

**ORIGINAL VOWS OF  
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA  
SUTRA**

**Chapter Six**

Commented by Khenpo Sodargye

2023 Edition

Dedicated to

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche in deep gratitude and love

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

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## Chapter Six

*The Praise of the Tathagata*

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

—Khenpo Sodargye

# Lecture Twelve

August 10th, 2020

## EFFICACY STORY: THE BLESSING OF A KSITIGARBHA STATUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CALLING FOR DONATION IS NOT ENCOURAGED

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# THE BUDDHA'S PRAISE TO KSITIGARBHA

## Chapter Six

### The Praise of the Tathagata

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

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



Generally, when the Buddha emits light, the light may come from different parts of his body—the coiled hair between his eyebrows, his fingers, his toes, his upper body, his Ushnisha and so forth. When the Buddha was about to praise Ksitigarbha, his entire body radiated brilliant light, illuminating countless buddha worlds. Then in his wonderful voice, he praised Ksitigarbha to all bodhisattvas and various beings of different worlds for his inconceivable strength and compassionate power of rescuing and caring for all sentient beings throughout the ten directions. Here the

text does not mention other buddhas because Buddha Shakyamuni mainly wanted all great bodhisattvas in different worlds to hear his praise of Ksitigarbha. Then he entrusted this sutra to all of them so that they would protect and spread it in the future with every possible skillful means so that all beings could also attain the bliss of nirvana.

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

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

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

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

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



the sake of all of his disciples, he spoke on the essentials of the Dharma.

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

At the end of this sutra, the Buddha said:

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

When reading this sutra, we should be touched by the Buddha's enjoinment right before his nirvana. He urged all disciples to actualize his teaching and to transmit his teaching to future generations, thus his dharmakaya will be present forever in this world. Some might feel it a little rigid or conservative because the Buddha emphasized the pratimoksha vows in his words, as if he were merely urging his monastic disciples. Actually this is not the case because back in that time, the disciples were mainly monastic bhiksus. In addition to monastic vows, the Buddha also expounded how to act properly in secular world by following the Buddhist teaching.

For example, Buddhists should stay away from seeking fame and profit and it is important to reduce desire and stay content. I would like to recommend that all Buddhists study this sutra and bear in mind this was the last teaching that the Buddha left in this human world. It certainly has great meaning to us.

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

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



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

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

Before the Buddha continued his words, there was another great bodhisattva in the assembly speaking to the Buddha. On behalf of all present and future sentient beings, he respectfully requested

the Buddha to expound on the qualities of Ksitigarbha and his activities of benefitting humans and devas, so that sentient beings, particularly those in the future degenerate times, would know how to engage in the Ksitigarbha practice and what virtuous result they will reap.

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

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

With regard to the praises of Ksitigarbha, very good poems have been written by great masters in the past that we can recite to extol Ksitigarbha's qualities. Or one can simply acclaim with a sincere

mind, “How inconceivable Ksitigarbha is!” Both are good practice to receive Ksitigarbha’s blessing.

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

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

body, speech, and mind, like the ways introduced in this sutra, their negative karma will undoubtedly be purified.

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

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

There is a story of a Tibetan guru regarding his teaching on karma. When he talked about the merit of virtuous deeds, he used the following example: "When you are at the top of a hill, if you recite the Mani mantra aloud with the altruistic mind of bodhichitta, then

all grass and trees on this hill are resounding the mantra with you. In this way, the number of your recitation will be as large as the total number of all grass and trees on this hill, so the merit of your chanting is inconceivably tremendous.” When he talked about the fault of non-virtuous deeds, he said, “Well, actually everyone must have accumulated severe negative karma. When we eat a bowl of tsampa, it is no different from eating a bowls of aphids because when farmer grow barley, numerous aphids are killed.”

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

## THE MERIT OF MAKING KSITIGARBHA STATUES



“Universally Vast, if there are good men and good women who paint this Bodhisattva’s image or make his image with clay, stone, resin, lacquer, gold, silver, copper, or iron, and then reverently gaze at and make obeisance to his image but once, these people will be reborn a hundred times in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three



**Devas and will never fall into the lower realms. If their heavenly merit is exhausted and they are reborn below in the world of humans, they will still be kings and will not lose great benefits.**

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

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

our reverence, regardless of which tradition or school it belongs to and whether its appearance is impressive or not.

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

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

As stated in many scriptures such as Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, when celestial beings exhaust their merit in heaven, they could

fall into hell because of their negative karma. However, for those celestial beings who had revered Ksitigarbha in their previous lives, after their heavenly merit being exhausted, they would be reborn as kings in the human realm and not lose their great benefits.

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

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

suffering to their people. It would seem much more preferable that they had not become kings so that they could not create such horrible negative karma that will trap them in hell endlessly.

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

Knowing the incredible merit of building a statue of Ksitigarbha, we should attach great importance to this virtuous practice. However, for a number of reasons, some people have chosen to downplay

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

The two situations above are both biased ways of following Buddhism. Since the Buddha's teaching contains both a profound aspect and a vast aspect, in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism, we need to approach Buddhism from both of these aspects rather than neglect either one of them. The corresponding two virtues, i.e., the conventional virtue that is accumulated from the vast aspect, and the transcendental virtue that is accumulated from the profound aspect, are equally important.

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

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

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

Simply gathering conventional virtue, such as making buddha statues, will not enable one to gain any transcendental progress because without realizing emptiness, conventional virtue can only lead one to take rebirth in higher realms but will not enable one to break free from samsara. Similarly, a partiality for accumulating transcendental virtue, such as merely delving into the theoretical

study of the Middle Way while disregarding conventional virtues will not fulfil one's wish to realize emptiness and become enlightened because the wisdom of emptiness will not have a place to develop and mature. As deluded beings, we are trapped in an illusory world. It is only by following its conventional rule and accumulating conventional merit that we can strengthen our ability to realize its empty and illusory nature and free ourselves from it.

