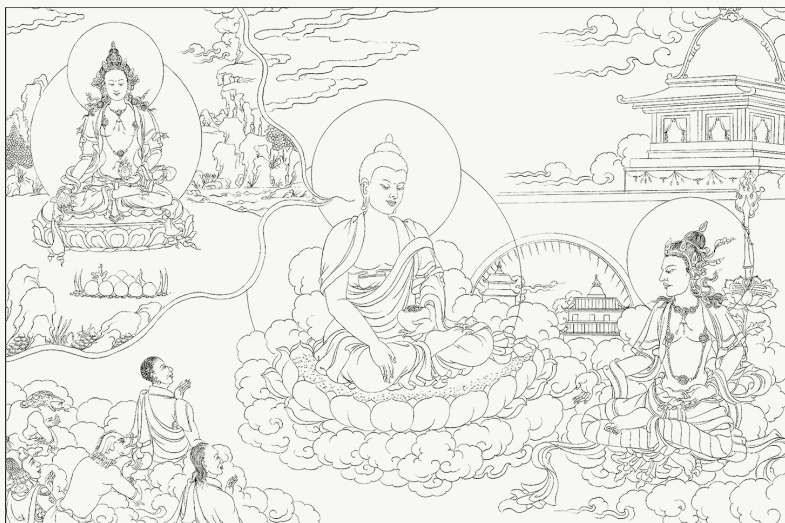
Normally when a big Dharma assembly takes place, as we see at Larung Gar, a huge crowd of people will gather together. Likewise, when the Buddha was going to give the teaching in the Trayastrimsa Heaven, the numbers in the crowd would be even more inconceivable, just as the situation described in *The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

The realization of buddhas and bodhisattvas is inconceivable and unfathomable, so are many great masters’ activities of spreading the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings. When His Holiness

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

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

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



Buddhism talks about five kinds of visions or five eyes: the eye of flesh, the divine eye, the wisdom eye, the Dharma eye, and the Buddha eye. The Buddha eye is the primordial wisdom that knows all aspects—the relative and the ultimate truths—of all phenomena. Here Buddha Shakyamuni said that even by seeing the assembly

through his Buddha eye that he was still unable to establish the exact number of all the beings present. We can imagine what an extraordinary and marvelous scene it was!

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

Manjusri said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, in the past I have long cultivated roots of goodness and have attained unobstructed wisdom; therefore, when I hear what the Buddha says, I immediately believe and accept it. However, sravakas of small attainment, devas and nagas and others of the eight classes of beings, as well as living beings in the future—although hearing the sincere, truthful words of the Tathagata, will certainly harbor doubts. Even if they receive these words most respectfully, they may still be unable to avoid slandering them. O World-Honored One, please speak in detail about what practices Ksitigarbha

Bodhisattva-Mahasattva cultivated and what vows he made during his causal states [of cultivation] that have enabled him to accomplish such inconceivable deeds.”

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

For Dharma teachings such as the principle of cause and effect or the true reality of emptiness, some people can believe and accept them straightaway and can easily assimilate them into their being, while others with strong wrong views are extremely obdurate and no matter how many times they are taught about the teachings, they simply would not accept them, or even worse, they may denigrate the Buddha and the Dharma with their biased and prejudiced views. In the same manner, some may find Ksitigarbha’s inconceivable wisdom and power truly impressive, feeling deeply

inspired by such teaching, while others may refuse it as something beyond their common sense and view it as absolutely impossible.

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

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

Back to the Manjushri case, because he had been well-trained in the Dharma through numerous lifetimes and gained supreme wisdom, he was able to accept whatever the Buddha said immediately and had no doubt whatsoever about it. However, for various other

beings, particularly ordinary beings in this degenerate age, after hearing the Buddha's true words, although they may accept it for a while, due to their lack of cultivation in the profound Dharma from previous lives as well as the lack of wisdom cultivated through hearing, contemplating and meditating in this life, they would very likely still harbor doubts about the Buddha's vajra words and may abandon or even denigrate them when confronted with certain challenges. Here in the text, even some of the beings in the Trayastrimsa Heaven may still lack the capacity to fully believe Ksitigarbha's qualities, let alone ordinary beings in this degenerate age who are entrenched in the wrong views of eternalism and nihilism.

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

Generating a firm belief in the Buddha and his valid cognition and his teaching which reveals the truth of all phenomena is the key to clearly answering these questions. This requires a rational and intelligent mind by which even if reasonable doubts arise toward what the Buddha had said, progress can still be made. But

if we simply deny what the Buddha said out of our own blind and irrational judgment, then we are just holding onto a foolish wrong view. As is mentioned in *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*,

Whoever doubts what the Buddha said,

About that which is hidden

Should rely on emptiness

And gain conviction in him alone.

