

**ORIGINAL VOWS OF
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA
SUTRA**

Chapter Seven

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 Seven

Benefiting the Living and the Deceased

In the bardo state, the consciousnesses of the deceased individuals desperately and constantly wish that their families would make merit for them. That is why it is necessary to conduct virtuous deeds on behalf of the dead.

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture Fifteen

August 14th, 2020

EFFICACY STORY: PRACTICE VIRTUE WITH BODHICITTA

Since you have participated in the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly today, you may be a bit tired for the lecture tonight. I will try to finish today's teaching quickly. How about in just a couple of minutes? Just kidding, it is impossible.

I would like to start with a story from the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*. In the Song Dynasty, there was a monk named Ding Fa in the Kong Guan Monastery, the name of which literally means the monastery of meditating on emptiness. Every month, Ding Fa painted several images of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. He prostrated and prayed in front of these images regularly, aspiring to see Ksitigarbha in person. He still had not seen any sign of Ksitigarbha after doing this for three years.

One day, a young guest monk came to the monastery and requested accommodation. Ding Fa went to greet him. The young monk said

to him, “Now your wish has been fulfilled. But why is your aspiration so limited?” After speaking those words, the young monk disappeared without a trace. When others learned of this incident, they commented that because of Ding Fa’s limited aspiration to just seeing Ksitigarbha in person instead of seeking to attain liberation, the bodhisattva manifested as the young monk who disappeared after seeing Ding Fa to teach him a lesson. Ding Fa also realized that his aspiration was too limited and he then resolved to generate bodhicitta to achieve supreme enlightenment.

Later, Ding Fa had a dream and he heard a voice saying, “The young monk was me, Ksitigarbha. You only wanted to see me but you have not generated bodhicitta. Therefore, I came and urged you to arouse the supreme mind of awakening. Since you have painted a great number of images of me, this will free you from the three lower realms in all your future lifetimes. You will be reborn in the Tushita Heaven after this life. When Maitreya becomes the Buddha, he will prophesy your attainment of buddhahood. I will be always with you, like your shadow, inseparable from your body.”

After he woke up, Master Ding Fa was so moved that he spent all his possessions to make a life-size statue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, inside which he placed all the Ksitigarbha images he had painted before. Ding Fa frequently prostrated in front of this statue and

made offerings. Miraculously, the statue emitted light, a vivid evidence of the inconceivable blessing of Ksitigarbha.

Initially, Ding Fa only had the wish to see Ksitigarbha in person. Because of his sincere persistence, he received a direct instruction from Ksitigarbha which expanded his motivation to the great aspiration of bodhicitta. When we engage in any virtuous practice, it is important to persevere with the practice and tune our minds to bodhicitta. Initially, our motivation to benefit and enlighten all beings may be unnatural or forced, and difficult. However, as long as we continue to make such aspirations, our minds will be transformed and genuine bodhicitta will emerge.

BEINGS OF JAMBUDVIPA ALWAYS COMMIT WRONGDOING



Chapter Seven

Benefiting the Living and the Deceased

At that time, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said to the

Buddha, “World-Honored One, I observe that the mental stirring and thoughts of living beings of Jambudvīpa are [almost] always wrongdoings. Although now and then they [may generate virtuous thoughts and] gain good benefits, they mostly retreat from their initial resolve. If they encounter evil conditions, in every thought they increase and add to [the unwholesome]. These people are as if walking in the mire and carrying heavy rocks. They would become more trapped and weighted down as their feet would sink deeper with each step. [...]

This chapter mainly talks about two things as taught by Kṣitigarbha: how the alive gain benefits through the *Kṣitigarbha Sūtra*, and how the deceased gain benefits and liberation through this sūtra. In the previous chapter, the Buddha said that “the acts and thoughts of the beings of Jambudvīpa are invariably karma and wrongdoing.” Here Kṣitigarbha repeated the same words that the mental activities and thoughts of living beings in this world are always wrongdoing. If we examine ourselves carefully, we will find that virtuous thoughts such as loving-kindness, compassion, altruism, and faithful devotion do not often arise in our minds, while non-virtuous thoughts, such as greed, hatred, jealousy, arrogance, cunning, or deceptiveness appear continuously.

It is quite true that ordinary people create negative karma in almost every mental activity and action. Even though they may perform a

few virtuous deeds and gain some benefits, their virtuous thoughts would just disappear as quickly as a flash of lightning in the dark night. They often regress from their initial determinations due to obstacles in this life or their karmic obscurations from previous lives. If they encounter unfavorable conditions such as a negative friend, a bad circumstance, or a misleading book of wrong views, their negativities will increase in almost every thought and act, leading them to eventually fall into the lower realms. As it is said in Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*,

*Most people cling to
An unwholesome direction,
Thus most common beings
Certainly go to bad rebirths.*

Because most people engage in unvirtuous deeds, they will fall into the lower realms after death. The six classes of sentient beings are distributed like a pyramid, with the lowest at the bottom and the highest at the top. The population in the hell realm is the biggest, next is the hungry ghost realm, and then the animal realm followed by the human being realm. The number of celestial beings in the four formless heavens, the highest heavens in samsara that require a high level of meditative attainment, would be a lot less than the 7.8 billion in the human realm.

In this human world, there are fewer people who are virtuous than those who are not. Among people who are virtuous, those possessing all eighteen freedoms and advantages for Dharma practice are even rarer. There are very few people who can study and practice the Buddha's teaching in the systematic way of listening, contemplating, and meditating. As the Buddha and Ksitigarbha described here, most people in this human world constantly create negative karma. Like those walking in a swamp and carrying heavy rocks, their feet would sink deeper with each step. The farther they go, the deeper they sink and the heavier the burden. There is no way for them to get out of the lower realms.

It is particularly true in this modern world, except for those who had auspicious connections with the Dharma in their previous lifetimes, most people will have difficulty proceeding with their Dharma practice. Their virtuous thoughts only appear occasionally and they have great difficulty in performing virtuous deeds. I would sometimes inquire about some of my old Dharma friends who once were quite diligent practitioners but are now preoccupied with many mundane issues and no longer spare time for Dharma practice. They are often worried and distressed by trivialities. Instead of making progress, some of them have even completely regressed from their previous practice. This makes me realize that

many people have great difficulties in making progress in their spiritual practice.

“[...] If such a person can meet a virtuous friend, this person’s burden will be lightened or even completely removed, because such a virtuous friend has great strength. Furthermore, the virtuous friend will lend him support, advise him to keep his steps firm and steady, and point out that once he reaches the level ground, he should beware of the bad road and not walk on it again.

If the person who carries a heavy burden in a swamp is fortunate enough to have a kind friend who has the power to help, his heavy load can be lightened or even completely removed by this friend. With the support and advice of this friend, this person would be able to take firm and steady steps forward and eventually reach level ground. Once there, he should take care to avoid walking again into the swamp.

In the same manner, for sentient beings carrying heavy burdens of karma and afflictions, it is very difficult to move forward on their own in the mire of samsara. However, if such a person fortunately encounters a virtuous spiritual teacher, his burdens of karma will be lightened or even completely removed. Relying on the teacher’s support and instructions, he will be able to arrive at a safer place.

As he realizes how much suffering he has experienced in samsara, he will resolve forever to be free from such a place of danger and torture.

We are just like the person who is carrying a heavy burden and mired in a swamp. If we have not met our gurus or virtuous spiritual teachers, we will sink deeper and deeper into the mire of samsara. We have already committed a lot of negativities in this present life. Without their guidance, we will continue to accumulate even more in future lifetimes. Fortunately, we have not only encountered virtuous teachers but we have also received precious instructions from them. There is hope that we will be able to free ourselves from samsara and attain ultimate liberation.

In the *Sutra of the Collection of All Virtuous Roots*, it says,

We should approach virtuous spiritual teachers,

Who can obstruct our negativities

And teach us what the Buddha advocates.

They are those whom we should be close to.