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

In a treatise, Patrul Rinpoche particularly stressed the merit of the Three Jewels and urged practitioners to hold sincere respect to the representatives of the Three Jewels, even very minor and ordinary ones. I was planning to translate this treatise into Chinese but it

would seem that I was always busy with something else. I cited a few teachings from it when I was teaching the *Lotus Sutra*. As Buddhist practitioners, we should cherish these precious teachings and sincerely revere any image of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

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

Many monastics today do not know how to fill a statue properly and I suggest the monastics among you learn these standard methods properly since they are not difficult at all. Among the Han sangha at Larung Gar, there is a special group of monastics responsible for filling Buddhist statues. They would be happy to teach those who are interested in learning these traditional



techniques. As an aside, it would be a true pity if a precious tradition or heritage is not maintained. Therefore, whatever specialties you may have, do not keep them to yourselves and think of them as a technical or commercial secret. The same principle applies to Dharma teachings. It would be sad and unfortunate if a guru's teaching is not inherited by somebody when he passes into nirvana. As Mahayana practitioners, we should share our knowledge and skills with others so that they can be passed down from generation to generation.

## KSITIGARBHA'S BLESSING TO WOMEN

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

*O Bodhisattvas!*

*In order to please the Buddha*

*Emanate in the form of a female,*

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

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

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



**“Furthermore, Universally Vast, if there are women who are weary of being ugly and frequently ill and, with a resolute mind before Ksitigarbha’s image, they reverently gaze at and make obeisance to him for even just the time of a meal, then throughout thousands of myriads of kalpas they will be reborn with perfect looks and features. If these ugly women are not weary of being women, then for hundreds of thousands of**

**myriads of millions of lives they will always be princesses, queens, or daughters of high ministers, prominent families, or great elders and be born beautiful and with perfect features. They gain such merit because they reverently gaze at and make obeisance to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva with a resolute mind.**

Further, if some women dislike their plain looks and are bothered by frequent sickness, they can gaze at and bow in front of Ksitigarbha's image with sincere devotion. Doing this for even just the time as short as a meal, they will be reborn with dignified looks and without any deformities throughout millions of kalpas. If they do not dislike being a woman, they will always be born as a woman of royal lineage, or marry into royalty, or become daughters of prime ministers, prominent families, or great elders, endowed with perfect features. All these merits are the result of whole-heartedly gazing at and paying homage to Ksitigarbha.

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

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

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



I tried hard to comfort them but sometimes to no avail. I can only accept the fact that everyone has his or her own life trajectory under control of his or her karma.

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

For women who seek a more dignified and beautiful appearance, instead of getting plastic surgery or wearing make-up, it would be more advisable to invite a Ksitigarbha statue to your home and pray to him. Remember the ugly daughter of King Pasenadi named Vajra? Originally, she was extremely ugly and her husband locked her up so that nobody could see her. But later because she was bursting with delight and respect upon seeing the Buddha's dignified appearance, through the Buddha's inconceivable blessing, Vajra became stunningly exquisite. So for those who are dissatisfied with their looks, do not forget to pray to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva!

# **Lecture Thirteen**

**August 11th, 2020**

## TREASURE THE DHARMA TEACHINGS

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

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

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

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

Such impermanence is observable in those who used to participate in my teachings. On this date last year, there were quite a lot of people happily listening to my teaching. But now, many of them are no longer here—some have passed away and some

have left with various reasons. No one can predict what will happen a year from now, either to me as a teacher, or to you as a listener. So it is important for us practitioners to have a sense of impermanence. Thogme Zangpo always urged Dharma practitioners to contemplate on impermanence because “it is a profound practice that stimulates one to enter into the Dharma, spurs one on to diligently practice the Dharma, and leads one to the ultimate enlightenment.”

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

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

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

We now continue with the sixth chapter, *The Praise of the Tathagata*. To recap, at the end of the last lecture, we learned that by earnestly praying to Ksitigarbha, people who are weary of their appearance

and health could be reborn with beauty and into distinguished families. Now, let us continue.

# BE PROTECTED BY GHOSTS AND SPIRITS

## Remember to Make Offerings



“Furthermore, Universally Vast, if there are good men and good women who are able to make offerings to him by playing music, singing songs of praise, and presenting incense and flowers before this Bodhisattva’s image, or who are also able to encourage



**others, one or many, to do likewise, both now and in the future they will be protected day and night by hundreds of thousands of ghosts and spirits who will even prevent evil matters from reaching their ears, much less allow them to meet with disasters personally.**

Offerings should be made to Ksitigarbha. Every year at Larung Gar, we hold a Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly, also known as the Dharma Assembly of Samantabhadra's Offering Clouds. During the assembly, a myriad of exquisite things are offered in the shrine to Ksitigarbha, including beautiful flowers, delicate foods, fragrant incense, and refined butter lamps, along with melodious songs and chants of verses of praise to Ksitigarbha. This practice was initiated by H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche which conformed perfectly to the teaching of the Buddha given here in the text. By learning this sutra, we will understand the deep intention of His Holiness. When great masters make a decision to do something, there are special meanings which may not be revealed until much later.

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

usually started with just *The Verses of the Eight Noble Auspicious Ones*, followed by *The Seven Preliminaries for Purifying the Mind*, which is the first part of *The King of Aspiration Prayers*.

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

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

to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Since we began this custom, many monasteries have also followed suit and started playing music with the chanting of *The Clouds of Offering Mantras* and *The Seven Preliminaries*.

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

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

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

## **Be Protected by Ghosts and Spirits**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Pray to Dharma Protectors

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

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

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



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

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

In a few days, on August 14th and 15th, it will be our yearly Dharma Protectors Festival. The Dharma Protectors Festival is held every year on the 25th and 26th day of the sixth month of the Tibetan calendar. On the first day, we will recite prayers to the Dharma protectors in the shrine hall and the next day we will make full

offerings to Dharma protectors at the peaks of the five mountains that surround our academy (also known as Little Mount Wutai).