Regardless of whether you have faith in the Dharma or not, if you have doubt about the profound teachings such as reincarnation and karmic law, you should first try to understand the Buddha's teaching on emptiness. This will help gain conviction in the Buddha. To observe and examine the philosophy of emptiness, you can rely on the four great logical arguments of the Middle Way, which are 1) an investigation of the cause: the Diamond Splinters; 2) an investigation of the result: refuting existent or non-existent results; 3) an investigation of the essential identity: neither one nor many; and 4) an investigation of all: the Great Interdependence. You may also analyze the Buddha's teaching by applying suitable worldly knowledge. Through comprehensive discernment, you will find the teaching on emptiness is undeniably true and thus convince yourself of the reliability of the Buddha's teachings and that they are valid cognitions.

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

INCONCEIVABLE QUALITIES OF KSITIGARBHA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then Buddha Shakyamuni said the following about Ksitigarbha to Manjushri,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lecture Four

July 16th, 2020

EFFICACY STORY: A GIRL SAVED HER MOTHER FROM THE HELL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AN ELDER'S SON GENERATED BODHICITTA



“Manjushri, in the distant past, an inexpressibly-inexpressible [number of] kalpas ago, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva was once the son of a great elder. At that time in the world there was a Buddha named Lion’s Swift Rousing Perfect in Ten Thousand Practices Tathagata. The elder’s son saw the Buddha’s

signs and characteristics of excellence, how he was adorned with thousands of merits. He therefore inquired of that Buddha what practices he had cultivated and what vows he had made to achieve these signs of excellence.

The Buddha told Manjushri, countless eons ago, Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha was the son of a great elder, a powerful and rich person. Probably because the Buddha wanted to emphasize that it was a long, long time ago, he repeated “inexpressible” twice here. It is quite common in sutras that certain important messages are repeated twice, such as “countless and countless”, or “inconceivable and inconceivable”.

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

As a matter of fact, a magnificent appearance can easily attract and inspire others, especially young people. Before I got ordained, I knew a lama who was a chant leader. He was always wearing a bright yellow robe with quite loose sleeves and I found it so

beautiful. I thought that after I got ordained, I would also be dressed like that. So right after I graduated from my college and was ready to become a monk, I bought a piece of yellow cloth and tailored a robe of exactly the same design. I told another senior lama that I would like to wear that robe on the first day I got ordained. As he was very kind to me, he told me directly that as a new monk that I had better not, otherwise people might think I was an arrogant man and mock me. Then he just gave me his old robes that wasn't even as beautiful and clean as my own new robe.

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

As ordinary beings, no matter how adorable and charming we are when we are young, we cannot escape the process of getting old.

I suspect that this is why normal people think that the Buddha would also have the signs of age. For instance, in some movies and TV dramas, the Buddha in his later years is depicted as someone having a lot of wrinkles, walking unsteadily and looking frail. Actually, ordinary and enlightened beings, including both arhats and bodhisattvas, will get old, but the Buddha's physical body would never become like that.

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

I notice some Dharma practitioners who do not take care of their appearance. Their hair is always unkempt, and their clothes are untidy. If they are Mahasiddhas and have specific intentions, their untidy manner may be understandable. But as ordinary practitioners, they should maintain a good appearance and not displease others with their apathy. As a Tibetan saying goes,

whether a person is good looking or not depends on his previous karma, but it is his own fault if he does not dress himself up. It means we don't have to go out of our way to please others, but we have to be considerate and follow the basic rules of conduct, including how we should dress and behave in public.

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

Therefore, we should not hold the view that since Dharma practitioners are meant to dismantle all attachments that it is not necessary to have a good appearance. It is actually quite wrong. Even if you have abandoned all your worldly concerns or have eliminated all your attachments, you need not make yourself look like the odd one in front of others. On the contrary, you should be more considerate and observe the local convention and cultural tradition to please others around you. This is required in all the three vows of Shravakayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

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

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

As ordinary people, we may occasionally help someone or engage in certain charitable activities for a few years. This is certainly far short of the activities of a bodhisattva. Very few people can devote their whole life to the wellbeing of others and the majority of people are exhausted by their selfish pursuit. For this reason, they cannot possess a healthy body or a peaceful mind but are frequently tortured by various pains and distresses. If we have inflicted harms on others for our own benefit, there’s no doubts

that as karmic retribution we will have to undertake the unbearable suffering in this or future life. On the other hand, if we are enjoying health, beauty, richness and freedom this life, it is the fully ripened effect of our virtuous deeds in benefiting others in many of our past lives.