They teach in accordance with the path of the Buddha,

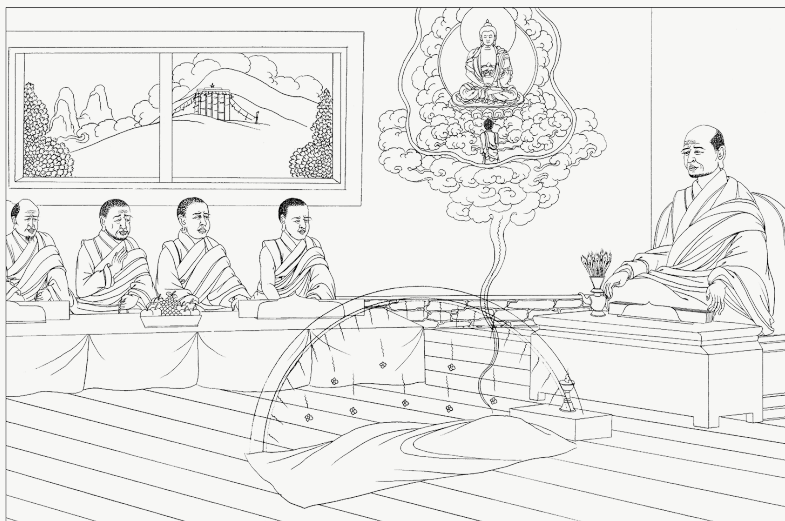
Through which our virtues will be cultivated.

Abiding in teachings of what we hear from them,

Our wisdom will be increased.

Virtuous spiritual teachers can help us end our wrongdoings. Following their guidance, our minds can be tamed and transformed, and we will be able to attain both temporary happiness in the human and celestial realms and the ultimate benefit of liberation. We are truly fortunate to have encountered these virtuous spiritual teachers and been able to rely on them. We should cherish all their teachings and put them into practice.

BENEFIT THE DYING



“World-Honored One, living beings who are accustomed to evil begin with a minute amount then quickly escalate into measureless [evil]. Because these beings have such a habit, when they are about to depart this life, their parents and relatives should make merit in their behalf to assist them on the road ahead. This may be done by hanging banners and canopies and lighting oil lamps, by reciting the sacred sutras, by making offerings

in veneration to the images of Buddhas and holy ones, as well as by reciting the names of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and pratyek-abuddhas in such a way that the recitation of each name reaches the ear of the dying one and may be heard in his fundamental consciousness.

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is well aware of the habitual tendencies of sentient beings in this world. They are often accustomed to committing negativities, starting with non-virtuous actions such as killing, stealing, lying, or divisive talk. They then create more and more negative karma until it becomes unconstrained. If these beings fail to purify their negativities when they are still alive, they will endure terrible suffering upon their death and their future lives will also be full of pain. Therefore, it is of great importance that their families and relatives make merit for them at the time of their death and after their death. By doing so, they could obtain a good rebirth and have an opportunity to attain liberation. Otherwise, since they have committed karmic offenses when they were alive, they would only continue with their habitual tendencies to create even more negativities and thus sink into the lower realms forever.

What types of merit could their family members make for them?

Hang Banners and Canopies

The first virtuous practice for the dying is to hang banners, flags, and canopies. In Chinese Buddhism, the word *Fan* (幡), translated into banners in the text, is a collective name for all kinds of prayer flags and banners. Among them, Tibetan prayer flags are probably one of the most popular types. Tibetan prayer flags and Chinese prayer banners are slightly different. Some may think that a banner is just a rectangular flag. Yet, if it is just a piece of plain cloth with no name or mantra of buddhas or bodhisattvas printed on it, it would bring no benefit to the dying or the deceased.

According to the Chinese Buddhist tradition, most prayer banners would have the names of buddhas or bodhisattvas, such as “Namo Amitabha Buddha” or “Namo Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva” printed on them. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, prayer flags are commonly printed with the Amitabha mantra, Mani mantra, Vajrasattva mantra, and so on. Prayer flags hang everywhere in the Tibetan regions, especially in places for burial, such as crematories, charnel grounds, and rivers used for water burials. Tibetan people have the tradition of hanging a lot of prayer flags for the benefits of both the dying and the deceased.

Some may wonder if there is any scriptural evidence proving the benefits of hanging prayer flags or banners. In Tibetan Buddhism,

many such descriptions can be found in works of great masters such as Karma Chakme Rinpoche and Karma Lingpa. There are related stories in journals of traveling in bardo recorded by Mahasiddhas and Dakinis. Also, in many termas revealed by various great tertons, it is said that even the wind that flaps the prayer flags can enable one to attain liberation.

In Chinese Buddhism, there is a 12-volume tantra called *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra*, which was translated by the Kuchean master Po Srimitra in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. I have not yet found a Tibetan translation. This tantra has a similar statement: “Prayer banners flap in the wind. They will be blown into pieces and become dust in the end. By touching the wind that blows the dust, one will obtain immense merit.” Even the dust of prayer banners or flags can bring immense benefit to those who touch them.

Since sacred mantras or names are printed on prayer flags and banners, they are indeed the representatives of the Three Jewels and we should hang them in places that are clean and tidy. For instance, it is not good to hang them by the side of the road or at the door of a building because in these locations, people may easily step on the disintegrated pieces, which will cause them negative karma. During the time when I was in middle school, religious policy was quite restrictive and prayer flag hanging was not permitted. There was a person who slandered the benefit of hanging prayer flags

and burned them in public. This person quickly received severe retributions. He had many negative experiences even on the day he burned prayer flags.

Light Oil Lamps

The second helpful practice is to light oil lamps for the dying. Traditionally, oil lamps were lit not only at one's passing but for forty-nine days thereafter. Regarding the number of oil lamps to be offered, it can be one hundred, one thousand, or even ten thousand lamps every day. The more the better. It is best to keep one or seven oil lamps lit continuously for forty-nine days. Or at least, oil lamps should not be extinguished until the dead body is disposed of.

Recite Sacred Sutras

Family members can recite sutras such as the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra*, *Pratimoksha Sutra*, and *Chanting the Names of Noble Manjushri* for the dying. In Tibetan regions, *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* is a must-recite tantra for the dying and the deceased. Reciting this tantra for forty-nine days after a person dies is a common practice for all Tibetans. People would make all efforts to invite monastics to recite this tantra for their deceased family members. Money and food are usually offered to monastics to support their chanting. If a poor person dies without any relatives, his neighbors or people in his village would voluntarily

collect money to do this for seven days, fourteen days, or twenty-one days. On the contrary, if a family has good income but does not follow this custom for the deceased, everyone would conclude that the family is not kind and it will definitely be criticized.

Make Offerings and Recite the Names of Noble Ones

Other virtuous actions that would greatly help the dying include making offerings to buddhas, bodhisattvas, and great masters, and reciting the names of noble ones such as buddhas and bodhisattvas. As long as the recitation of these names reaches the ear of the dying, a virtuous root will be planted in his or her fundamental consciousness, alaya consciousness. Such a virtuous root will bring the dying great benefits in future lives and will eventually lead this person to liberation.

“These dying beings, should the results brought about by the unwholesome karma they generated be reckoned, would certainly fall into the lower realms. However, by virtue of their relatives’ cultivating these noble causes in their behalf, their manifold [torments of] offenses can be dissolved. [...]

Relying upon the virtues cultivated by their family members in their names, the offenses of the dying beings can be purified,

allowing them the opportunity to attain liberation. *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra* says, “If the deceased have committed negative karma that will cause them to be born in the eight circumstances that prevent true practice of the Dharma, the merit of hanging prayer banners and making light offerings will grant them liberation from these circumstances.” Therefore, whether we hang prayer banners and flags, make light offerings, or recite sutras and tantras such as *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, the dying will certainly gain benefits and be freed from their negative karma.

The Thought upon Death

I would like to further explain how virtuous deeds can be beneficial for the dying. In Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, it says, “Although practicing virtues the whole life, generating a non-virtuous thought at the time of death will cause one to fall into a lower realm. Although practicing non-virtues the whole life, generating a virtuous thought at the time of death will lead one to the celestial realm.” Therefore, what one is thinking at the moment of death can be a determining factor for one’s next life. With a good thought, one will take a good rebirth, while with a bad thought, one will have to take a bad rebirth. It is important for us to tune our minds to a virtuous state at the time of death.

In the same manner, the thought one has just before falling asleep could also impact one's dream. If you think too much before bed, you may find it hard to fall asleep or you may have a bad dream. If you fall asleep with a virtuous thought, usually you will have a good dream. I always pray to my guru H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche before going to bed, and thus maintain my mind in a virtuous and peaceful state. Normally my dreams are good and auspicious.

Two Things to Be Avoided for the Dying

There are a couple of points that relatives of the dying should be aware of. According to the Vinaya teaching, when a person is dying, one should avoid saying any negative words to him, but should say something positive and encouraging. Statements such as "you have committed grave offenses and you will fall into the lower realms" should definitely be avoided. Instead, if one tells the dying person that "by the blessings of buddhas and bodhisattvas, all your offenses will be purified and you will head to a good rebirth," this person would be relieved from his worry and anxiety and have a nice new life.