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

make offerings to Dharma protectors of the lineage, including the goddess of the trees of Dzichen.

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

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

of Dharma protectors, why should those who had abortions be banned? Since this kind of requirement has never existed in all the years I have been in Larung Gar, I would like to know the origin of this new requirement.

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

If you have studied and practiced at Larung Gar, you need to remember our tradition of making offerings to the Dharma protectors. Even many great Han masters who had come to Tibetan monasteries in the past to seek the Dharma have been persisting

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

## NEVER SLANDER THE NOBLE BEING

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## BENEFIT THE DYING WITH KSITIGARBHA'S POWER



“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future if there are men and women who are bedridden with a long [illness] and unable to get well or die despite their wishes, and at night they dream of evil ghosts, of family and relatives, of wandering in dangerous paths, or they have many nightmares of wandering in the company of

ghosts and spirits; and as days, months, and years go by, their illnesses worsen and they waste away; they cry out in their sleep; they are miserable and melancholy—all these represent cases of karma and [the ensuing] realm of existence under judgment, with the degrees of seriousness still undetermined, making it difficult for these people to die or recover. The ordinary eyes of men and women cannot discern such matters.

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

We may also be like that at the end of our life so we should be prepared for our death. We all hope that when we die, we can



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

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

One more possible reason for such suffering is that they may have kept other sentient beings tormented for extended periods without releasing them nor letting them die immediately and peacefully.

They may have restrained beings with ropes or held them captive like Ajatashatru imprisoned his father, King Bimbisara. Others such as some butchers are very cruel. They make animals suffer a lot before finally killing them. These people may then receive a retribution that makes it impossible for them to die immediately or recover fully. This is the law of karma.

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

**“In this instance, this sutra should be recited aloud once before the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and possessions that the sick person loves, such as clothing, jewels, manors, gardens, or houses, should be offered by someone saying clearly in front of the sick person, ‘In the presence of the sutras and images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, I, so-and-so, give these items on behalf of this sick person to make offerings to the sutras and**

**images, to make the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to construct stupas and monasteries, to light oil lamps, or to give gifts to the sangha.'**

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

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

If a patient is terminally ill with no hope of recovery, people should enumerate all the objects that the patient cherishes, such as iPhone, iPad, clothing or monastic robes, jewels, bank accounts, cars, or real

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

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

While the sick person is still alive, it is necessary to inform him in a loud voice on how you will use his possessions to perform virtuous deeds. It is beneficial for the patient to know what these virtuous

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

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

**“[Consider how a sick person can be benefited,] how much greater [the results will be] when good men and good women personally copy this sutra in writing, teach others to copy it, personally sculpt or paint the Bodhisattva’s image, or even teach**

others to sculpt or paint [his image]! They will certainly gain immense benefits.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## WHAT TO DO IF WE DREAM OF GHOSTS



**“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future if living beings when dreaming or dozing should see ghosts, spirits, and other forms who are sad, crying, worried, sighing, fearful, or terrified, these are the living beings’ fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, or other relatives from one,**

**ten, a hundred, or a thousand lives past who are in the lower realms and unable to leave. They have no place from which to hope for the strength of merit to rescue them, and so they plead with their family from their previous lives to use skillful means, hoping that they may thereby leave the lower realms.**

We may, while dreaming or dozing, see ghosts, headless spirits and other forms like those in horror movies, who are either sad, weeping, worried, fearful, or terrified. Who are they? They are indeed our fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, and relatives from one, ten, a hundred or a thousand lives past. Due to their evil karma, they are trapped in the lower realms and unable to free themselves from suffering. So they have come to us looking for help.

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

have such a nightmare or dream, we should do virtuous deeds and make dedication on their behalf the next day.

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

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

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

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

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

# **Lecture Fourteen**

**August 13th, 2020**

## DEEPEN YOUR FAITH THROUGH INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

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

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



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

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

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

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

## EFFICACY STORY: A REBIRTH IN THE HEAVEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## BREAK AWAY FROM LOWER POSITIONS



“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future if there are various persons of the lower classes, slaves, maidservants, and other people without freedom, who realize [that they are undergoing the ripened effect of] their past karma and wish to repent, they should, with a resolute mind, reverently gaze at and make

**obeisance to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's image for seven days and recite the Bodhisattva's name a full ten thousand times. When their present ripened effect is over, for thousands of myriads of lives they will always be reborn among the respected and wealthy, and they will not undergo the suffering of the three lower realms again.**

The Buddha continued to tell Universally Vast that for people in lower positions, such as servants, maids, and others who are deprived of their freedom, if they realize that their present situations are the result of their past karma and wish to confess their negativities, they should earnestly pay homage to Ksitigarbha statues or paintings and devotedly chant Ksitigarbha's name 10,000 times in a period of seven days. If they do so, when their current lives come to an end, they will be reborn into noble families for tens of millions of lives and no longer suffer the agonies of the three lower realms.

## **Being Deprived of Freedom**

Talking about people who are deprived of freedom, we may easily think of those who are confined to prisons, or those who are under the control of or manipulated by others, having no freedom over what they say or do. There are also those whose minds are possessed by mara or tortured by all kinds of suffering which



can also be considered a loss of freedom. Losing freedom can be the worst kind of suffering for people living in this world. As Ju Mipham Rinpoche says in his *The Just King*, "Every form of independence is happiness. Every form of dependence on others is suffering." If a person is not under the control of anything or anybody, then this person enjoys the greatest happiness in life. If, however, a person is under any control, even if one is only controlled by one's parents, spouse, siblings, or teachers, then this person is living in pain.

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

Reasonable discipline is indispensable for one to truly enjoy freedom. Some may believe that freedom should be completely without limitation, not even subject to law or regulation. To them, freedom

of speech means being able to say whatever they want, and personal freedom means they can act solely of their own volition. In actuality, freedom can never be defined nor practiced in this way. It must be accompanied by societal values, rules and law.