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

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

the great vow to liberate all sentient beings from the six realms of samsara.

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

*Those who have a lifespan of one hundred years,
While never make any virtuous wish
Are not as good as those who live only for one day,
But make the four great vows.*

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

*Living beings are incalculable, I vow to liberate them all.
Afflictions are infinite, I vow to extinguish them all.
The Dharma teachings are innumerable, I vow to master them all.
The Buddha path is unsurpassable, I vow to achieve it.*

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

In *Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions*, the Buddha says that Ksitigarbha “spends extraordinary efforts in guiding and benefiting sentient beings in the age of five degenerations by virtue of his fundamental vows as well as those sentient beings’ karmic connection with him.” In particular, Ksitigarbha has a deep connection to all beings in our world of Jambudvipa. Hence, our supplication to Buddha Shakyamuni and Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha is far more efficient than to other buddhas and bodhisattvas. If we are able to pay homage, make prostrations, and pray to Ksitigarbha, we are creating an auspicious cause to fulfil our wishes.

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

relationship, a healthy body, etc. For all of these wishes to be fulfilled, we can pray fervently to Ksitigarbha.

THE NOBLE BRAHMAN GIRL WHO SAVED HER MOTHER

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

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



“Moreover, in the past, inconceivable asamkhyeya kalpas ago, in the world there was a Buddha named Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata. The lifespan of that Buddha was four hundred thousand myriad million asamkhyeya kalpas. During the Age of Semblance Dharma, there was a Brahman woman who had ample, profound merits from previous lives. She was admired and respected by people. Whether she was walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, devas guarded and protected her. Her mother, however, believed in false doctrines and often slighted the Triple Gem. The holy woman used many

skillful means to persuade and encourage her mother to give rise to right view, but her mother did not fully believe. Before long, the mother's life ended and her consciousness fell into the Incessant Hell.

Boundless kalpas ago, there was a Buddha who had lived for innumerable eons. The number "four hundred thousand myriad million asamkhyeya kalpas" is really beyond our imagination. If we've learned about the Buddhist cosmology, we would know that besides our earth planet, there are numerous unbelievable worlds and the dimensions of the whole universe are beyond our ordinary perception. The Buddha's Semblance Dharma Age means the time when the Buddha had passed into parinirvana and his Dharma teaching still existed in that world. At that time, there was a girl who was born in the Brahmin caste and had ample and profound merits. Because she had strong devotion to the Three Jewels, she was constantly safeguarded and protected by many gods.

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

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

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

In the story, the Brahman girl's mother had wrong beliefs and always disrespected and slandered the Three Jewels. The girl used many ways to try to convince her mother of the truth of

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayed to the Tathagata and Received His Blessing

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

unknown world alone and helpless. We would hope that one can take rebirth in the pure land instead of any of the three lower realms, but it is entirely dependent on one's own karma.

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

Those who recollect the Buddha's body form

After the Buddha passed into nirvana

Will see the Buddha in person

By the virtue of the Buddha's miraculous power.

It is also said in the same sutra, "Those who, while walking, sitting, standing, or sleeping, recollect the moon-like Buddha, will always be in the Buddha's presence, and will attain the vast nirvana." In Mipham Rinpoche's *The Treasury of Blessings: A Practice of Buddha Shakyamuni*, he said, "Visualize the form of the Buddha in this way, and imagine that he is actually there, in front of you. The instant that you generate this thought—as the buddhas' wisdom body is

not constrained by limits like time or location—he will certainly be there. One of the sutras says: Should anyone think of the Buddha, he is there, right in front of them, constantly granting his blessings and freedom from all harm.” Likewise, should we pray to Buddha Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava, Ksitigarbha or any other deity, as long as we generate genuine faith, the faith itself will become the real deity appearing in front of us. A faith like such is essential in both Mahayana and Vajrayana practice.



“Upon hearing these words, the Brahman woman cast her entire body [skyward] to prostrate herself, injuring her limbs and joints. Her attendants supported and attended her for quite a while before she finally came to. Then she said toward the sky, ‘I

implore the Buddha to take kind pity upon me and quickly tell me in what realm my mother has been reborn, now that I am near death myself.'

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

Upon hearing the Buddha's words, the Brahman girl was so moved that she cast her body skyward to prostrate herself. Since she did so in such a vigorous way, she hurt her knees and limbs and fainted. After she revived, she said to the Buddha, "May the Buddha compassionately tell me where my mother is as I know that I will not live long." The Buddha said, "After your offering is complete, go home and meditate on my name. Then you will know where your mother is."