Another point is not to cry in front of the dying person. Great masters all tirelessly exhorted not to cry out loud next to the person who is dying. As said in *Longshu's Pure Land Text*, "When one

suffers from severe diseases and is going to die, his relatives should neither cry loudly nor sigh anxiously in front of this person as it will disturb his mind and cause him to lose mindfulness.” When a dying person hears the people around him crying, he would be disturbed from his original tranquil state. In such cases, the person would mostly generate even stronger attachment to this current life and such clinging would lead him to a lower realm.

BENEFIT THE DECEASED

“[...] If relatives can furthermore widely perform many good deeds during the seven seven-day periods after the death of such beings, then the deceased will be able to leave the lower realms forever, be reborn as humans and devas, and experience excellent, wonderful happiness. The living relatives will themselves receive measureless benefits.

Why Forty-Nine Days?

Ksitigarbha emphasized that it is important to perform virtuous deeds for the deceased in a period of forty-nine days after their death, which will greatly benefit both the deceased and the living. Why should it be forty-nine days? According to Vasubandhu’s *Auto-Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*, most sentient beings will spend forty-nine days in their bardo state before going to the next life. Yet, those with special karma may take a longer time. *A Forest of Gem in the Garden of Dharma* tells a story about a governor named Guo Quan in the Song Dynasty who had not been able to take

rebirth for more than 30 years after his death. Finally, he found his daughter and daughter-in-law and requested them to offer meals to thirty monks on his behalf. It is said that after the meal offering, he was freed from such karmic retribution and took rebirth. H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once also said that in some Dakinis' travel journals in bardo, there are records that some people were not able to head to the next life for more than three years after their death.

Although forty-nine days are the general time length of the stay for sentient beings in bardo, there are cases that those with special karma cannot take rebirth within such a period of time. For example, just like the procedure of applying for a country's visa which may have a general duration of seven days, there could be applicants who would have to go through a special review process that could take a lot longer.

Who Is King Yama?

In both Tibetan and Chinese traditions, King Yama is regarded as the chief judge in the human realm, evaluating all sentient beings' karma and determining their punishment in hell. King Yama and hells are not just myths created by our conceptual mind. As long as the karma of a sentient being leads him to take a rebirth in hell after death, he will see King Yama in person and experience the

suffering of hell as a result of the maturation of his karma and habitual tendencies. It is as if you are in a dream where you would have the same body you have in this life and engage in similar activities you do in your daily life; all of these scenes manifest merely on the ground of your habitual tendencies.

As a result of different habitual tendencies, King Yama appears in different forms in different cultures. Indians may see King Yama as an Indian with a beard or other distinctive features that only Indians possess. While Tibetans, Chinese, or people of other ethnicities may see King Yama as a person possessing features of their own ethnic groups. This is because different sentient beings have different habitual tendencies in their alaya consciousnesses. This is a very profound concept in Buddhism and I hope you will have the opportunity to delve into these teachings in depth. Once you develop a deep understanding of habitual tendency and alaya consciousness, most Dharma teachings will become clear to you.

Virtuous Practices for the Deceased

It is crucial to perform virtuous deeds for the deceased within forty-nine days after their death. In my monastery, Dhomang Monastery, there is a building with ten prayer rooms particularly prepared for the deceased where local people can recite prayers for their deceased family members for forty-nine days. These prayer

rooms are used by different families daily throughout the whole year, regardless of spring, summer, autumn, or winter. Sometimes all rooms are occupied, sometimes two or three rooms are used. When I visited the monastery the other day, someone humorously introduced these rooms as the “Hotel for the Dead.”

As a whole, Tibetans tend to follow the tradition to make merit for the deceased and assist them on the road heading to next life. When a person dies, his family members, friends, and neighbors will perform various virtuous things for him to ensure that he has good merit to support his next life. They will print and hang prayer flags, light oil lamps, recite Buddhist scriptures, and make offerings to the Three Jewels. Everyone will practice virtues and accumulate merit on behalf of the deceased. This is different from the customs in many other places where people would only bring monetary gifts for the family of the deceased and then enjoy a luxurious banquet that usually serves meat, creating even more negative karma for the deceased.

During the famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s, conditions in most places did not permit the recitation of any prayer or the performance of any virtuous deed for the deceased. It was very difficult for the family that they had to quickly deal with the bodies of those who died of starvation. They were not even able to light a butter lamp or hang a piece of prayer flag for them. The ones who

survived all felt great remorse for not being able to make any merit for the deceased. When the situation finally improved, they did all they could to locate the remains of their deceased family members and performed Buddhist pujas for them so that they can still be blessed and gain merit for their next life.

These traditions and practices are not so common outside of Tibet. I suspect that most Han Chinese or Westerners have not heard of *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, not to mention inviting monastics to recite this tantra. They usually hold a funeral ceremony to memorize the deceased for a couple of days. Other than that, nothing more is done to help the deceased gain a better rebirth. At any rate, as you now study Buddhism and become Dharma practitioners, you should know how crucial it is to make merit for your deceased family members or friends. For example, you can invite a few monastics or lay practitioners to recite sutras and tantras such as *Chanting the Names of Noble Manjushri* or *The Ritual of Liberating the Dying and the Deceased* for forty-nine days. Some lay Buddhist groups voluntarily recite rituals and prayers for the dead. These are very meaningful practices for both the living and the deceased.

Knowing that it is important to perform virtuous deeds for the dying and the deceased, we, as Buddhists, need to put what we have learned into practice. When a relative or a friend dies, we

should use all our knowledge to make merit for the dead. It would be a pity that after learning all these teachings one would still not know what to do in real life. What Ksitigarbha has taught here is very much related to our daily life. It is truly important to engage in virtues for the deceased, such as reciting sutras, hanging prayer flags, making light offerings, or making tsa-tsas within forty-nine days after their death. We should keep these teachings in our minds and put them into practice as needed.

A Story of Fan Zhongyan

Although performing these virtuous deeds seems quite simple, it can truly bring immense benefits to the dying and the deceased. In the last lecture, we talked about the story of a woman who was saved from the suffering of difficult childbirth by the virtue of making a Ksitigarbha statue. I want to share with you another story of Fan Zhongyan, the most prominent figures of the Song Dynasty, who saved his deceased mother by dedicating to her the merit of reciting the *Diamond Sutra*.

On the 21st day after the death of his mother, Fan had a vision of his mother in his dream, telling him that she was experiencing tremendous suffering in the bardo and that if she did not accumulate enough merit as soon as possible, she would fall into hell. She requested Fan to recite the *Diamond Sutra* to generate the

necessary merit for her. Fan Zhongyan was deeply shocked and woke up immediately. With tears welling up in his eyes, he bathed and observed the eight one-day precepts on his mother's behalf. Then he went to Xuanmu Chan Monastery to respectfully invite the monastics to recite the *Diamond Sutra* for seven days for his deceased mother.

On the night of the sixth day, he dreamed of his mother again, saying, "Your sincere devotion and virtuous deeds even moved the great bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara). He joined the monastics and recited half of the *Diamond Sutra* today. Now thanks to the great power of this sutra, my negative karma of previous lives has been purified and I will take rebirth in the celestial realm. You can go to the monastery tomorrow morning to find the manifestation of Guanyin, the monk who recited half of the *Diamond Sutra*."

Next day, the seven-day recitation of the *Diamond Sutra* was completed. Fan Zhongyan went to the monastery and made a grand offering to the monks who recited the sutra for his mother. He asked them respectfully, "Had any of you recited only half of the sutra yesterday?" The monks were all confounded and answered him, "We were required to recite the full sutra. Why would we recite only half of it?" Then, a monk standing beside the assembly said calmly, "When the monks were reciting the sutra yesterday, I

was standing on the side and recited silently. As I finished half of the sutra, you came to the monastery to make offerings, so I went back to the kitchen to continue my work. Now that you have asked, I will tell you honestly.”

Hearing his words, Fan Zhongyan realized that this monk was Avalokiteshvara and prostrated to him immediately. The monk replied, “Mo! Mo! Mo!” In Chinese it means please don’t do this. Then the monk suddenly rose high into the air and disappeared. Afterwards, as they learned that the monk was the manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, both monastics and lay people were full of devotion. In order to commemorate this special experience, Fan Zhongyan built the Mo Mo Chan Meditation Hall.