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

If people who have lost freedom or who are born into lower classes attribute their present situation to other people, it is an indication that they are ignorant of the law of cause and effect. Actually, all unfavorable encounters have to do with the negative karma accumulated in previous lives. If we are secondary to others in many respects, not endowed with good looks, have no power, wealth, or status, cannot get what we seek, or unable to do things well, we should know that all of these are the consequences of our negative karma in previous lives. What we should do is to

purify our negative karma by devotedly paying homage to the image of Ksitigarbha and reciting his name. The key here is not just the action but a sincere attitude. Such attitude indeed applies to any virtuous deed we perform such as circumambulating stupas, doing prostrations, and so forth.

## **How to Chant Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's Name?**

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

Then, Buddha Amitabha appeared in his dream and told him, “You still have ten years to live in the human world, and you should stay diligent.” Ying Ke said to Buddha Amitabha respectfully, “Since the saha world is very corrupted and impure, it is hard for me to

stay mindful all the time. I'd rather take rebirth in the Sukhavati as soon as possible."

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

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

If we can sincerely recite Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's name 10,000 times in a period of seven days, then when our present lives come to an end, we will take rebirth into the nobility for thousands of lives and never fall into the three lower realms. The reason why we can reap such a virtuous result is twofold. The name of Ksitigarbha itself can grant inconceivable blessings, and the merit of paying homage to his image is also inconceivable. As it is stated in the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*,

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

It also says, “Many eons of multifaceted veneration and supplication to Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Maitreya, Samantabhadra and other numerous supreme bodhisattvas, such as taking refuge in them, reciting their names, paying homage and making offerings to them, is not as quickly effective as doing the same to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva for a single instant in fulfilling one’s wishes.” Similar description can also be found in Ju Mipham Rinpoche’s *Beautiful Adornment of the Earth: In Praise of Ksitigarbha*. If the merit of chanting the name of Ksitigarbha in one day is already so inconceivable, then the merit generated from sincerely chanting his name 10,000 times in seven days would be far beyond imagination.

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

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

It means,

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

*To you I make offerings! In you I take refuge!*

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

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

advice without any doubt while questioning the requirement of a Buddhist practice.

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

## ACCUMULATE MERIT FOR NEWBORN BABY



**“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future in Jambudvīpa, if Kṣatriyas, Brahmins, elders, householders, and others of various names and clans have new-born infants, boys or girls, they should read and recite this inconceivable sūtra and recite the Bodhisattva’s name a full ten thousand times early on within**



**seven days of birth for the sake of their children. If these newborn children, boys or girls, are due to have misfortunes as a result of their past, they will gain release and be well, happy, and easily raised, and their lifespans will increase. If they had been reborn by virtue of their [past] merit, their well-being and happiness will increase and so will their lifespans.**

The Buddha continued to instruct how newborn babies can be protected by engaging the Ksitigarbha practice. It is of great help for new babies if their families recite the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and chant the name of Ksitigarbha 10,000 times in the first seven days after their birth. By doing so, new babies will be released from any severe negative karma accumulated in their previous lives, easily raised and enjoy longevity and happiness. If they were born by virtue of their own merit, their well-being and happiness will be further increased.

A relative of mine brought his newborn baby came to see me in my little hut yesterday. He could not help telling me everything about the baby. "He is just cute!" "He never cries at night." "He is always smiling." I could feel how much he loved the new baby, who has become the entire world to him. I guess all parents must feel the same way about their babies. The best way to take care of their babies is already expounded here by Buddha Shakyamuni.

Following the Buddha's instruction, it will bring immense well-being, happiness and extended longevity to the newborns.

Talking about the way to welcome the arrival of a newborn baby, the customs vary in different places. In the Han region, traditional birth celebrations include a series of events, the biggest celebration happens when the baby is one month old. The family will hold a dinner party, in which friends and relatives will attend with presents for the baby. The most common gift is money stuffed in a red envelope as a token of good luck. However, this probably involves killing since the dinner often has meat and fish. In ancient India, rituals that bestow blessings to the mother and the baby are performed at different stages before and after the baby is born. In the Tibetan regions, when a baby arrives at a household, the family will immediately go to the master of a local monastery and ask him to grant the baby an auspicious name, and to chant prayers and do some virtuous deeds for the baby. Although this tradition is increasingly overlooked by many younger Tibetans today, it remains the main custom for Tibetan people to welcome a newborn baby. Indeed, the name of a person also plays an important role in this person's life and is an integral element under the infallible principle of dependent arising.

Overall speaking, it is necessary for new parents to perform virtuous deeds and create a virtuous atmosphere in order for their

babies to be born and grow. Instructive teachings for prenatal education can be found in both Confucianism and Buddhism. For instance, from the first day of pregnancy onward, if the mother lives in a pure environment, doing meditation and conducting virtuous deeds, the baby will be born with a kind character and a wholesome mentality. In reverse, if the pregnant mother lives in a terrible environment such as in a war, the baby's mentality and character will be different. Therefore, it is important to create a pure and peaceful atmosphere for an expectant mother. Today, when we see grumpy children, people often say that their parents must have a bad relationship during the children's upbringing. Such a presumption is not totally groundless because the living environment of children contributes significantly to their personality development. This is also why Mencius' mother moved three times in order to choose a beneficial environment for him to grow up in.

Following the Buddha's instruction, when we welcome the arrival of a newborn baby, we should bring Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's blessing to the baby by reading the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Of course, a non-Buddhist household would probably prefer a red envelope over a reading of the sutra. Sadly, however, people have increasingly grown apart from each other, even sending an envelope has sometimes become dispensable and is often replaced by a routine

message of congratulation. The bottom line is that doing virtuous deeds for a newborn baby is always important because this can transform the negative karmic bond between the parents and the baby and strengthen their positive karmic bond.

## **Why Does a Baby Come to a Family?**

According to Master Yin Guang, the thirteenth patriarch of the Pure Land School, the birth of a baby in a family is often associated with four causes: 1) to repay past kindness, 2) to repay past wrongs, 3) to repay past debts, and 4) to claim past debts. These causes suggest four types of karmic bonds between the children and their parents.