In this mundane world, it is quite natural that people are strongly attached to their beloved ones as illustrated in a story from *White Lotus: An Extensive Biography of the Lives of Buddha Shakyamuni* where after the death of her husband, a woman held his skeleton and roamed the charnel ground for a long time. It would appear that the Brahman girl had the same deep love for her mother, but

as we can see at the end of this story, the girl generated bodhicitta for the welfare of all living beings because of this love.

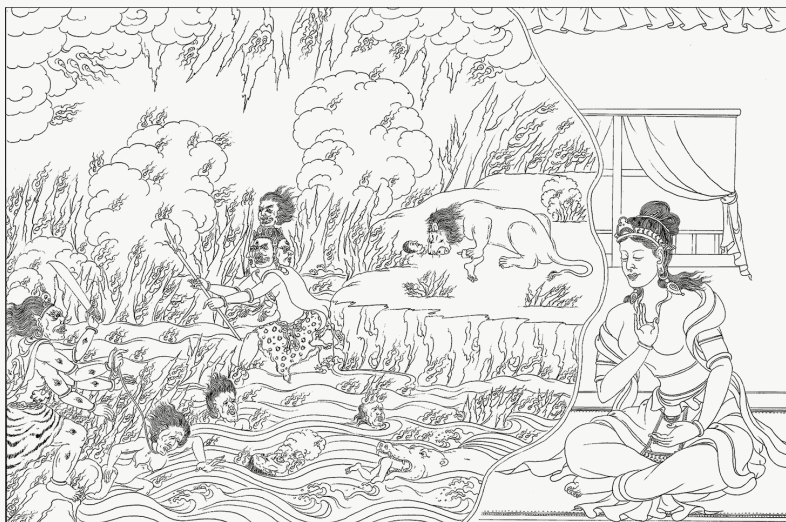
Came to the Hell and Knew Her Mother Had Been Saved



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

“After a day and a night, she suddenly saw herself beside a sea whose waters seethed. Many evil beasts with iron bodies flew and ran on the sea, rushing here and there in pursuit. She saw

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



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

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

Here we see the incredible power of the blessing from the Buddha. Some people can be very timid and often scared easily by trivial things. I know some practitioners who, even when talking with me, seem to panic as if there were evil forces behind their backs. Last year, the year of 2019, I was investigated for about four or five months, and had to answer the same questions in front of different people every day. But still, I felt quite calm and this process didn't perturb me at all. Even though at the end they declared that the Puti Association of my lay students was an illegal organization and then forcefully banned it, I could still accept the result peacefully because I have already given my all and recognized that there were still many issues beyond my control.

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

For sure, we should not be too careless in the face of the pandemic as it is still ongoing. But on the other hand, being too worried or frightened is not helpful or necessary and can only make the

situation even worse. In reality, human beings are very adaptable to new changes. For instance, we never used to wear face masks. But now, if we are not wearing one we would feel that something is missing or uncomfortable. Before, when I was in Chengdu I rarely wore face mask except in hospitals. Since last year, I have gotten used to wearing face mask and feel it is quite natural to see everyone wearing a face mask. Another example, being confined to one's own home for months used to be thought impossible. However, within less than just one year, we all recognize it as the best way to protect oneself and others. Therefore, we do need to adjust ourselves to different lifestyles and there is no doubt that we have the ability to adapt to change.

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

We also need to cultivate an open mind to embrace impermanence. We should never think that our life is permanently fixed upon the present mode. The reality is that there will always be changes and

when changes strike, we should accept them readily as we know they are part of nature. It is pointless to feel heartbroken, shocked, or speechless in face of unexpected changes. We have to break up our habitual thinking pattern and train our mind in this way. Otherwise, without a well-prepared mind for impermanence, we will be devastated when a big change occurs in our life.

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

For now, it is important for us Dharma practitioners to continue our spiritual practice. But at the same time, we should try our best

to help those in need. For instance, at Larung Gar, we are offering work positions to local Tibetans so that they can earn a living and also serve the sangha to accumulate merit. I know their salary would help support them and their families.

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

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

"The Brahman woman asked the ghost king, 'What is this place?'

"Poisonless replied, 'This is the first of the seas west of the Great Iron Encircling Mountains.'

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

“Poisonless replied, ‘There really are hells.’

