

**ORIGINAL VOWS OF
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA
SUTRA**

Chapter Five

Commented by Khenpo Sodargye

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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 Five

The Names of the Hells

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

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

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture Ten

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

WHY DO WESTERNERS TEND TO REJECT HELL?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DOES HELL EXIST?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EFFICACY STORY: MIRACLES OF THE IMAGE OF KSITIGARBHA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHERE ARE THE HELLS?



Chapter Five

The Names of the Hells

At that time, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “Benevolent One, for the sake of devas, nagas, the fourfold assembly, as well as for all living beings in the present and future, please speak about the names of the

hells, where wrongdoing suffering beings of Jambudvipa in the saha world undergo ripened effects, and bad consequences [that they experience], so that living beings of the Age of Declining Dharma in the future may know of such results.”

In the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, we can often encounter great bodhisattvas we are familiar with. In this chapter, the main characters are Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha and Samantabhadra. In this instance, Samantabhadra made a request to Ksitigarbha, asking him to speak about the hells for the sake of the eight classes of gods and demons such as nagas and devas, the four groups of Buddha’s followers which are monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, and all sentient beings in the present and future, particularly those in the time of degenerations, so that they will know that one’s severely negative karma will force him or her to fall into the hells and experience immense suffering.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NAMES OF DIFFERENT HELLS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Iron Clothing Hell: In this hell, beings' whole bodies are wrapped in burning iron clothing or iron monastic robes. Covered by such

burning iron garments, sinful beings' entire skin, flesh, muscles, and bones are all destroyed and burnt. Imagine how extremely painful that is!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the monks would start quarreling, fighting, and beating each other with them. Maybe the Quarreling Hell is like this story where inhabitants keep arguing and fighting with each other vehemently and no one would compromise. Our usual debate would be a joy compared to this.

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

My point is, to practice patience is important. If we cannot always stay patient, at least within an hour or a day after we are irritated, we should still try to avoid quarreling with others or exhibiting

improper behaviors driven by hatred. To contain our anger and refrain from any negative behaviors are indeed a practice of patience. If we just bear with it a little, our anger may subside after a while. This is a very good method of dealing with anger.

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

People sometimes have strong negative emotions, but if we apply mindfulness and introspective awareness to counter them, they can be excellent opportunities to train our minds. Although we cannot do what Buddha Shakyamuni did in his causal stage when someone cut his flesh into pieces with a sharp knife and he remained undisturbed and even aspired to liberate the person after attaining

buddhahood. When others questioned if he was really not at all angry, he vowed that “if it is true that I am not angry at all, may my body recover as before”, and then his body did recover due to the power of this truthful speech. We may not be able to do this, but we can at least try not to generate negative karma.

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

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

If we do not want to fall into this hell, we must cultivate compassion and loving kindness. Some people could be very loving, but once they become angry, they cannot control or counteract their anger. If this fierce negative emotion is not purified properly, it will continue to take effect and cause terrible consequence. According to Mahayana teachings, among greed, anger, and ignorance, anger is the most poisonous. The fault of one thought of anger is far greater than a hundred thoughts of greed. Therefore, according to Mahayana Buddhism, one must make efforts to counteract anger.

On the start of the spiritual path, it might be difficult to tame hatred due to the karma and habits from previous lives, but as long as we adjust our mind using the methods taught in Mahayana teachings, even an irritable disposition will gradually change. This is the power of Dharma practice.

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

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

Therefore, each of us should carefully examine ourselves. As a Buddhist, it would be very unfortunate if we do not think about hell or if we doubt its existence. Although many people do believe it, without regular practice and training of the mind, when negative karma ripens and afflictions arise, so fiercely like a waterfall bursting out, it would be difficult for them to break through its influence and control their minds. I visited many prisons around the world and was told by many inmates how they acted on the spur of the moment and committed a murder or other crimes. That is why it is so important for us to guard our minds with mindfulness and introspection so as not to fall into those hells mentioned above.

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

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

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

Lecture Eleven

August 7th, 2020

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

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

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

EFFICACY STORY: ASPIRING TO MAKE A KSITIGARBHA STATUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NAMES OF DIFFERENT HELLS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NEVER UNDERVALUE THE POWER OF KARMA

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



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

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

Karma has enormous power

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do not take lightly small misdeeds,

Believing they can do no harm:

Even a tiny spark of fire

Can set alight a mountain of hay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DESCRIPTION OF HELLS IN MORE DETAIL

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

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

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

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

Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way says,

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

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



Ksitigarbha said, “Benevolent One, the ripened effects of wrongdoing as occur in the hells are like these: In some hells the wrongdoers’ tongues are taken out and then plowed over by oxen. In some hells the wrongdoers’ hearts are taken out and eaten by yakshas. In some hells the wrongdoers’ bodies are cooked in cauldrons full of boiling liquid. In some hells the wrongdoers are compelled to embrace red-hot, burning copper pillars. In some hells fires burn and overtake the wrongdoers. In some hells there is cold and ice at all times. In some hells there is limitless excrement and urine. In some hells there are solely flying caltrops. In some hells there are many flaming spears. In some hells the wrongdoers are struck solely on the chests and

backs. In some hells their hands and feet are burned specifically. In some hells iron snakes twine around and strangle them. In some hells iron dogs pursue them. In some hells they all ride on [flaming] iron mules.

Ksitigarbha had previously described some of the retributions in hell and now he added more details which are somewhat similar to what he had said before but are now enumerated in greater details. There are some hells where sinful beings' tongues are stretched out and plowed through by cattle, which is similar to the condition in the aforementioned Tongue Plowing Hell and Tongue Plucking Hell. In some hells, yakshas pull out hell beings' hearts and eat them, and in other hells, beings' bodies are cooked in cauldrons of boiling water. Also, there are hells in which beings are forced to hug red-hot copper pillars, hells in which beings are constantly burned by fire, hells where being are consumed all-pervasively by cold and ice, and hells where beings sink in dung and urine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Now through the Buddha’s awesome spiritual penetration and at the Benevolent One’s request, I have briefly described this matter in this way, for if I were to explain in detail, I could not finish even when a kalpa is over.”

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

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

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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