“To repay past kindness” means that the child had incurred a debt of gratitude to the parents in a previous lifetime and he or she has now come to be born in the parents’ household in order to repay their kindness, so the child is very filial.

“To repay past wrongs” means that the parents had committed some wrong toward their present child in a past lifetime and the child has come to be born in the household to seek retribution. These children are usually spendthrifts and when they grow up, they will probably cause the family’s ruin.

“To repay past debts” means that the child has come to be born in his or her parents’ household because he or she had incurred a debt toward them in his or her past life. When the amount is substantial, the child will be very attentive towards the parents. If the child’s debt is small, the parents will be cared for just enough to ensure that they lack nothing.

“To claim past debts” means that in a past lifetime, the parents had incurred an obligation toward their child who has now been born in their household in order to reclaim what was owed. If the parents did not owe much, the child may die young. If the parents had owed the child a lot, they will have to spend a lot of money and efforts on the education and care of the child.

This coincides with what Arhat Katyayana saw about a family he came across when he was out on his alms-round. The story is described in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. One day, while the Arhat Katyayana was out on his alms-round, he came across a man with a child on his lap. The man was eating a fish with great relish and throwing stones at a dog that was trying to get at the bones. What the master saw with his clairvoyance, however, was this. The fish had been the man’s own father in that very lifetime, and the dog had been his mother. An enemy he had killed in a past existence had been reborn as his son, as the karmic repayment for the life the man had taken.

These four types of karmic links also apply to husbands and wives as well. Often, when a couple quarrels frequently, they may ascribe their difficult relationship to their bad karmic bond in previous lives. However, when they are in a good relationship, they would be too busy enjoying their happy life and give no regard to the fact that this is also the positive karmic bond that they had built in previous lives.

To recap, when a baby arrives at a household, the parents should try to perform virtuous deeds for the baby. If the baby has a good karmic connection with the parents, then such connection will become stronger. If the baby has a bad karmic connection with the parents, by accumulating virtue for the baby, negative karmic connection could be converted.

## **Apply the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* in Daily Life**

I believe that this sutra can be a useful handbook for applying Buddhism in everyday life. Besides developing a theoretical understanding of the profound Dharma teaching, we need to apply the Dharma instructions as the “effective means” to address our everyday situations. For example, how will we deal with the sick and the disadvantaged, and how to provide children with better education and so forth. This chapter offers instructive solutions that can be used in many aspects of our ordinary life. For example,

we have talked about how to accumulate merit for newborn babies so that they could live a better life; how people of lower social status and those who are unfree can improve their situations; how to transform a nightmare; how to help the deceased; as well as how a person who does not want to be further affected by the illness and difficulties of being a woman could do to change her life. I am sure that these issues must concern many of you. In the face of life situations like these, Ksitigarbha can provide us a great help with his powerful blessing.

Some people may be quite satisfied with their present situation. Their circumstances, their looks, their wealth and status, are all pleasing to them. They would say, “This is the best and the happiest time of my life. Thanks to the blessing of the Three Jewels, I’m so happy that even words cannot express my feeling.” To these people, we wish that their happiness thrives with each passing day. On the contrary, some people are simply unsatisfied with anything—the people around them, their body shape, their appearance, even a dish just served to them—you name it. Because they just simply frown at whatever they see and hear, all situations they encounter could become unpleasant and undesirable. Just as it is said in the *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment*, “All appearances have arisen as enemies.” Their situations are also

similar to being in the Incessant Hell, where their six sense faculties only perceive objects of suffering—everything they see is repulsive, everything they hear is grotesque, everything they smell is offensive, and so forth.

To these people, since their present experiences are the ripened effect of their previous karma, even Ksitigarbha would find it challenging to quickly improve their situations. Imagine an ugly person praying to Ksitigarbha seeking beauty in this very life. Since one's appearance is the ripened karmic result from previous lives, Ksitigarbha would not be able to make a dramatic change on it immediately. When sentient beings' karma has ripened into effect or has matured into a result, even Buddha Shakyamuni cannot change it with his miraculous power. Nevertheless, as long as we pray sincerely, virtuous roots will start to grow in our minds which will ripen into virtuous results in the future.

Another point that I want to mention is the importance of “seven” in the Buddhist practice. This number appears frequently in Buddhist scriptures. For instance, in the *Amitabha Sutra*, the Buddha said to Shariputra, “If a good man or woman who hears of Amitabha holds fast to his name even for one day, two days, three, four, five, six, or seven days with a concentrated and undistracted mind, then, at the hour of death, Amitabha will appear with a host of holy ones. Consequently, when their life comes to an end, the



aspirants' minds will not fall into confusion and they will be born immediately in the Land of Utmost Bliss of Amitabha."

Some people may wonder why Buddhist practices or retreats are always held for a period of seven days or its multiples. This is because in Buddhism, seven is a number that builds up the condition for perfection or represents perfection. As a matter of fact, the number seven is not only special to Buddhism, it is also special in other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and many other religions where the number seven connotes such concepts as completion and perfection, exoneration and healing, and the fulfillment of promises. A week of seven days has long been accepted globally in the modern world. When people make a plan to get certain project done, they often schedule their process by week. The number seven thus indeed marks the completion of something.