This story shows how indispensable it is to accumulate merit for the dying and the deceased. Relying upon the merit of reciting the *Diamond Sutra*, Fan’s mother was able to be reborn in the celestial realm. This is also a vivid example that shows many people, including prominent figures, would turn to religions for help when they encounter special situations. In the end, they would need to accept the existence of situations such as bardo and reincarnation, and then rely on the power of the Three Jewels to gain liberation.

NON-VIRTUOUS DEEDS BRING THE DECEASED HARM

“Therefore, in the presence of the Buddha, World-Honored One, as well as devas, nagas, and others of the eight classes of beings, humans, non-humans, and others, I now exhort living beings of Jambudvīpa to be careful—do not kill, harm [beings], generate evil conditions, or worship and offer sacrifices to ghosts and spirits, or seek the help of goblins on the days when someone is nearing death. Why? Your killing, harming, worshipping, offering sacrifices, and so forth are not the least bit helpful to the deceased, but bind up conditions of wrongdoing so that they become deeper and more severe. If in this life or in the future the departed one gains elements of holiness and is to be reborn among humans or devas, but because his relatives commit these evil causes [for his sake] when he is on the verge of death, he will become involved in dispute and be delayed from being reborn in an upper realm. How much worse the situation will be

for the dying persons who never had even a few roots of goodness from their lifetime! Each of them will undergo the lower realms in accordance with his own karma; how can he bear to have relatives add to that karma? It is as if there was a person who had traveled from afar. He had been out of food for three days and carrying a load that weighed more than a hundred kilogram. Suddenly he came upon a neighbor who attached a few more things to it. He would be even more burdened then.



Ksitigarbha continues to urge beings of Jambudvīpa not to do improper things that will create more offenses for the deceased. One should avoid killing because it creates severely negative karma for both the deceased and the living. In 1995, His Holiness Jigme

Phuntsok Rinpoche was sick and stayed in the Pidū District of Chengdu for a long time. People there had a special custom to memorize the deceased. They beat gongs and drums at the funeral ceremony. When burying the dead body, they would kill a chicken at the burial grounds to make animal sacrifice. Such action is brutal and not only brings no merit for the dead, it further increases their negative karma. The *Dharmapadavadana Sutra* says, “If one wants to gain merit through killing, it only keeps merit far away.” It is impossible to accumulate merit through killing and such thought is truly mistaken.

Other things that beings of Jambudvīpa should avoid are worshipping and offering sacrifices to ghosts and spirits or seeking the help of goblins. All these actions are not only the least bit helpful to the deceased but will only increase their burden, like adding fuel to the fire, bringing no benefit to the deceased at all. The deceased are already suffering terribly from the retribution of various offenses they have committed themselves. It would be worse if their relatives and friends create even more negative karma for them.

Imagine the merit a deceased person has accumulated when he was alive or the merit made by his relatives on his behalf is sufficient to allow him to take birth in Amitabha’s Pure Land, become a bodhisattva, or at least take rebirth in the human and celestial realms. However, his family members decide to make sacrificial

offerings for him when he is on the verge of death. As a result, he will become embroiled in disputes with the sentient beings that have been killed by his family members on his behalf. King Yama will then have to judge whether he needs to be responsible for the retribution of killing or not. The actions of his relatives have brought him non-virtuous karma and thus potentially compromising the corresponding effects of his virtuous karma. He could have attained good rebirth and liberation, yet the negative karma created by his relatives on his behalf could prevent this result from happening. This is similar to a prisoner who has tried his best to earn the credits to get an early release, yet because of the negative actions taken by his relatives or friends on his behalf, early release has become less hopeful. Although his relatives all had a good intention, instead of helping him, they have made things more complicated and brought him negative consequences.

If even sentient beings with virtuous karma may not be able to bear all the negative karma their relatives could add to them, how would those beings with almost no virtue be able to handle it? Their own negative karma is already heavy enough to push them to fall into the lower realms. It would get worse if others accumulate even more negative karma on their behalf, such as killing, including making animal sacrifices. In some spiritual traditions, sheep and cows are buried together with the deceased as burial objects. In

ancient times, even human beings were buried alive with the dead ones as human sacrifice. These actions are indeed horrendous and unacceptable.

Ksitigarbha used an analogy to further explain this concept. A person carrying an extremely heavy load had traveled from afar and had not eaten for three days. It was getting very difficult for him to continue to walk. Unexpectedly, his neighbor appeared and asked him to carry some additional objects, further burdening him. Likewise, the dying person is already burdened with a lot of negative karma, his situation would only become worse if his relatives add even more negativities to him. Their actions not only do not relieve his suffering, they could make his liberation even more unreachable. It is a pity that in many places people still follow these bad customs and accumulate severely negative karma for the deceased.

PERFORM GOOD DEEDS WHILE ALIVE

“World-Honored One, I see that as long as living beings of Jambudvīpa are able to follow the teachings of the Buddhas, or even just perform good deeds as little as a strand of hair, a drop of water, a grain of sand, or a speck of dust, they themselves will gain all the benefits.”

Kṣitigarbha speaks of how to gain benefits for living beings of Jambudvīpa. If they are able to perform even very small virtuous deeds in accordance with the Buddha’s teachings, accumulating merit by relying on the object of the Three Jewels, they will gain all the benefits generated from their virtuous deeds, no matter how small they are.

Cherish the Freedom to Practice the Dharma

It is essential to engage in virtuous practices when we are alive. We cannot rely on the virtues others perform for us after our

death. We may have asked our family members to recite prayers for us for forty-nine days after we die. However, it is never certain whether others would be able to arrange these things or not because everything is impermanent and unreliable. As the old saying goes, “Out of sight, out of mind.” They may completely forget everything after we die, or there are no allowable conditions for them to do that. Therefore, while we are still alive in this world, we should accumulate as much merit for ourselves as we can.

In this regard, we should not ignore any small virtuous deed. For instance, lighting one butter lamp, offering one stick of incense, making one prostration, reciting the six-syllable Mani mantra once, chanting the name of a buddha once, or paying homage with one hand, all of these bring us incredible benefits, as long as our minds abide in a pure state. Meanwhile, we should avoid any non-virtuous deeds, no matter how small they are. For example, in front of noble beings or representatives of the Three Jewels, we must avoid negative thoughts such as aggression, anger or jealousy. Otherwise, we will create very negative karma that can bring us immense suffering.

In Master Yongming Yanshou’s *Treatise on the Common End of Myriad Good Deeds*, it says, “If in the merit field of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, one can perform virtuous deeds as little as a strand of hair, he will possess grand merit no matter

where he takes rebirth. Such merit is inexhaustible.” So it is of great significance and benefit to perform virtuous deeds in the merit field of the Three Jewels, no matter how small they are. If we do not act now, we may not have a chance to accumulate the same merit in the future, because all phenomena are impermanent and favorable circumstances of both ourselves and external environment for practicing virtues can disappear suddenly. There is a verse from *Compendium of the Teachings Sutra* which I personally quite like. It goes like this:

All happiness has its end,

All loved ones have to be apart,

All lives will come to die.

Please learn and practice the Dharma while still alive.

It tells us how important it is to learn and practice the Dharma when we have the opportunity. Life is short, we should not delay our Dharma practice with a myriad of excuses, “I am too busy now”, “I am too tired now”, “I am in a bad mood now”, “I am not in good health”, and so on and so forth. When impermanence strikes, it will be too late for us to realize the truth of impermanence and that nothing can be relied on.

Because of our ignorance, we ordinary people often do not notice that all phenomena keep changing moment by moment. Rather,

we perceive them as permanent. This is our delusion and without Dharma practice, we will not be able to break free from such deluded ignorance. We regard a bottle we saw yesterday exactly as the same one we see today. We consider the bottle permanent and fail to realize that what we have perceived is just a continuum of similar appearances. This shows us how blind we are to the true reality of all phenomena. This is what we need to overcome by engaging in Dharma practice.

Master at Least One Dharma Practice in This Life

Not long ago, I visited several monasteries and nunneries which were affiliated with Larung Gar. I told them that as Dharma practitioners, we should at least grasp one Dharma practice in this life and develop a personal experience from it. Whether it is impermanence, emptiness, or guru yoga, we need to rely on it to transform our minds. Of course, it is best if we are able to master all Dharma practices and apply them to ourselves. If we cannot do it, we must at least master one practice and we must never lose faith and devotion in the guru and Three Jewels.

