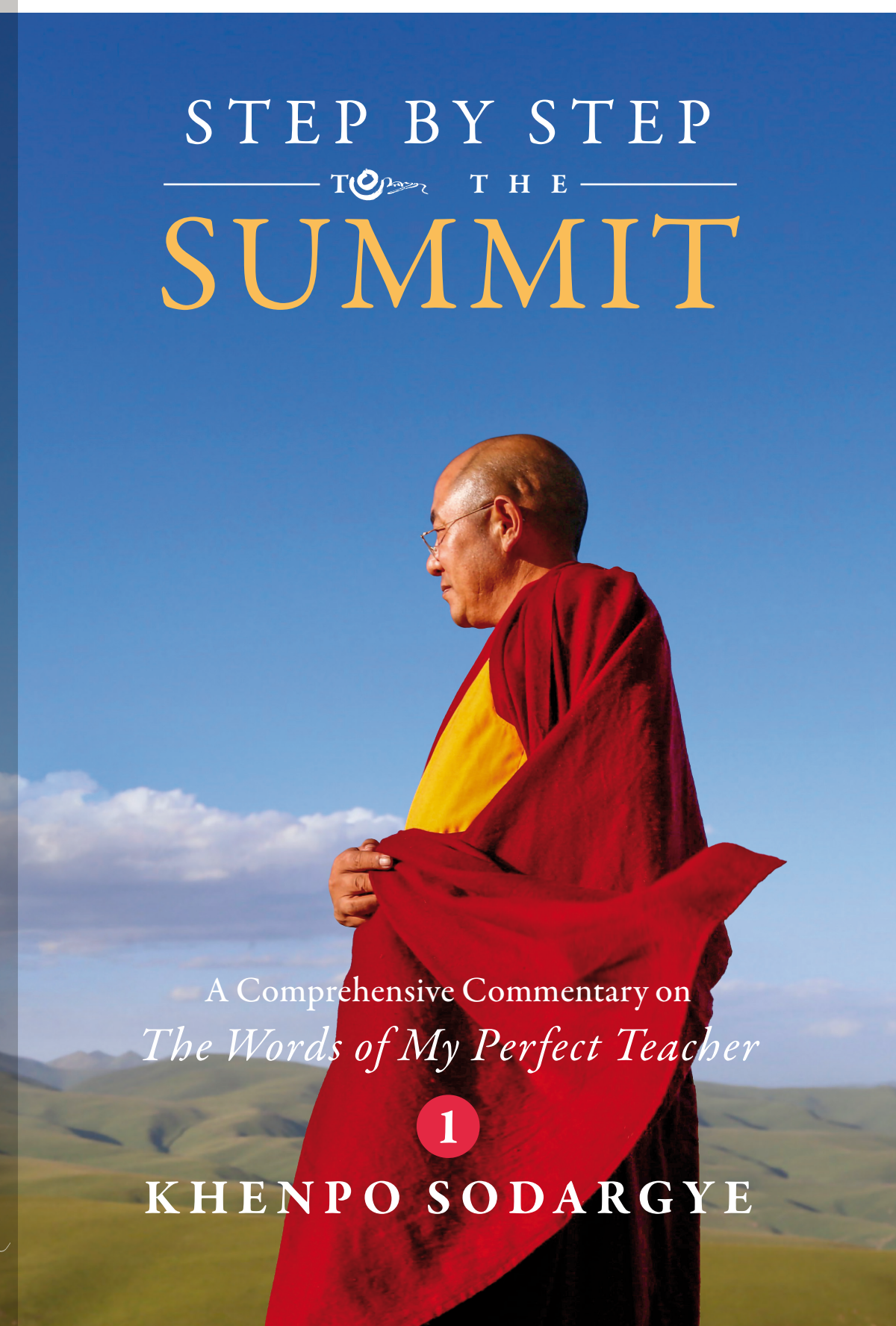




STEP BY STEP — TO — THE — SUMMIT

A Comprehensive Commentary on
The Words of My Perfect Teacher

1

KHENPO SODARGYE

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— T O — T H E —
SUMMIT

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The Words of My Perfect Teacher

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KHENPO SODARGYE

TRANSLATED BY
*The Wisdom and Compassion
Translation Group*



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CANADA

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BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI



THE FIELD OF REFUGE



GURU RINPOCHE
PADMASAMBHAVA



PATRUL RINPOCHE

Homage to the fundamental teacher Buddha Shakyamuni:

*With great compassion, you embraced this turbulent and
degenerate world,*

And made five hundred mighty aspirations.

*You are as exalted as the white lotus; whoever hears your name
shall never return to samsara—*

Most compassionate teacher, to you I pay homage!

