

**ORIGINAL VOWS OF  
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA  
SUTRA**

**Chapter Three**

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.

# Contents

## CHAPTER THREE

### OBSERVING THE KARMIC CONDITIONS OF LIVING BEINGS

2

#### Lecture Six

4

Proper Way in Making Offerings . . . . . 4

Efficacy Story: Being Saved from Misfortunes . . . . . 7

The Ripened Effects of Wrongdoings . . . . . 10

Crimes That Lead One to the Incessant Hell . . . . . 14

Sufferings in the Incessant Hell . . . . . 31



## Chapter Three

*Observing the Karmic Conditions of  
Living Beings*



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

—Khenpo Sodargye

# **Lecture Six**

**July 20th, 2020**

## PROPER WAY IN MAKING OFFERINGS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## EFFICACY STORY: BEING SAVED FROM MISFORTUNES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# THE RIPENED EFFECTS OF WRONGDOINGS



## Chapter Three

### Observing the Karmic Conditions of Living Beings

At that time, the Buddha's mother, Queen Maya, respectfully joined her palms and asked Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, "Holy One,

living beings of Jambudvipa generate different karma. What ripened effects do they experience?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CRIMES THAT LEAD ONE TO THE INCESSANT HELL

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

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

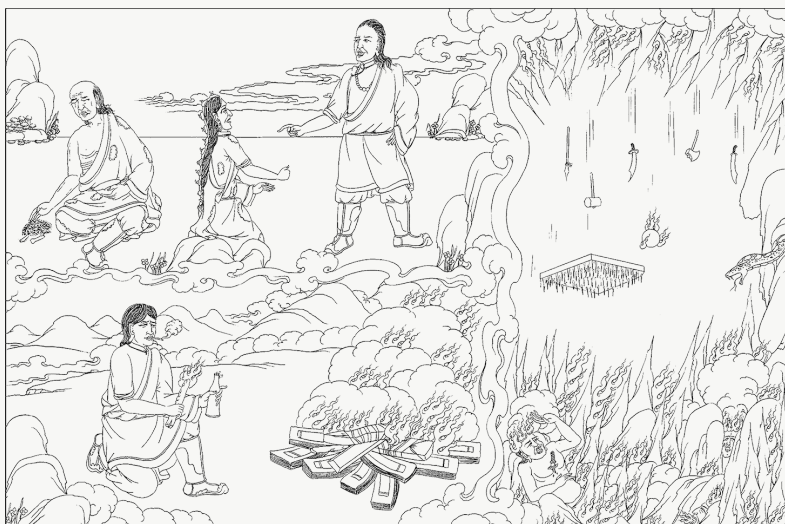
the five crimes with immediate retribution. For example, in Karma Chakme Rinpoche's *Aspiration to Be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*, the five crimes with immediate retribution are killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing one's teacher, killing an Arhat, maliciously drawing blood from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

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

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

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

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



**“If there are living beings who shed a Buddha’s blood, who slander the Triple Gem, who disrespect the sacred sutras, they too will fall into the Incessant Hell, and for thousands of myriads**

**of millions of kalpas, be without a time of release despite their wishes.**

This is the second group of crimes that would lead wrongdoers into the Incessant Hell. The crime of shedding a buddha's blood can be committed under two situations. First, when the Buddha was alive, it refers to causing the Buddha's body to bleed. Second, after the Buddha's parinirvana, this crime can refer to deliberately destroying a buddha's image, be it a thangka or a buddha statue. In the first example, Devadatta tried to kill the Buddha by throwing a rock at him from high up on a mountain but the Buddha was only slightly wounded in the foot by a splinter. Though the Buddha's body has transformed to the indestructible vajra body, there are still people who have unfavorable connections with the Buddha in their past lives trying to harm or even kill the Buddha with a malicious intention. An equivalent crime to this after the Buddha's parinirvana is to harm or kill a vajra master.

The crime of slandering the Triple Gem means to denigrate the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha or to destroy the physical representations of the Three Jewels. The crime of disrespecting the sacred sutras means showing no respect to or sullyng Buddhist scriptures whether it be sutras or tantras. For instance, even though someone may respect the Buddha, if he treats the Buddhist texts the same as any other worldly book and tosses them around without



regard, such behaviors disrespect the Dharma. Committing these kinds of misdeeds result in an awful consequence and would lead the person to fall into the Incessant Hell.