Some practitioners claim that they have great faith in their guru. But they should examine themselves using the tantric teachings and the words of great masters of the past. The term “guru” has

different meanings in the traditions of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. In Vajrayana, it is inappropriate to think the guru as like the Buddha; instead, the guru is truly the Buddha, the two of whom have no difference. In Mahayana, the guru is considered as a bodhisattva. In Theravada, the guru is a qualified Dharma teacher to whom one should pay reverence. Thus, different vehicles have different definitions of a guru, which directly indicate the level of faith that practitioners of different vehicles should possess in their guru.

We may think we have strong faith toward our guru and the Buddha, but our faith may not necessarily be genuine. We need to closely examine whether we have the confidence and irreversible faith that are deeply rooted in our hearts and bones. If we keep our practice only on papers and in words, then we will sadly not be able to apply the Dharma teaching in actual life when we truly need it.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, a great number of people were forced to stay at home. Many of them, including some Dharma practitioners, found that their fear and anxiety were triggered by lockdowns. This could be due to a lack of Dharma practice in their daily life. If we master just one or two Dharma practices, we will be able to confront difficulties and life's challenges on our own.

Even at the moment of death, we will be able to stay calm and not experience too much suffering.

As long as we continue our efforts in Dharma practice, we will for sure make progress because the Buddha and his teachings do have such blessing and power. Yet, if we lack sincere faith and remain distracted when engaging in Dharma practice, even if performing virtuous acts as small as a strand of hair or a speck of dust could be beneficial, it would not be enough to eradicate the root of samsara when we are not mindful nor sincere in these actions.

Therefore, it is extremely important that we drive ourselves to practice the Dharma diligently when conditions are favorable and available. Everyone should and can gain certain benefits from the Dharma in this short life. Learning the Dharma is important, but what is even more important is to practice the Dharma gradually and constantly. Although performing virtuous deeds such as reciting a sutra is a Dharma practice, the genuine and ultimate Dharma practice is to observe the mind and to realize its nature. By doing so, we will be able to eliminate all our mental afflictions. This is the best and most profound Dharma practice that each of us should aspire to engage.

Lecture Sixteen

August 17th, 2020

EFFICACY STORY: A NON-BUDDHIST SAVED BY KSITIGARBHA

We will continue with the seventh chapter, *Benefiting the Living and the Deceased*. This chapter mainly talks about how the deceased and the living can benefit from the Ksitigarbha practice. As usual, I will share with you a story about the blessing of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva.

In the Song Dynasty, there was a town called Liao where there had been around one thousand households originally which gradually increased to some two thousand. The residents were mostly Mahayana followers and had strong faith in Avalokiteshvara and Ksitigarbha. They held in high esteem the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha* and *The Avalokiteshvara Sutra*, the latter of which is more widely known as the *Lotus Sutra's Universal Gate Chapter*. There was an old monastery in the town in which three shrine halls were erected on its three sides. In the middle shrine hall, Buddha

Amitabha was worshipped, and in the left and the right shrine hall Avalokiteshvara and Ksitigarbha were worshiped, respectively. The statues of the two bodhisattvas were the same height and that of Amitabha was about twice as high. They were all very efficacious statues, and auspicious signs often appeared when people prayed to them.

One time, an epidemic struck the town and took the lives of many people. In order to stop the epidemic, the town mayor went to the monastery and prayed sincerely before the statue of Ksitigarbha. While he was praying, light emitted from the statue and shined upon the whole town. People who were infected recovered quickly and those who died young were resurrected. There was a girl who was a believer in a worldly god and died of the epidemic. One day after her death, she revived. Immediately after she regained consciousness, she went to the monastery, paid homage to the Ksitigarbha statue, wept, and asked for ordination. As the monk wondered why such a request came from a non-Buddhist believer, the girl recounted what happened after her death.

She said, "After my death, I was seized by evil ghosts. In great fear, I prayed to the god I used to worship for protection. But when a monk appeared, the god was so scared that he forsook me and ran away. Then the monk said to me, 'Ignorant as you are, you do not follow the Buddhadharma yet take refuge in a worldly god,

now you see he is not able to save you. I am Ksitigarbha from your local monastery. Under the request of the town mayor, I have come to save you and bring you back to life. Since my statue is built in the town, it is my duty to protect the residents. I do not subdue these evil ghosts because they can remind people of subduing their non-virtuous thoughts. These evil ghosts manifest from nothing but your own negative karma. They have no substantial entity but are just your own karma. Now that you know this, when you go back to the living world, you should refrain from negative thoughts and wrong views, renounce the secular life, and take Buddhist ordination so as to live a pure life.” After hearing her words, the local people all rejoiced in her and the monks in the monastery agreed to her request for ordination.

When man-made or natural disasters such as the present pandemic strike, or when we are challenged by all kinds of difficulties, both physically and mentally, if we pray to Ksitigarbha wholeheartedly, all negative conditions will be transformed and all obstacles will be dispelled. Praying to Ksitigarbha is especially indispensable in such a special time when the entire world is dispirited by various disasters, the Coronavirus pandemic in particular. If we read the news, we will notice that we seem to be threatened by more and more uncertainties. Faced with such difficult circumstances, it is

particularly important for us to pray to Ksitigarbha to avert all negative influences.

The statues I gave you the other day have two sides. One side is the image of Buddha Shakyamuni, and the other side is the image of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Although there are many forms of Ksitigarbha, the image I chose was the one His Holiness once prayed to. At its bottom, the Chinese characters of “Namo Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva” are carved. I do worry that some would try to profit by selling the same statues and advertising their products using my words. Since there is no difference among the various forms of Ksitigarbha in terms of his blessing, there is no need to purchase a statue that is identical to the one I offered to the Han sangha. Furthermore, since it is inconvenient at present for us to mail things from the valley, for those outside who are interested in purchasing a Ksitigarbha statue, you may purchase it online, or as I had suggested earlier, find a nice picture of Ksitigarbha on the Internet and make a copy of it. It does not matter whether the image or statue is of the Tibetan or Han tradition, just choose the one you have the most faith in. It is necessary for all of you to have a Ksitigarbha image in your home shrine as your object of veneration.

THE GREAT BLESSING OF NAMES OF HOLY BEINGS



As these words were spoken, in the assembly there was an elder named Great Eloquence. This elder had long since attained nonarising; he taught and guided living beings of the ten directions [to the other shore]. Manifesting in the form of an elder,

he joined his palms in respect and inquired of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “Mahasattva, after beings of Jambudvīpa die, and their family and relatives cultivate virtues for their sake, make vegetarian meal offerings and so forth, planting many good causes, will these departed ones gain great benefits and release?”

After Ksitigarbha had spoken about the virtuous deeds the living ones should perform for the deceased and how the deceased would benefit from these deeds, an elder in the assembly called Great Eloquence asked another question to Ksitigarbha. From his name, we could presume that the elder was very skillful and apt in debates. Although appearing as an ordinary lay practitioner instead of a realized great bodhisattva, he actually is like Vimalakīrti who had realized emptiness a long time ago. He has been engaged in many activities that have benefited sentient beings from the ten directions and helped guide them to liberation. Throughout the history of Buddhism, there are many great masters who appeared as lay practitioners but engaged in numerous activities that benefited others.

Elder Great Eloquence asked that when a person of this world dies, for example, one’s parent, and the whole family and friends perform a myriad of virtuous deeds for the deceased such as making offerings of meal and other things to the sangha, freeing captive lives, lighting butter lamps, reciting sutras, building stupas,

practicing the six paramitas such as generosity, discipline, patience and so on, would these acts bring the deceased considerably great benefits? What level of release would the deceased gain?



Ksitigarbha replied, “Elder, now through the Buddha’s awesome [spiritual] power, I will explain this in general terms for the sake of all living beings in the present and future. Elder, beings in the present and future who hear a Buddha’s name, a Bodhisattva’s name, or a pratyekabuddha’s name on the days when they are nearing death will gain release regardless of whether they have offenses or not.

“If there are men and women who did not cultivate good causes but committed many offenses while they were alive, and after

their death their family and relatives make merit and benefit in their behalf, they will receive one-seventh of the virtues of the holy deeds, and the other six-sevenths will benefit the living relatives themselves. Therefore, good men and good women in the present and future should themselves cultivate [virtue] when they are healthy and hearing well. They will receive every part [of the benefit].

Here, Ksitigarbha gave a reply through the Buddha's miraculous power, for the sake of all beings then and ever after. According to Ksitigarbha, when people are near death, if they hear a buddha's name such as "Namo Shakyamuni Buddha", "Namo Amitabha Buddha", "Namo Ratnasikhin (Jewel Heap) Buddha", "Namo Medicine Buddha", or if they hear a bodhisattva's name such as "Namo Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva", "Namo Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva", "Namo Manjushri Bodhisattva", or even if they just hear a pratyekabuddha's name, they will gain liberation no matter if they had accumulated severe negative karma or not.