The four major Dharma assemblies at Larung Gar are also held on a seven-day basis. They are the Vajrasattva Dharma Assembly, the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly, the Sukhavati Dharma Assembly, and the Vidyadhara Dharma Assembly. The first three are all held for seven days. As for the last one, it is a Dharma gathering that focuses on the practice of the sadhana of the *Nine Deities of Avalokiteshvara* composed by Lerab Lingpa, a powerful practice of magnetization. Originally, it was held for seven days just as

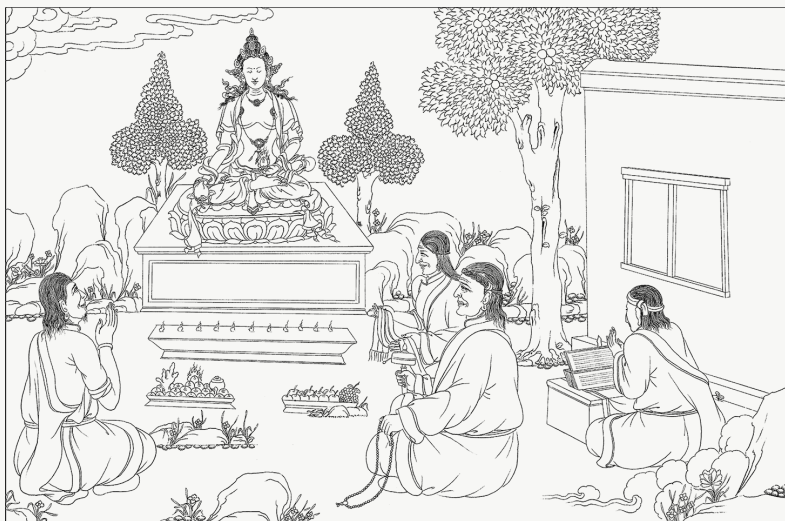
the other Dharma gatherings. However, His Holiness later said that in order to gain freedom over our own body and mind, more importantly, in order to more effectively spread the Buddhadharma and bring happiness and benefit to living beings, we need to strengthen our practice of the magnetizing activity and practicing for only seven days was not enough. He decided that it should be doubled. Since then, the Vidyadhara Dharma Assembly at Larung Gar has been held for fourteen days.

Regarding other great Dharma gatherings held in different Tibetan monasteries, they are mostly held for three to seven days, as in the case of the Vajrakilaya Drupcho, the Drubpa Kagye Drupcho, and the Mahakala Drupcho. Doing seven-day retreat is also very popular in Han Buddhism, such as the seven-day Medicine Buddha retreat, the seven-day Amitabha recitation retreat, and the seven-day Avatamsaka retreat. Of course, all of them can be held for multiple seven days. Because seven is a number that carries auspicious dependent arising for perfection, many Dharma activities are held for seven days or multiples of seven. If you are planning to do a short retreat of meditation or other specific practice, for example, to recite the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it would be best to do at least three days or seven days.

## PRACTICE VIRTUES ON SPECIAL DAYS

“Furthermore, Universally Vast, in the future on the first, eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, eighteenth, twenty-third, twenty-fourth, twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth days of the [lunar] month, the offenses of living beings will be compiled and the degrees of seriousness assessed. The acts and thoughts of the beings of Jambudvīpa are invariably karma and wrongdoing. How much more so when they give themselves over to killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech—hundreds of thousands of offenses! If they are able to read this sutra aloud once in front of the images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, holy ones, and worthies on these ten observance days, there will not be disaster or calamity for a hundred yojanas to the north, south, east, and west. Those in their families, both young and old, will be apart from the lower realms now and throughout hundreds of thousands of years in the future. If they can recite this sutra once on each of the ten observance days, in the present life there will not

**be untoward dire events and illnesses in the family, and there will be food and clothing in abundance.**



As is frequently quoted by many great masters, the Buddha says here that for beings of this world, all their acts and thoughts would invariably be karma and wrongdoing. It is even worse for those who indulge in non-virtues such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. However, if a person recites this sutra aloud once on the ten observance days mentioned in the text, then no calamity, whether natural or caused by evil influences, will come to the four directions of his residence within hundreds of miles. Also, the whole household, including both the elderly and young, will not take rebirth in the lower realms for the present and future

hundreds of thousands of years. Their family members will not suffer any serious diseases nor untimely death, they will be well-fed and well-clad, and abundant wealth will come to them effortlessly. Such is the inconceivable benefit of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Therefore, regular recitation of this sutra is essential.

The ten days in every month are known as the Ten Days of Abstinence. They are considered special because, according to this sutra, on these days a person's crimes will be collected and their degree of seriousness will be assessed. In the same manner, the virtuous deeds will also be collected and assessed. Some other sutras talk about the Six Days of Abstinence, for instance, not including the first, eighteenth, twenty-fourth, and twenty-eighth days mentioned here. In *The Buddha Speaks of the Four Heavenly Kings Sutra*, it says that on these six days, different gods will descend to the human world to examine and take notes of all the virtuous and non-virtuous deeds sentient beings have conducted, and report to the four heavenly kings. Then the four heavenly kings will report to the Indra, and the Indra will then command the Lord of Lifespan to increase or decrease the lifespan of each sentient being according to the positive and negative deeds he has done.

In the following chapter, *Benefiting the Living and the Deceased*, it also says when people die, they will be taken to the Lord of Death who will decide in which realm they will be born according to the

positive and negative karma they have accumulated when alive. This procedure sounds a lot like that of a criminal investigation today. When a person is suspected of having been involved in a crime, the police will conduct an initial inquiry and investigation. Then the prosecutor will decide whether to bring the case to court based on the evidence uncovered by the police. If the case is taken to court, the judge and the jury will decide whether the suspect is guilty and hand down appropriate punishment.

Why do the Buddhist scriptures describe such a procedure? Sentient beings do indeed have this karmic experience. But is there actually a Lord of Death wearing a black hat in the bardo? Actually not. Because human beings are habituated towards experiencing a procedure before a suspect is convicted, when a person dies, such habitual tendency is projected into the external circumstance so that in the deceased's own experience it would appear to him that the Lord of Death and Hell Guards are examining all the virtuous and non-virtuous deeds that he or she has done during the past life before the corresponding sentences are handed down. But this is no more real than just a nightmare in which one falls into hell and is sentenced to remain in a certain hell for a certain period of time. So the descriptions in Buddhist scriptures are often in accord with sentient beings' karmic experience, which in turn is a result of the being's habitual tendencies.