Homage to the omniscient Longchenpa:

At the neck of the treasury Gangri Thökar,¹

Is the blissful grove of perfect virtues.

Omniscient Longchen Rabjam,

The secret yogin with the essence of the twofold goal,²

To you, I prostrate.

Homage to the omniscient Mipham Rinpoche:

The wisdom of Manjushri, Lion of Speech, arose in your heart,

And you trained in the infinite aspirations of Samantabhadra,

*Performing the enlightened actions of the buddhas and their
heirs:*

Jampal Gyepé Dorje, to you I pray!

Homage to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche:

*In the pure realm of the great sacred site, the Five-Peak
Mountain,*

The blessings of Manjushri's wisdom ripened in your mind—

Jigme Phuntsok, at your feet I pray!

*Inspire me with your blessings: transmit the realization of the
wisdom-mind lineage!*

In order to liberate all sentient beings from samsara, may we all
generate the supreme Bodhicitta!

¹ Gangri Thökar, literally “The White Skull Snow Mountain,” is a famous peak in Central Tibet, approximately twenty-five km south of Lhasa. It was here, in the hermitage of Orgyen Dzong, that Longchenpa taught and composed many of his most important writings. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

² The twofold goal: bringing benefit to oneself as well as to others.

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The Translator's Note

It is with profound respect and immense joy that we present this translated commentary on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is a classic Tibetan Buddhist text written by Patrul Rinpoche, a prominent nineteenth-century Dzogchen master. The text itself serves as a commentary on the preliminary practices (*ngöndro*) of the *Longchen Nyintik* lineage, which is a significant part of the Nyingma school, the oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* provides comprehensive guidance to practitioners for their spiritual path from beginning to culmination. Since its original writing in Tibetan, the text has been translated into various languages such as Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Vietnamese, and Greek, benefiting countless beings from various Buddhist traditions.

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche is one of the few contemporary teachers who have offered a comprehensive commentary on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. In fact, Rinpoche has taught the text five times since the early 1990s. The most recent teaching was between 2008 and 2010, during which Rinpoche delivered, in Mandarin Chinese, a series of 144 oral teaching sessions using his own Tibetan to Chinese translation of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. The present work is the translation of the transcripts from the 144 teaching sessions.

This translation has been made possible thanks to the unremitting effort of various Chinese and Western practitioners in monastic and lay communities following Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche. We have done our best to transcribe and translate each session carefully to maintain the authenticity and integrity of Rinpoche's teachings. Our goal is to serve as a conduit to bring these vast and profound teachings to a wider English-speaking audience. Doing so will allow the reader to receive Rinpoche's clear and extensive explanations of the text. It is our sincere hope that this commentary serves as a valuable resource in your spiritual

journey to perfect enlightenment. May it inspire, guide, and support you in your pursuit of the Dharma.

The path of Dharma study and practice is not always easy, but it is profoundly rewarding. By following these teachings and engaging with this commentary, you are taking a significant step toward deepening your understanding of the Dharma and transforming your life onto the path to enlightenment. May you find strength, clarity, and wisdom on this sacred journey.

How to study this commentary?

This commentary is intended for those dedicated to a systematic study of the Dharma. A “systematic study of the Dharma” refers to a sequentially organized, methodical approach to assimilating Buddhist texts and teachings. This involves progressively investigating Buddhist principles and examining how they apply to everyday life in order to develop a solid foundation in both intellectual understanding and experiential application.

To derive the maximum benefit, we recommend that readers follow this sequence: First, read Patrul Rinpoche’s *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* published by Yale University Press. After completing the reading, listen to the oral teachings by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche available with English subtitles.³ Following this, study this commentary diligently to gain a deeper understanding and insights.

For busy individuals, a more streamlined approach can be used. Studying this commentary alone will be of great benefit. However, incorporating the reading of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* into one’s study of this commentary is strongly recommended. For instance, you can use the following sequence: Read the first chapter from *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, then read Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche’s sessions corresponding to that chapter (each chapter is normally covered over multiple sessions). Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche provides detailed explanations that will facilitate your understanding of the chapter. Our translation of Rinpoche’s teaching transcripts includes indications to identify the corresponding sections in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Being surrounded by like-minded individuals is crucial for studying and practicing the Dharma. Therefore, engaging with this commentary during weekly

³ <https://www.mypureperfectteacher.org/teachings/series/comprehensive-commentary>



group study sessions is highly encouraged, as the group fosters a collaborative learning environment that enhances understanding, personal motivation, and practice. For those who prefer or need to study independently, this commentary is also a valuable resource for self-study. The included footnotes are designed to clarify key terms and concepts, ensuring a comprehensive grasp of the material.