For those who have not performed any virtuous deed during their lifetime but instead committed many negative deeds, if their family and relatives perform virtuous deeds on their behalf after their death, they will receive one-seventh of the merit and the other sixth-seventh would accrue to the living. Ksitigarbha appealed that we should try to cultivate our virtues while we are healthy

and have all of our six senses so that we can receive every portion of the generated merit.

Benefiting the Dead by Chanting the Names of Buddhas

I would like to emphasize several important points. First, as I have always said, it is extremely important to offer prayers, particularly chanting the name of Buddha Amitabha, when a person is dying or right after a person dies. This could help the dying person concentrate on the name of Buddha Amitabha and gain rebirth in Sukhavati. For ourselves, we should chant the name of Buddha Amitabha frequently and make it a daily practice in order to gain rebirth in Sukhavati when we die.

Reciting the name of Buddha Amitabha can bring us immense benefit. *Collection on Rebirth* edited by Master Lianchi, recounts a number of stories of people who took rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land. In one story, Zhang Shanhe, a butcher who lived during the Tang Dynasty, slaughtered cattle his entire life. When he was dying, he saw in his karmic experience many cattle coming to take his life. He was very terrified and said to his wife, "Please immediately invite a monk to help me repent my negativity of killing." The invited monk said to him, "According to *The Sutra on Contemplation of Buddha Amitayus*, when faced with terrifying

scenes on your deathbed, as long as you can wholeheartedly recite 'Namo Amitabha Buddha,' you would still be able to take rebirth in the Pure Land." The man accepted the monk's instruction and said, "Since I may fall into hell at any moment and I do not have time to get an incense burner, I will just use my hand to hold the incense." So facing west, he held the fire in his right hand and the burning incense in his left and he started to recite the name of Buddha Amitabha wholeheartedly. After no more than ten recitations, he said that Buddha Amitabha was coming to pick him up, and passed away in peace.

When a person is dying, recitation of the name of Buddha Amitabha would bring virtue and peace to the person's mind and provide a virtuous cause for his next life. As we have said in the past, it is very important to maintain a virtuous mindset when one is near death. If a dying person generates a negative thought upon death, although he or she may have led a virtuous life, it is still unlikely for this person to gain a higher rebirth. This is because the state of mind at the time of death is the most critical and it can be the turning point deciding which direction the dying person will go, in other words, whether to take rebirth in a higher or a lower realm.

Therefore, at the time of death, family members around should be extremely cautious and try to create a peaceful and virtuous

atmosphere for the dying by performing virtuous deeds to help the dying person remain in a tranquil and positive state. Do not do anything that would provoke negative emotions in the dying person. For example, fighting over the assets of the dying person, expressing immense grief, or crying. All of these behaviors are detrimental to the dying because he or she will become upset or even irritated. All these negative emotions could drag the person to a lower realm.

There is an ancient sutra called *Nagasena Bhikshu Sutra* from around the first century B.C. This sutra has two editions, the north edition and the south edition. The south edition is named *The Milindapanha* or *Questions of Milinda*, a highly valued sutra in the Theravada tradition. The north edition is found in the Chinese Tripitaka with two translations by unknown translators. Compared to the south edition, the content of the north edition is shorter and thus incomplete. Overall, this sutra is held in high esteem worldwide and has been translated into many languages. The sutra is about the dialogue between King Milinda and the monk Nagasena. One of the topics covered in this sutra concerns a conversation on samsara and the law of cause and effect.

King Milinda said, “You say that a man who has lived an evil life for a hundred years can, by thinking of the Buddha at the moment of his death, be reborn among the gods; and that a

good man can, by one bad deed, be born in hell. These two things I do not believe.”

“What do you think, O king. If a tiny stone is cast into the water, will it float or will it sink?” asked Nagasena.

“It will sink.”

“What about a hundred big stones in a boat? Will the boat sink?”

“No.”

“It is because of the boat that the hundred big stones don’t sink. Similarly, although a man has committed evil deeds, by thinking of the Buddha which is the boat that keeps him afloat, he can be free from falling into hell and take rebirth among the gods. The tiny stone that sinks into the water represents the evil deed the man does, without ever knowing the Buddha or Buddhist teachings, the man will directly fall into hell after death.”

Therefore, our state of mind at the time of death is very decisive for our rebirth. No one knows when and in what way we will die. Death may come as a result of accidents such as car accident, or natural disasters such as earthquakes. When it happens, very likely we would not be able to concentrate on complicated visualization.

Therefore, a shortcut to ensure rebirth in the pure land is very important to employ. You should visualize your consciousness going up your vertex and merging into the heart of Buddha Amitabha or Padmasambhava who are sitting atop your head. This would help you gain a noble rebirth. If the death is from natural causes and there is enough time to think, try to stay away from any negative thoughts because they can drag you directly to a lower realm.

Both the Living and the Dead Gain Merit

Second, it is stated specifically in this sutra that the dead would receive only one-seventh of the merit when an act is performed by the living. Although this is not stated in many other scriptures, it does not mean that this is incorrect since each sutra has its specific emphasis and may sometimes contain hidden meanings. In certain scriptures as well as in some pith instructions, it is stated that if the living performs virtuous deeds on behalf of a deceased and dedicates the merit to the deceased, the deceased would get all the merit generated from the virtuous deeds. There are also other references claiming that the deceased would reap only half of the merit or three-tenths of the merit.

These apparently contradictory statements are likely intended to deliver different intentions or hidden meanings. For example, if

the living performs virtuous deeds sincerely and wholeheartedly in the hopes of freeing the deceased from suffering and helping him attain peace and happiness promptly, then the deceased should gain immense benefit. However, if the living is cavalier in performing these virtuous deeds, then the dead would still by the power of interdependency gain some but less benefit.

According to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, if we recite the Mani mantra 70,000 times for the dead, then the dead would gain the merit of reciting 10,000 Mani mantra, and the living one who does this for the dead would gain the rest. As long as we recite mantras or prayers for a deceased, we will most certainly receive benefits. As Patrul Rinpoche said in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, “Dissolving your own obscurations on someone else’s cushion.” It means that if those who perform ceremonies could make every effort to focus their body, speech, and mind on love and compassion for the suffering being, although they have been invited to benefit the suffering being, they will achieve a twofold accumulation both for themselves and for the others at the same time. According to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it would seem we would be the biggest beneficiary ourselves while performing virtuous deeds for the dead.

Practice the Dharma Diligently

Third, we should be diligent in the actual practice if all favorable conditions are present. Engaging in virtuous deeds should never be delayed. We should not count on having others perform Amitabha phowa (transference of consciousness at the time of death into a pure land) for us, or perform prayer chanting for us, or perform other virtuous deeds for us when we die. At that time, as Patrul Rinpoche quoted from Padmasambhava in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, “By the time empowerment is being given to the memorial card bearing your name, it is too late! Your consciousness, already wandering in the intermediate state like a dazed dog, will find it very hard to even think of higher realms.” If we fail to gain the conviction in liberating ourselves from samsara through practice while we are alive, and instead rely only on someone else to transfer our consciousness to the pure land after our death, there is significant risk of failure. That is why we should take advantage of our precious human existence to practice the Dharma, diligently engaging in practice while we are alive and have the freedom to do so.

The prerequisite to effective engagement in Dharma practice is to first listen to the Dharma and to contemplate the teaching so as to gain conviction in the Dharma. That being said, learning the Five Great Treatises is absolutely necessary because for those of us

who tend to conceptualize everything, without using the sword of the wisdom and the power of the Dharma, our distorted views and negative habits that are rooted in our mindstream cannot be penetrated. On the other hand, if we are satisfied simply with just listening and contemplation of the Dharma and do not engage in actual meditation, then the Dharma would not be able to guide us across to liberation.

Therefore, to each and every practitioner here, it is essential that you listen to and contemplate the Dharma diligently, and more importantly, you need to put it into practice. Engaging in actual practice means that no matter how long you have spent learning the Dharma here, when you leave this place someday, you need to have assimilated at least one Dharma teaching into your being. Just as an old Tibetan saying goes, “Words are the ones you bear in mind; food is that which you carry in your clothes.” No matter where you go to pursue the Dharma, you should aim to internalize at least one Dharma teaching and use it to transform your mind. If you have already spent ten or even twenty years seeking the Dharma but are still your old self without any positive change, your extended stay in such a holy place is meaningless because you have not really gained anything.