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

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

There have been numerous similar situations throughout history in both the West and the East. For example, an emperor who was a

believer of one religion may seek to eradicate all other religions such as Buddhism. Or even a village governor who may have beliefs other than Buddhism would cause damage to buddha images, stupas and Buddhist scriptures and so on in his area of governance. Related prophecies about Buddhism being persecuted in various periods of time have been clearly stated in Padmasambhava's biographies.

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

So it's really a wretched and ignorant act for people to purposely damage the Three Jewels. This situation is similar to the case that those who have no gratitude for other's kindness and they would

end up with more harm to themselves. In his *Treasury of Good Advice*, Sakya Pandita says,

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

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

Those who have no sense of gratitude and do not return others' kindness can never hurt those who have helped them, instead, not returning others' kindness would only bring great loss to themselves. In the same way, those who damage the representatives of the Three Jewels will never really destroy the Three Jewels, instead, because of their wrongdoings, they would experience immense suffering in the Incessant Hell for countless kalpas. This is nothing but the greatest loss to themselves.

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



The third group of crimes that will lead the wrongdoers to fall into the Incessant Hell include usurping or damaging the property of the sangha, meaning to usurp the sangha’s funds, spoiling the foods of the sangha, and damaging the property that the sangha uses. For example, breaking the windows of the sangha’s

residences, ruining the shrine hall of the sangha, and embezzling the money offered to the sangha for reciting prayers or for meals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## SUFFERINGS IN THE INCESSANT HELL



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

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

name; and next, there are hundreds of thousands, each also with a distinct name.



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

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

When asked how the Incessant Hell got its name, Ksitigarbha first gave an overall picture of the hells within the Great Iron Encircling Mountains. In summary, there are eighteen great hells, five hundred middle ones and hundreds of thousands of small ones, each with a different name.

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

Beings in the Incessant Hell experience various special karmic retributions. Inside this hell there is a bed that extends for more than three thousand miles. One who suffers there can see himself



filling that bed, when thousands of people are suffering there, each of them sees himself filling that entire bed, too.



“Moreover, the wrongdoers undergo all manner of suffering. There are hundreds of thousands of yaksas and evil ghosts with teeth like swords and eyes like lightning who pull and drag the wrongdoers with copper-clawed hands. There are also yaksas wielding large iron halberds who pierce the wrongdoers’ bodies, into their mouths and noses or into their abdomens and backs. They toss them into the air, catch them again, or else place them on the bed. There are also iron eagles that peck at the wrongdoers’ eyes. There are also iron snakes that strangle the wrongdoers’ necks. Long nails are driven into all their hundreds of joints. Their tongues are pulled out and plowed through. Their bowels

**are drawn out and chopped up. Molten copper is poured into their mouths. Their bodies are bound in hot iron. They undergo myriads of deaths and as many births. Such are the consequences brought about by their karma.**

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

Also, burning iron eagles peck at the eyes of the wrongdoers, and iron snakes strangle the wrongdoers' necks. In all the hundreds of joints of their bodies, long nails are spiked through. Because of the ripening of their karma, their tongues, when pulled out, become so huge and they experience the suffering of their tongues being plowed through. Their internal organs including intestines, lungs, and livers are drawn out and chopped up piece by piece. Molten copper is poured into their mouths and their bodies are wrapped up in burning hot iron. They experience myriads of sufferings and also undergo myriads of births and deaths in this hell. All these

are the results of their various negative karma in their previous lives.

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

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

Although they are all desperate to be liberated from such intense and unbearable suffering, beings in the Incessant Hell cannot escape from it even after millions of kalpas. When the world undergoes destruction, if their karmic retribution of experiencing the suffering in the hell hasn't come to a stop, the wrongdoers will be transferred to the hell of another world to continue the

suffering. When that world undergoes destruction, they will again be conveyed to the hell of the next world and so on. They will be passed through the hells of different worlds until this world is formed again. By then, if they still need to experience the karmic retribution, they will come back to the hell of this world. The time for the karmic retribution in the Incessant Hell is infinite.

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

The suffering of the Incessant Hell is indeed indescribable. Just as it is said in the *Collection of Essence of All Sutras*, "Once falling into the Incessant Hell, one will suffer from endless physical torture." The following text describes five reasons why this hell is called

Incessant. This is a unique teaching in this sutra because there's no such extensive explanation in other sutras.