I. Combining this commentary with the practice of Ngöndro

Studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in conjunction with practicing ngöndro, or preliminary practices, is essential. Ngöndro practices are designed to deepen your experience, tame and purify the mind, and prepare the practitioner for more advanced teachings. This combination of study and practice ensures a balanced approach, integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application, leading to holistic spiritual development. The profound teachings within this text, when practiced diligently, can lead to significant personal transformation and spiritual growth. For this reason, we have also translated the corresponding guided meditations taught by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche⁴ and Rinpoche's ngöndro guide booklet.

II. Situating this commentary in a larger systematic study of the Dharma

The Words of My Perfect Teacher is traditionally incorporated into a larger sequence that trains and prepares the practitioner to progress on the path. The sequence presented here aligns with the approach advocated by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, reflecting the essence of training at Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy. Each of the following texts builds upon the previous ones, creating a structured and progressive learning experience.

Step 1: Establishing the Dharma foundation—cultivating the right understanding and view

Begin by reading *Tibetan Buddhism: A Guide to Contemplation, Meditation, and Transforming Your Mind* by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, published by

⁴ <https://khenposodargye.org/meditations/longchen-nyingtik/>



Shambhala in 2024. This work provides a comprehensive overview of Tibetan Buddhism in accessible language, laying a strong foundation for further study and practice. Group study of this book is encouraged to enhance understanding and discussion.

Following this, study Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's *The Song of Victory*, a short yet profound text on the sequential order of our spiritual practice. The text and a commentary by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche can be found here.⁵

Step 2: Establishing personal foundations—developing the right mind and conduct

Next, study Mipham Rinpoche's *The Way of Living*, a precious short text that focuses on how to be a good person—an essential prelude before becoming a good Buddhist practitioner. Practicing the ten qualities explained by Mipham Rinpoche brings positive benefits to oneself and others and sets the practitioner on a correct path.

You can also listen to Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's *Pith Instructions for Secular Life and Spiritual Practice*. In this video, Rinpoche provides guidance on how to live a successful life while being a good practitioner.⁶

Subsequently, you can study *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment* by Dodrupchen Jigme Tenpe Nyima. This profound text offers clear guidance on benefiting spiritually from life's ups and downs. The text and Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's commentary can be found here.⁷

Step 3: Entering the bodhisattva's path—embracing the tender heart of the warrior

⁵ <https://khenposodargye.org/teachings/khenpos-classical-teachings/song-of-victory/>



⁶ <https://khenposodargye.org/teachings/khenpos-short-teachings/pith-instructions-for-secular-life-and-spiritual-practice/>



⁷ <https://khenposodargye.org/content/uploads/2021/03/Transforming-Suffering-and-Happiness-into-Enlightenment-20210308.pdf>



Following the preceding study and reflection, engage now with important Mahayana texts. For example, you may study the classic text *The Way of the Bodhisattva* by Shantideva. For those of you who lack sufficient time to study Shantideva's lengthy work, you may choose to study *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* by Gyesle Tokme Zangpo. This profound text, although concise, offers an extensive explanation of the key practices for you, the aspiring bodhisattvas. The text and a commentary by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche are available here.⁸

Step 4: Study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and this commentary

This is where practitioners following Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's guidance will normally start studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and Rinpoche's commentary. The study of Patrul Rinpoche's text and the practice of ngöndro prepare practitioners to formally enter the tantric path—the swift path to enlightenment. As a complement to this study and practice, one can use Mipham Rinpoche's *Illuminating the Path to Liberation*. Mipham Rinpoche's text presents the distilled essence of the common and uncommon preliminaries, which can be used as a practice guide for one's ngöndro practice.

According to the lineage tradition, after ngöndro practice, one may proceed to receiving empowerment and more advanced tantric teachings, especially the teachings of Dzogchen, or the Great Perfection.

This translation was initially prepared by students of Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche based in the West, all of whom have studied these teachings extensively while completing the ngöndro practice. It was then reviewed by monastic practitioners from Rinpoche's sangha at Larung Gar, who bring both deep knowledge of the Dharma and strong proficiency in English.

The text has undergone several rounds of careful review to ensure accuracy and clarity. We would especially like to thank Steven Wilhelm and Cecilia Luk for their tireless line editing of the first draft. In the final stage, AI-assisted tools, including EditGPT and PerfectIt, were used to support copyediting and proofreading.