Obtaining and mastering the Dharma is a must and the core of learning the Dharma. As I see it, no matter where we pursue the

Dharma, it will not be an easy thing as we may face obstacles and pressure from finance, family, physical health, and so on. If we are simply acting like a tourist, taking snapshots of the scenery along the way, and arguing and debating with other Dharma followers now and then without converting our obstinate mindstream, then there is no meaning in pursuing the Dharma. Many practitioners in the past had been just ordinary people before they pursued the Dharma but they became realized beings after finishing their studies. To them, it was a fruitful journey. Likewise, when we pursue the Dharma, we should strive to better our mindstream. The same goes to online listeners who receive the livestream teaching or those who follow teaching records. If you treat a Dharma teaching as if it is just a secular lecture, such as a corporate training course, and promptly forget about the content afterwards, you will not derive any actual benefit from it.

No matter what Dharma we learn, it is important to understand the essence of the teaching and put it into actual practice. If we are satisfied with only the theoretical understanding, then the teacher's words and those of the great masters will only remain theirs and the Dharma will remain distant to our minds so that we will still be dominated by the same destructive emotions as before. Although a simple theoretical understanding of the Dharma is still a meritorious act that can plant virtuous seeds in our alaya

consciousness, the power of these seeds is very limited and they may take kalpas to ripen into virtuous results.

As we live in this lifetime and follow the Mahayana teachings, especially the precious tantric teachings, we should strive to gain the conviction of liberation. I do not mean that you must gain freedom over living and dying. In Khenpo Yonga's *Commentary on Ascertainment of the Three Types of Vows*, he quoted the teaching from the *Kalachakra Tantra* which stated that "Beginners should not perform the conduct of yogins. Yogins should not perform the conduct of mahasiddhas. Mahasiddhas should not perform the conduct of the fully awakened." This means that each practitioner should act in accordance with his own realization. Since it is difficult for an ordinary practitioner to achieve the realization of a mahasiddha, a bodhisattva, or a buddha within this lifetime, it would be a mistake for us to try to act like a highly realized being. If our mindstream is no different from an ordinary person's mental state but we act like we were a great yogin or a mahasiddha, there would be an inconsistency between our view and our conduct which may result in a failure for the Dharma to produce a positive influence on our mindstream. Therefore, it would be important to engage in Dharma practice diligently and gain the conviction of liberation while we are endowed with all favorable conditions.

THE IMPERMANENCE OF DEATH

“The great ghost of impermanence can come to one at any time. The consciousness [of the departed one] then wanders in darkness, not knowing how his offenses and merits [will turn out overall]. During the ensuing seven seven-day periods, he is as if stunned and deaf, or he is at various authorities being examined and questioned regarding his karma and the effects. Once the result is determined, he undergoes rebirth in accordance with his karma. In the time before [his rebirth] is determined, he is tormented by thousands of myriads of worries. How much more anguished will he be if he falls into the lower realms! Throughout the seven seven-day periods, in every thought the departed one who has not yet undergone rebirth hopes that his parents, children, and relatives will engender the strength of merit to rescue him. After these [periods of] days, he will undergo the ripened effects according to his karma. If he is a wrongdoer, he will pass through hundreds of thousands of years without a day

of release. If his offenses include [any of] the five great violations that lead to incessant torments, he will fall into that great hell and for thousands of kalpas, and for an interminably long time undergo manifold sufferings.



The great ghost of impermanence can come to anyone at any time. When it strikes, the consciousness of the departed will enter the bardo and wander in darkness. During the forty-nine days of the intermediate state or the bardo, he would not know how his positive and negative karma would balance and what particular result the karma would produce. They are as ignorant as a poor mute and deaf person. Or, during this time, in his own karmic perception, he would be examined and questioned by the Lord of

Death and his subordinates regarding his karma in order to decide which one outweighs the other. After examination and debates, if positive karma outweighs negative karma, the consciousnesses will take rebirth in a higher realm. If negative karma outweighs the other, he would take rebirth in a lower realm. During the time when his rebirth is pending, his consciousness would experience thousands of worries and anxieties. But the magnitude of suffering in the bardo would be greatly eclipsed by the suffering that awaits him if he falls into a lower realm.

Within the bardo, the departed would all hope to have their families and relatives perform virtuous deeds on their behalf to increase their merit and their chances of being rescued. After forty-nine days have passed, they will receive their sentences according to their karma. If they are judged to be sinners, for hundreds or thousands of years, there would be no deliverance from the three lower realms of suffering. If they had committed any of the five crimes with immediate retribution when alive, they will fall into the Avici Hell and suffer for thousands of kalpas.

The Great Ghost of Impermanence Can Come at Any Time

I personally feel the sentence “the great ghost of impermanence can come to one at any time” contains profound meaning. There

is no guarantee that any one of us would be alive and healthy tomorrow. For some who are living a vigorous life today, tomorrow death may catch them unprepared and take them to a completely unfamiliar world. As an old saying goes, “Young and old, all are equal in Death.” So youth is not something to boast of given the impermanence of death and being young does not mean one is further away from death. In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, it says,

We cannot trust the wanton Lord of Death.

The task complete or still to do, he will not wait.

In health or sickness, therefore, none of us can trust

Our fleeting, momentary lives.

The Lord of Death is unpredictable as he comes to us regardless of whether we are sick or healthy and regardless of whether we have purified all our negative karma and gathered enough merit or not. It will never say, “Ok. I will come to you after you finish this job.” To many, death would come suddenly when they still have many tasks unfinished.

Contemplating the impermanence of death is a supreme practice in Buddhism and it is of great importance for everyone to engage in such a practice. Personally, I have focused on this practice and I have a deep conviction in impermanence. I now look at everything from the perspective of impermanence, and I am confident that

when faced with significant events of impermanence in my life that I will be able to accept them with the most ease and readiness. As we contemplate impermanence, we should strive to be well-prepared for the coming of death at any time. In the *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*, it says,

Steadfast ones constantly think of death.

Death cannot possibly be halted.

Remembering one's impending death

Is praised as the supreme mindfulness.

Just like Master Yin Guang who hung the word “death” in his room as a reminder, wise people should constantly contemplate death. Contemplating impermanence and death is one of the supreme Buddhist practices. As it is said in the *Nirvana Sutra*, and also quoted by Mipham Rinpoche in his *Gateway to Knowledge*, “Just as among the footprints of all living beings, no footprint surpasses that of an elephant, so too is the thought of impermanence paramount among all thoughts.” From this, we can see the importance of contemplating impermanence and death.

We should be well-prepared for the occurrence of impermanence at any time in any way. I am confident that I have made such preparation for death or anything else that may happen in my life. When impermanence strikes, I will not be shocked, nor complain

about why it is happening to me. Instead, I will face and deal with it with a positive attitude. Why? Because I have gained the certainty that the great ghost of impermanence could come to me at any time in any manner. We never get to make an appointment with him. He always comes unexpectedly. Impermanence serves as a useful reminder for us to take every opportunity we have to practice the Dharma.

The Intermediate State of the Bardo

As we read from the text, in the bardo state, the consciousness of the departed is ignorant and is tormented by all kinds of worries. Such state is like that of a criminal suspect who is being held in detention before his trial. I know of criminal suspects who have been held in detention for several years, without receiving a trial or being released. The duration of their detention kept being prolonged for reasons such as a need for further investigation and so forth. Some of them may prefer a jail sentence because the psychological effects of extended uncertainty can be devastating. It is the same with the consciousness of the dead in the bardo. One would be eager to know where his karma will lead him even if it is to fall into hell because an extended state of uncertainty could be unendurable.

Not everyone experiences the intermediate state of the bardo. There are two types of people who won't enter the bardo. The first type is

those who have committed severe negative deeds such as the five crimes with immediate retribution and the offenses in the tantric tradition that would lead one directly to the vajra hell. After they die, their consciousnesses fall into hell immediately without any intermediate state. The second type is those with high levels of realizations. For Vajrayana practitioners who have accomplished the practice of Trekcho, when they die, they abide in the nature of the mind instantly. Except for those with the keenest faculty, most practitioners of Trekcho would hardly notice the fleeting moment of bardo, as it is described in the *Lama Yangtik*. Except for these two types of people, most ordinary beings will enter the bardo after death where they experience the suffering of unknowing and myriads of worries and anxiety while waiting for the trial with the Lord of Death and his subordinates.