That being so, if modern people die and fall into hell, their experience in the bardo and the ways they are punished in the hell could be different from those in the past. With today's high-tech products, such as smartphone and iPad, so intimately involved in our day-to-day life, it is very likely that after death, modern people will habitually see a computer instead of a book being placed in front of the Lord of Death which records their positive and negative deeds. The whole circumstance in hell could appear very modernized. It is the same with what would appear in our dreams. Before phone or computer was invented, these devices would never appear in anyone's dreams. Since we are now so accustomed to them, they often appear in our dreams. When we die, these devices would be projected into the external circumstances and the investigations and trials would be conducted in a similar manner to how they are done when we are alive.

There are those who do not believe these statements. They do not believe that hell exists or that it can change with times. The fact is that hell is nothing but the manifestation of our own karma. When our present life comes to an end, the karma we have created will ripen into effects and we have no choice but to immediately experience its consequences. This is a profound teaching worthy of deep contemplation.

The timing of the special days is not only mentioned in Han Buddhism, it is also stated in Tibetan Buddhism. In *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*, there is a verse that goes,

*At the full moon and the new moon,  
And on the eighth and twenty-ninth days of the month,  
As well as on the tenth days of the waxing and waning moon,  
By day, by night respectively,  
Labor in the practice of approach and of accomplishment,  
Confessing and restoring, offering the sacred feast.*

It means on the eighth, tenth, fifteenth, twenty-fifth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth days of a Tibetan month, practitioners should be diligent in the practice of approach and accomplishment, confession and restoration, as well as the tsok offering. As the Omniscient Longchenpa explained, on these six days, our inner wind-mind, channels, and essence-drops are different from the usual, and dakas and dakinis will gather. Especially in the morning of the tenth day and in the evening of the twenty-fifth day (the tenth of the waning moon), the holy assembly of dakas and dakinis will gather around the residences of Vajrayana practitioners. Practitioners should seize the occasion to perform tsok offering, and by doing so, samaya can be maintained in a pure way and attainments are easily accomplished. Anyway, there are especially auspicious



days for accumulating virtues in both Tibetan and Han Buddhism to accumulate virtues. Because these special occasions will create auspicious conditions for our personal practice, we should understand this and take advantage of these opportunities to act accordingly.

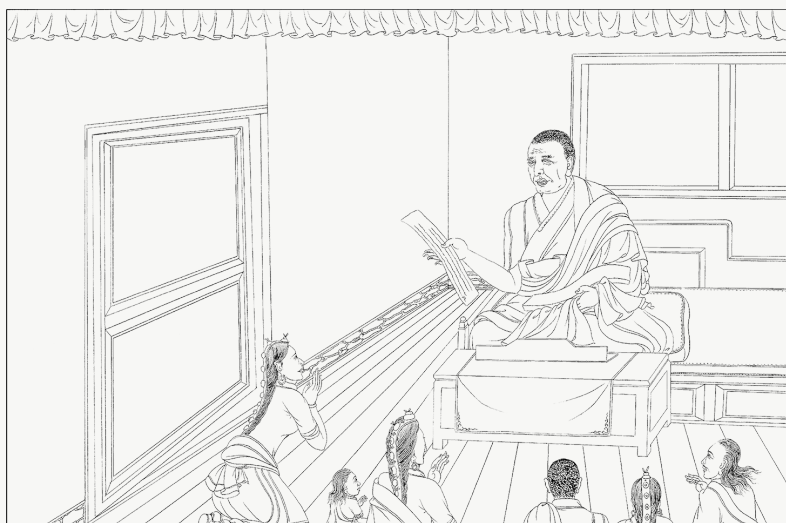
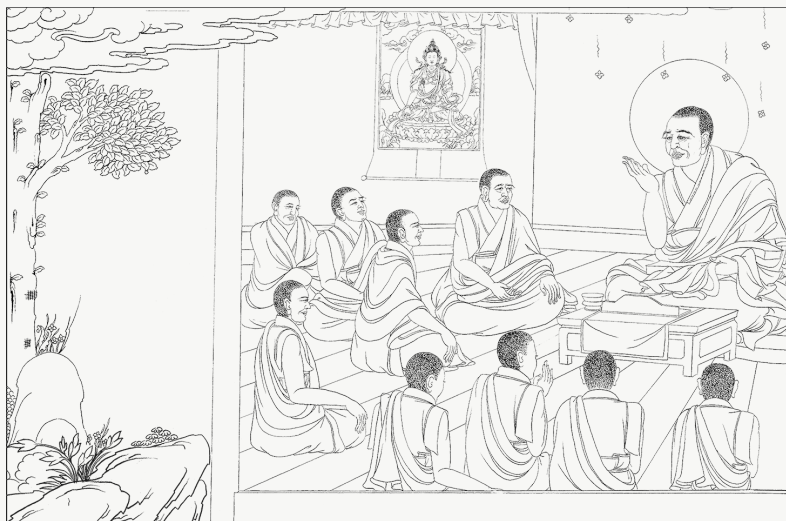
There are individual Buddhists or even Dharma teachers who interpret the Dharma teachings with their own discriminative thinking. Unlike the great masters of the past, they do not have a thorough mastery of the Dharma and are often poorly ignorant of key Buddhist tenets. If they act irresponsibly, they could ruin the Dharma rather than help it flourish. Therefore, I urge them to reflect and keep their own discriminative thinking to themselves rather than spreading it irresponsibly.

A few years ago, I heard that several monastics were giving Dharma teaching to lay practitioners on the condition that their listeners sign a confidentiality agreement to not disclose what they were taught to others. Why was it so? It was because the teaching did not conform to the authentic Dharma but was instead based on their own discriminative thinking, and they were afraid of being discovered. In order to seek personal profit and maintain their fame as a Dharma teacher, they demanded their lay Buddhist audience to keep their teaching secret. The truth is, the more you want a secret to stay hidden, the quicker it will be exposed to others. These

people were ignorant of the basic Buddhist tenets and lacked due respect for the Three Jewels, and yet they pretended to be learned Dharma teachers. Their behaviors could damage Buddhism and destroy the connections others have to Buddhism.