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

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



Then a ghost king named Poisonless appeared and came to greet the Brahman girl. He asked her for what reason she had come here. But the girl had no idea where she was. So Poisonless told her that

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

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

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

“Poisonless replied, ‘These are recently deceased beings of Jambudvīpa who had done evil. They have passed through forty-nine days without any descendants doing virtuous deeds on their behalf to rescue them from suffering. Besides that, during their

lifetime they did not plant any good causes. Therefore, their own karma will accordingly bring about the hells, and naturally they are to cross this sea first. A hundred thousand yojanas east of this sea, there is another sea where the suffering is many times greater than this one. To the east of that sea, there is yet another sea where the suffering is multiplied again. Brought on by the evil causes in the karma of body, speech, and mind, these seas are called the seas of karma. This is that place.'



“The holy woman again asked Ghost King Poisonless, ‘Where are the hells?’

“Poisonless replied, ‘Within the three seas are great hells. They number in the hundreds of thousands, and each one is different.

There are eighteen specifically known as the great hells. Second [to them] there are five hundred, where the agonizing suffering is measureless; and next, there are hundreds of thousands, also with measureless suffering.'

The noble Brahman girl asked again, "Why is the sea boiling? Why are there so many evil persons and fierce beasts?" Poisonless told her that those recently deceased beings of Jambudvipa who have committed severely negative karma are crossing these seas and will fall into the hell manifested by their own karma unless somebody has arranged proper rituals or performed good deeds on their behalf to rescue them during the first forty-nine days after death or if they had redeeming merit from virtuous actions when they were alive. Usually, if their family members can perform virtuous deeds within the first forty-nine days, such as chanting the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* or other sutras and mantras, and dedicate the merit to them, they will not come to these seas and fall into hells.

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

neighboring hell and the ephemeral hell. Second to them there are five hundred hells, where the agonizing suffering is immeasurable; and next, there are hundreds of thousands of hells also with immeasurable suffering.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Poisonless joined his palms and informed the Bodhisattva, ‘Holy One, please return to your home. Do not be worried or sorrowful in remembering, for the woman wrongdoer Yue Dili was reborn in heaven three days ago. It is said that by virtue of her filial child’s making offerings to cultivate merit in the mother’s behalf by practicing giving to the stupas and monasteries of

Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata, not only was the Bodhisattva's mother released from the hells, the other wrongdoers in the Incessant Hell, too, experienced happiness and were reborn on that day.' After the ghost king had finished speaking, he joined his palms and withdrew.



The Brahman girl wondered where her mother was, so she asked the ghost king Poisonless. Poisonless asked what her mother used to do when she was alive. She answered, "My mother had improper beliefs and disrespected the Three Jewels. At one time she believed in the Buddha, and then soon after became disrespectful." That is why the Brahman girl was so worried that her mother would probably fall into the lower realms after death. After Poisonless

learned of her mother's name, he respectfully told the noble girl, "Please return home and do not be sad. Your mother ascended to heaven three days ago. She was saved by your filial piety as you made offerings to the Buddha's stupas and monasteries to cultivate merit on her behalf. Not only was your mother released from hell, but the other wrongdoers in the Incessant Hell were also reborn and experienced happiness." After the ghost king had finished speaking, he joined his palms in respect and withdrew.



"The Brahman woman quickly returned as if from a dream. Upon realizing this event, she made an immense vow before the image and stupa of Awakening-Blossom Concentration Mastery King Tathagata, 'I vow that throughout the future kalpas, I will

employ many skillful means for all wrongdoing suffering beings, causing them all to attain liberation.”

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



The Brahmin girl woke up as if from a dream. Realizing that she had saved her mother from hell by making offering and praying to the Buddha, she made a great vow in front of the Buddha, “May I employ as many possible skillful means as I can to release all wrongdoing suffering beings from pain and cause them all to attain liberation.” After this story, Buddha Shakyamuni told

Manjushri, “The ghost king Poisonless is now the bodhisattva named Leader-In-Wealth, and the Brahmin girl is now Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha.” This vow is very essential and it differentiates the Mahayana and Shravakayana practice. As Mahayana practitioners, we should follow in the footsteps of these great bodhisattvas and make the same aspirations in all our lifetimes. As *The King of Aspiration Prayers* reads,

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

Also,

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

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

In this story, the Brahman girl never thought that she had finished what she needed to do because her mother had been reborn in heaven. Instead, as she realized that she was able to save her mother from hell, she made this immense vow that she would save all sentient beings in samsara. As mentioned in the story we quoted in the beginning of this lecture, it is because of her mother that the Brahman girl generated bodhicitta deep in her heart.

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

After finishing the study of the first chapter, we should remember the incredible qualities of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, the great vows that he had made in his previous lives, and also the two stories about how he had generated bodhicitta in different lifetimes. It

is important for us to keep them in our mind to nourish our Mahayana practice.

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

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

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 Buddhadharma,
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.

Please email us at: *translation@khenposodargye.org*



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