⁸ <https://khenposodargye.org/books/ebooks/the-thirty-seven-practices-of-a-bodhisattva/>



Any errors in word choice, meaning, or understanding in this translation are entirely our own, and we ask for forgiveness from the lama, the deities, and protectors of the doctrines for all mistakes made out of lack of experience, unawareness, and others.

As you embark on this journey of study and practice, we encourage you to offer prayers to the enlightened teachers, the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Dharma protectors. Their blessings and guidance are invaluable in navigating the path to enlightenment. May your study be steadfast, your practice fruitful, and your journey toward enlightenment be filled with compassion and wisdom.

May Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's comprehensive commentary on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* guide you, step by step, to the summit of enlightenment!

The Wisdom and Compassion Translation Group

Feb. 18, 2026

Preface

In 1985, at the age of twenty-three, I was fortunate enough to receive Khenpo Depa's teachings on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. The experience had a profound impact on my life. I translated the text from Tibetan to Chinese, and over the course of nearly forty years, I transmitted it multiple times through teaching, hoping that this extraordinary Dharma text could reach more individuals aspiring to freedom from samsara.

In 1988, during my retreat at Wangi Monastery, I taught this text to the sangha there in Tibetan. Subsequently, I taught it again in Tibetan to part of the sangha at Larung Gar.

In 1992, using the Chinese translation by Yuanxing Guo, I gave my first Mandarin teachings of the text to the Chinese sangha at Larung Gar in sixty-four sessions.

In 1999, while working on my own 250,000-word Chinese translation of the Tibetan text, I offered a comprehensive oral commentary on its profound meaning. My teacher, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, on the occasion of his sixty-eighth birthday, wrote a special preface for this Chinese version, highlighting the great importance of the text.

In 2004, to enable more people to appreciate the importance of practicing ngöndro, or the preliminaries, I taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* once again. This systematic teaching lasted three years and included 188 lessons.

In 2008, I transmitted the teaching to a broader audience, both online and offline, in a total of 144 lessons. In just a few years, a large number of people became connected with this teaching and diligently completed the five hundred thousand accumulations of the preliminary practices. This English translation comprises the lessons I gave during that period.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche held *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in

high regard. During his early years at the Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy, he taught this text to the sangha every spring for one month. Before he passed into parinirvana, the last Dharma teaching he completed was *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, urging his disciples to read or teach it at least once a year.

Among the more than one hundred Buddhist works I have translated, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* has consistently been a bestseller. Across the Tibetan and Han regions of China, countless practitioners have gained spiritual inspiration and growth through studying and practicing this text.

People often ask me, “To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Dharma, which text should I start with?” My answer is always the same: *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. Written over two centuries ago by the great Tibetan master Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* encapsulates the essence of the Buddha’s teachings and the sequential practice instructions in a single text. It is concise, direct, and grounded in practical experience, making it an ideal guide for practitioners to study the Dharma from beginning to more advanced levels.

The Words of My Perfect Teacher holds immense transformative power. Numerous practitioners in Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, and beyond have experienced remarkable changes through studying and practicing its teachings. For Buddhists, it encompasses all the core principles of practice. For non-Buddhists, it offers relief from anxiety, suffering, and stress, as well as insights into the true meaning of life.

I sincerely recommend that you systematically study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and, where possible, complete the five hundred thousand accumulations accordingly. This will not only deepen your understanding of the Dharma but also allow you to truly experience the power of the practice in your daily life.

I would like to give special thanks to those who translated my commentary on the text into English. Your hard work will undoubtedly help spread *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, a precious teaching filled with compassion and wisdom, to a wider audience around the world, allowing more individuals to connect and transform their lives.

Patrul Rinpoche once said that *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is like an imperturbable instructor who clears all our doubts with detailed explanations and

never loses patience. You will learn its benefits by studying it, just as you will know if the water is warm or cold by drinking it. You will gain invaluable insights, regardless of who you are. I believe it would be a significant loss to miss out on this book. All is not lost, however, if one starts right now.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Khenpo Sodargye. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial 'K' and a long, sweeping tail.

Khenpo Sodargye

September 22, 2024

Song of Victory:

The Sound of the Divine Drum—Counsel at a Time of Victory

The Great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche

Translated by Adam Pearcey

Ever-youthful and glorious Manjushri,
Embodiment of all the victorious Buddhas' wisdom,
Remain forever upon the eight-petaled lotus in my heart,
And make whatever I say a source of healing for all beings!

Simply to hear the words of the essence of clear light,
The most profound of paths, is to undermine samsaric
existence,
While meditation on its key points brings liberation in a mere
six months—
So, let this alone penetrate into the glorious knot of your heart.

For fortunate ones to encounter this teaching
Is a sign of having gathered merit over many eons in the past,
And provides an opportunity equal to that of Samant-
abhadra—
So rejoice, my dear heart-friends!