## MAKE KSITIGARBHA'S INCONCEIVABLE POWER KNOWN TO EVERYONE

**“Therefore, Universally Vast, you should know that through the power of his great awesome spiritual penetration, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has inexpressible hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of instances of benefiting [beings] such as these. Living beings of Jambudvipa have great cause and condition with this Great Being. If these living beings hear this Bodhisattva’s name, see this Bodhisattva’s image, or hear but three words, five words, a verse, or a sentence of this sutra, they will have superbly wonderful peace and happiness in the present life. For hundreds of thousands of myriads of lives in the future, they will always be good-looking and be reborn in respected and wealthy families.”**



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

I believe most of us desire these benefits. Last night, when I got home after my teaching session, there was a young Tibetan man waiting for me at the entrance to my yard. It was already pretty late. He wanted to attend college and he came to me seeking my support so that he may continue his studies. His destitute family could not afford the tuition. His words stirred up my empathy and I could not help but wonder why the world seemed to be quite unfair. Some people are extremely rich and seem to have everything. They live an extravagant and lavish life with money that never runs out. Whereas many others find it a struggle just to cover the costs of basic living, let alone to afford higher education. However, deep down, I know the so-called unfairness never truly exists because whatever we experience is the result of our accumulated karma.

Those who enjoy privilege in all aspects of life must have done something virtuous in the past. If we have faith in the karmic law and create positive karma by building a connection to Ksitigarbha, the benefits it can bring to our present and future lives will be unimaginably great.

Although all Eight Great Bodhisattvas share karmic affinity with sentient beings of this world, it is particularly meaningful with Ksitigarbha and numerous people have devoted their faith in Ksitigarbha. Actually, the most important reason for all buddhas and bodhisattvas to appear in the world is to open the door to the buddha wisdom and show it to living beings, to cause them to awaken to the buddha wisdom, and to induce them to enter the path of the buddha wisdom. We are fortunate to have such an extraordinary opportunity to encounter the precious Dharma and great teachers. Qualified Dharma teachers are like wish-fulfilling jewels that can grant us full enlightenment and ultimate liberation. Therefore, we should undoubtedly seize the opportunity to learn and practice the Dharma and free ourselves from the sufferings of samsara in this very life.

**At that time, after Universally Vast Bodhisattva had heard the Buddha Tathagata praise and extol Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, he knelt on his knees, joined his palms, and said to the Buddha once more, “World-Honored One, I have long known that this Great**

Being has such power of inconceivable spiritual penetration as well as power of great vows. For living beings in the future I make the request to the Tathagata, so that they may know such benefits. Yes, we receive [this Dharma teaching] most respectfully. World-Honored One, how should this sutra be named, and how should we propagate it?"



The Buddha told Universally Vast, "This sutra has three names: the first is called the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha*; it is also called the *Original Practices of Ksitigarbha*; and it is also called the *Power of the Original Vows of Ksitigarbha*. Because this Bodhisattva has made such profound vows throughout many long kalpas to benefit living beings, all of you should propagate it in accordance with these vows."

**After hearing this, Universally Vast joined his palms in respect, made obeisance, and withdrew.**

After hearing the Buddha's sincere praise to Ksitigarbha, Universally Vast knelt on one knee with his palms joined, which is a traditional gesture of paying obeisance from ancient India and told the Buddha his motivation for raising the question. Although he has long known Ksitigarbha's unimaginable spiritual power and his great vows, he asked the question for the sake of future beings so that they would know the benefits of paying respect to Ksitigarbha and engaging in the Ksitigarbha practice.

The bodhisattva Universally Vast was not alone in doing so. In the previous chapter Samantabhadra also purposely raised his question to Ksitigarbha in order to let sentient beings be aware of the suffering of lower realms. They all asked questions for the sake of sentient beings. Unlike when I was giving talks at universities where the audience raised many questions to clear their own doubts, these bodhisattvas raised questions to help ordinary beings understand the benefits of Ksitigarbha.

Universally Vast further asked the Buddha how this sutra should be named and how should it be propagated to other sentient beings in the future. The Buddha gave the sutra three names. The first is the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha* because this sutra talks about



how Ksitigarbha originally made his supreme vows, which can be summarized as “not attaining buddhahood until the hell is emptied.” This name is generally accepted by us now, and it is the name I adopted when I was translating it into Tibetan. The second is called the *Original Practices of Ksitigarbha*, because after Ksitigarbha made deep and vast vows, he diligently practiced to fulfill his vows. The last is called the *Power of the Original Vows of Ksitigarbha* because his vows carry unique and miraculous power that can liberate sentient beings. We may also vow to benefit sentient beings and try to put it into practice, but as ordinary beings, our vows may not carry such great power as that of Ksitigarbha’s. But because Ksitigarbha’s vow carries a unique power to liberate sentient beings, by praying and paying respect to Ksitigarbha we would gradually gain such power as well.

The second question on how this sutra is to be propagated is also extremely important. By answering it, the Buddha clearly instructed us on how we should spread this teaching and the Ksitigarbha practice. In brief, we should propagate it in accordance with Ksitigarbha’s vows. Ksitigarbha has taken great vows to benefit sentient beings in all his lifetimes and over countless kalpas. He has never thought about his own welfare, such as his health, happiness, rest, or nourishment. His sole purpose is to bring temporary and ultimate benefits to all beings. As long as this wish

can be fulfilled, Ksitigarbha is prepared to do whatever it takes, even including going to hell. Therefore, when we propagate this teaching, we should try to avoid selfish motivation like finding a companion, or seeking a career or reputation and wealth. Instead, we should propagate this teaching with an altruistic motivation like Ksitigarbha has done to benefits sentient beings. This is the best way for us to propagate this sutra and such a motivation is the purest and bears the greatest power. I hope that we will all emulate Ksitigarbha and vow to benefit sentient beings through the Ksitigarbha practice for the rest of our lives and in all future lifetimes to come.

## Dedication

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