In the bardo state, the consciousnesses of the deceased individuals desperately and constantly wish that their families would make merit for them. That is why it is necessary to conduct virtuous deeds on behalf of the dead. Tibetan people attach great importance to this practice. If a family member dies, even though the household is very poor, they will still try their best to perform as many virtuous deeds as possible for the dead. They believe no matter how destitute the household is, the living can still find a way to survive, but the dead is not able to do anything on his own to help

himself. Therefore, the living must help the dead by any possible means.

When performing virtuous deeds on behalf of the dead, it is necessary to write down the names of the dead no matter whether it is within the forty-nine days of their death or not. For example, if you offer a sum of money to the sangha and ask them to recite prayers or to perform Amitabha phowa for the dead. It would be important to write down their names so that the sangha can read their names out loud during the ceremony. Even if it is for your grandparents or those of your ancestors who died many, many years ago, it is still necessary to do it so that the sangha can read their names when chanting prayers for them. Even if a deceased had unfortunately taken rebirth as a hungry ghost or a hell being, by reading out his name, he will have a better chance to be liberated from the lower realms. This is the infallible power of interdependency.

I always write down the names of my deceased family members when I donate money to the sangha to chant prayers for them. But I have noticed some Dharma friends often neglect to do this. Writing down the name of the dead is not only valued in Tibetan Buddhism, but it is also a tradition in Han Buddhism. *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra* says, “Call upon the name of the deceased and perform various virtuous deeds on the deceased’s behalf.” So

it is important to write down or call out the name of the deceased when we perform virtues for them. If no family member conducts virtue on the dead's behalf, Tibetan people often say, "This family must be very poor as no one actually mentions the name of their dead family member." So when a family member or a friend dies, we should write down their names and try to ask the sangha to recite prayers and perform phowa for them every day within the forty-nine days after their death. This is particularly beneficial and necessary for the dead.

Be Mindful and Vigilant of Our Actions

While we live in this world and enjoy all kinds of freedoms, we should try to avoid creating grave negative karma because there will be unimaginably horrible retribution. But it is likely inevitable for people to commit various negative actions due to their ignorance and the lack of the knowledge of the law of cause and effect. For the followers of Buddhism, we should at least try to avoid any grave negative action such as any of the five crimes with immediate retribution. In order to accomplish this, we need to control our afflictive emotions and be always mindful and vigilant of our actions. Otherwise, we could fall into hell directly.

Vajrayana practitioners need to be even more cautious with your samaya vows. According to tantra, if one violates samaya vows

such as disrespecting the vajra teacher, insulting vajra brothers and sisters, abandoning love for sentient beings, and revealing secrets to those who are unworthy, the consequence of such violation will be much more severe and terrifying than falling directly into the Incessant Hell. Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* has detailed descriptions of empowerment and samaya. If we read this treatise, the consequences of violating samaya vows should really concern us. Non-believers may take this as a pure legend that will never happen to them. To Buddhist followers, however, if one claims to be a hardcore believer of the principle of cause and effect yet violates it in their own conduct, then the only explanation for this paradox is that this person must be under the control of his or her own negative karma.

The world today is becoming increasingly degenerate and people's afflictive emotions have grown stronger. We have seen people commit some of the five crimes with immediate retribution such as killing one's parent. Once fallen into the Incessant Hell, the suffering these wrongdoers would experience would be unimaginable and totally different from the hunger, cold, mental depression, or even a serious illness that we are familiar with. No suffering in the human world can compare with it, not in the slightest. Therefore, we must be mindful not to commit any grave crime.

HOW TO MAKE VEGETARIAN MEAL OFFERINGS ON BEHALF OF THE DEAD?

“Furthermore, Elder, after the death of such a being with wrongdoing karma, his parents, children, and relatives may make vegetarian meal offerings to help him in his karmic path. In the process of preparing such a meal and before that offering is completed, rice rinsings and vegetable leaves should not be thrown onto the ground, and before the food has been offered to the Buddha and sangha, no one should eat it. If there is any transgression or laxness in this matter, the departed one will gain no strength from it. If purity is diligently maintained in making the offering to the Buddha and sangha, the departed one will receive one-seventh of the benefit.

“Therefore, Elder, if after the death of parents and relatives, living beings of Jambudvīpa are able to make vegetarian meal

offerings in their behalf with diligence, sincerity, and a resolute mind, they will benefit both the living and the deceased.”

As these words were spoken, thousands of myriads of millions of nayutas of ghosts and spirits of Jambudvīpa who were in the Trayāstrimsa Heaven all gave rise to the immeasurable bodhi mind. Elder Great Eloquence made obeisance and withdrew.



If the families of the dead want to make vegetarian meal offerings to the Buddha and the sangha for the dead to purify his negative karma and help him accumulate merit on his karmic path, the sutra gives specific instructions on how to make these meal offerings. First, during the preparation of meals and before the offering is completed, nothing should be thrown away or wasted randomly,

not even small vegetable leaves or the water used to rinse the rice. Instead, they should be stored in barrels temporally. Second, no one should eat the food before it has been offered to the Buddha and the sangha. If someone sneaks even a tiny taste of the offering, the dead will not receive any benefit. For those who are diligent in fulfilling the two aforementioned requirements and offer clean and pure food to the Buddha and the sangha, the dead shall receive one-seventh of the merit.

So beings of this world should make vegetarian meal offerings to the sangha when their parents or close ones die. When making these offerings to the sangha on behalf of the deceased, a sincere and pure attitude is essential. Without it, even a big sum of money does not necessarily bring significant merit. With a sincere and pure attitude, even if the money spent is very little, both the dead and the living ones will receive immense benefits. If making one meal offering to an entire sangha is too much to afford for a person, one can contribute financially to meal offerings to the sangha on important days, such as within the forty-nine days after their death, on their death anniversary, or during big Dharma gatherings.

When Ksitigarbha bodhisattva finished his words, all of the countless deities and ghosts of Jambudvīpa in the Dharma assembly resolved to realize the mind of bodhicitta. Elder Great Eloquence paid his respect and withdrew.

As always, whenever I talk about the merit of making offerings, whether it is for meal offerings or other offerings to the sangha, my audiences tend to be very enthusiastic about it. Unfortunately, there may be certain individuals who take advantage of their enthusiasm and instead solicit money for themselves. Given such a situation, I am always cautious about talking about accumulating merit through making donations. Some lay practitioners are very generous with making donations. If I talk about the merit of building Buddhist statues, they would immediately get excited about gathering virtue through it. They would transfer money to online accounts claiming to build statues without carefully confirming whether they are legitimate. After the money has been collected, the accounts would disappear along with the money. There are many online thieves today so I want to remind you to be very careful with any message about collecting money for the sangha. Except for the official account that accepts offerings and is overseen by the sangha, any other account deserves your careful scrutiny.

Also, there are individuals who constantly organize donation drives for the sangha. Such behavior not only causes people to have a negative impression of Buddhists but also brings a negative influence on Buddhism. Offerings should be made based on a voluntary basis. In addition, given the current political environment,

I would suggest that lay practitioners not organize donations of any kind as it may bring trouble to the related people. Whatever virtuous deed we perform, we should follow local regulations and conventions. Anyone who is willing to perform virtuous deeds should do it on his own and there is no need to persuade others to do so.

There are those who seldom engage in any virtuous activity but keep telling others to do so. This is unnecessary. Buddhist practitioners should all know what virtuous deed they should perform instead of having someone else tell them. Every practitioner has the capacity to perform virtuous deeds and should perform them based on their own situations. It is no exaggeration to say that those people who only persuade others to make donations are almost robbing others' money for alms giving. Such actions are certainly not appropriate nowadays. Buddhists should be mindful of how their actions would reflect on the image of Buddhism.

What is worse is that there are individuals who never perform virtuous deeds on their own and yet constantly go about collecting money in the name of a guru. This is something I really feel strongly about. Although I have repeatedly said not to collect any money in the name of a guru or a monastery, I discovered just a couple of days ago that there are still individuals among the audience who are doing this. These people may be paying no attention to the

teaching while specializing in the collection of money in someone else's name. Among them could be a few who are doing this with an altruistic intention, however, the majority are likely seeking self-benefits that are driving their collection efforts. People who are truly altruistic will give others the freedom to accumulate merit based on their own capability instead of persuading them into doing it. For those who take advantage of my teaching on making offerings to the sangha for self-benefits, I want to remind you of the consequences of these actions and urge you to be careful in this regard.

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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