## Five Qualities of Incessant Hell



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

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

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

**“Third, there are instruments of torment such as forks, clubs, eagles, snakes, wolves, dogs, pestles, grinders, saws, chisels, files, axes, cauldrons of boiling liquid, iron nets, iron ropes, iron donkeys, and iron horses. The wrongdoers are flayed alive. Their heads are bound in their own skin. Hot iron is poured over their bodies. They swallow iron balls when hungry and drink molten iron when thirsty. The wretched suffering continues nonstop throughout nayutas of kalpas. Therefore, it is called Incessant.**

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

**“Fifth, if beings fall into this hell, they will undergo myriads of deaths and myriads of births each day and night from the time of entry and on through hundreds of thousands of kalpas. Although they seek to pause, even in a thought-moment, that will not happen. Only when their karma is exhausted can they be reborn. Because of this continuity, it is called Incessant.”**

There are five reasons why the hell is called Incessant. First, the time to experience suffering in this hell is incessant. The wrongdoers experience torment day and night through many kalpas without having a moment of rest. In the *Chronicle of the Buddhas*

*and Patriarchs*, it is said that beings in the Incessant Hell have to endure suffering for as long as one kalpa without interruption. In a prison where it is deemed as a place of suffering, prisoners will be released after serving their sentences; even if one is sentenced to life imprisonment, he or she may not be in prison next life. However, beings in the Incessant Hell experience uninterrupted suffering through many kalpas and they can't even choose to die. This is the first reason why it is called Incessant.

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

Third, the suffering is incessant. Beings are tortured with various implements continuously. Pestles are used to crush or grind beings' bodies in a mortar, just like rice is husked in a mortar. Grinders are used to grind beings' bodies gradually. Saws and chisels are used to cut their bodies piece by piece. They are hung on the iron nets to be burnt and are tied up with iron ropes. Iron donkeys and iron horses trample over their bodies. Their heads are wrapped with their own skins; burning molten iron is poured on their bodies. They swallow iron balls to deal with hunger and drink molten iron to quench their thirst. They experience the various forms of suffering without interruption through numerous kalpas so their suffering is incessant.

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

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

In the Chinese text, there is a phrase "Qiang, Hu, Yi, Di" (Chi: 羌胡夷狄) which means people of different races from all directions. Some people believe it is a derogatory slang used to describe the ethnic minorities on the border of China, and because this is a very ancient way of expression in China, so they make the conclusion that this term should not exist in a Sanskrit sutra originated in ancient India, and thus the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is apocryphal. This is actually very untenable.



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

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

People often consider a term as commendatory or derogatory based on what they had learned from their teachers and they would stick to these perceptions. But the fact is that the property of a given term changes with history and culture. We have seen in even just a couple of decades that the usage and property of a word could undergo huge changes, let alone when the time duration is over a thousand years. Therefore, it would be imprudent for academics to deduce something to be right or wrong simply based on their limited learning and personal opinions. To deny something, one

must first have reasonable and meticulous methods of discernment, which is a scientific attitude that one should adopt in academic research.

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

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



From this text we learn that the karmic retribution a wrongdoer experiences in the Incessant Hell is truly terrifying. As a matter of fact, we may all have, intentionally or unintentionally, committed one or more of these offenses in this life or in previous lives that could lead us to fall into the hell realm. We may have embezzled the property of the Three Jewels due to our ignorance, disrespected our parents or teachers out of our arrogance, or damaged Buddhist scriptures carelessly. Does this mean that we will face these severe consequences and that there would be no way to be freed from such grave karma? It is not necessarily the case.

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

In many Buddhist scriptures, it is also said that with sincere confession, crimes with immediate retribution can be purified in an instant, just like King Ajatashatru, due to his sincere and powerful confession, his karmic retribution for killing his father was exhausted within a very short time. It is also said in many

tantras that relying upon the blessing and power of the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, even negative karma such as the five crimes of immediate retribution can be completely purified.

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

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

After hearing Ksitigarbha's brief introduction of the Incessant Hell, Queen Maya appeared very sad for those hell beings. We now also have a rough idea of how miserable those beings are. As practitioners, we should, while confessing our own wrongdoings sincerely, also dedicate our merit accumulated through Dharma

practice to the hell beings in the hope that they can be freed as soon as possible. Whether we recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, practice Vajrasattva, or pray to Ksitigarbha, we should wholeheartedly dedicate our merit to them, through which they will sooner be liberated from hell. By the extraordinary blessing of buddhas and bodhisattvas, especially by the powerful blessing of Ksitigarbha, beings in the hell realm can be liberated from their suffering. As we've learned previously, Ksitigarbha is the great bodhisattva who is able to convert immutable karma. So as long as we pray to him sincerely, by either chanting his name or his mantra or his sutra, there is no doubt that both our negative karma and the suffering of hell beings can be eliminated miraculously!

## Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute  
in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great masters,  
to the flourishing of the 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.

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