To bring relief to beings throughout samsara's terrible realms
By leading them to a state of lasting happiness,
Take on the task of helping others in thought and deed,
And avoid self-cherishing as if it were food laced with poison!

It is this that closes the door to the lower realms below,
That leads to the blissful splendor of the higher realms above,
And that ultimately brings us to the dry land of liberation—
Without undue thought then, put this into practice!

Toward all the luxuries and enjoyments of saṃsāra,
Let your desires and aspirations subside in relaxation,
And prize pure dharma discipline as the supreme adornment,
The greatest source of reverence for gods and other beings alike.

From this derives all the joys and splendors
Of the higher realms and definitive goodness;
While transgressions mean wandering endlessly in the lower
realms,
So do not deceive yourself, but adopt and avoid actions in the
proper way!

Always be in harmony with friends in attitude and deeds,
And exert yourself in cultivating sincerity and pure motivation;
Even if you seek your own best interest in the long term,
The method is still to benefit others—this is the instruction.

This advice encapsulates the essence of the rules of pure human
conduct,
The skillful methods of the buddhas of past, present and future,
And the four means of attracting others,
So, my disciples, never ever forget this!

Through the virtue of pronouncing this advice,
May all beings be freed from saṃsara's abyss,
May fortunate disciples be sustained with joy
And reborn in the Blissful Pure Land to the west!

I, Ngawang Lodro Tsungme, sang these words of advice before an assembly of almost five thousand sangha members on the ninth day of the eighth month of the Fire Mouse year during the seventeenth calendrical cycle (21 September 1996), when we, the teacher and disciples, were celebrating victory over outer, inner and secret obstacles. May virtue abound!



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRELIMINARY PRACTICE

In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it is only after a practitioner has completed the preliminaries, or ngöndro,⁹ that a qualified guru will then offer that practitioner the highest tantric teachings, including the generation stage and the completion stage. This rigorous practice sequence is a common tradition in all lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.

The reason for studying and practicing the Dharma is to attain liberation, and liberation relies on systematically studying and practicing the Dharma. Without following this sequence, it is impossible for an ordinary person to attain liberation.

There are very few occasions when a disciple with the most superior faculties meets a guru with extraordinary qualities. In these cases, through the guru's gestures, pointing-out instructions, or brief talks, the disciple immediately attains realization and recognizes the nature of mind, without going through all the preliminaries.

But this kind of sudden realization is beyond the reach of most ordinary practitioners. Therefore, it is essential to follow the tradition of our lineage masters and engage in the Dharma practices step by step.

The great enlightened masters of the Nyingma lineage, including Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887), Lungtok Tenpe Nyima (1829–1901),¹⁰ Khenpo

⁹ Ngöndro refers to the preliminary or “foundation” practices of Vajrayana Buddhism. In Tibetan, ngön means “before” while dro means “to go.” So ngöndro is usually translated as “preliminary practices,” or “foundational practices.” (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

¹⁰ Nyoshul Lungtok Tenpe Nyima (Tib. རྩོམ་ལུང་རྟོག་པའི་ཉི་མ་, Wyl. smyo shul lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma) (1829–1901) received Dzogchen teachings from Patrul Rinpoche and was his greatest disciple. He was regarded as an emanation of Shantarakshita. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Ngawang Pelzang (1879–1941),¹¹ Khenpo Kunzang Palden (1862–1943),¹² Khenchen Thubten Chöphel (1886–1956),¹³ and the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche (1933–2004), all emphasized the preliminary practices. Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is such an important text on the preliminaries that many notes and commentaries on the text have since been produced.

Honoring the tradition of keeping accomplishment secret, all lineage disciples of this tradition, whether in Nepal, India, Tibet, or elsewhere, refrain from revealing their accomplishments: they have seen the *bindu*, or essence-drop, realized emptiness, achieved clairvoyance, or attained miraculous powers. While they do not flaunt their accomplishments, the truth is that no unfavorable conditions can destroy their realization, and many signs reveal that they have reached very high levels of realization.

If your aspiration is to attain similar realization, I hope you will wholeheartedly follow the traditional sequence transmitted from the lineage masters during all stages of your own practice.

¹¹ Khenpo Ngawang Palzang (Tib. མཁན་པོ་ངག་དབང་པལ་ཙམ་, Wyl. mkhan po ngag dbang dpal bzang) aka Khenpo Ngakchung (1879–1941) was one of the most important and influential Dzogchen masters of recent times. He is regarded as an emanation of Vimalamitra, who foretold that he would appear once every hundred years. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

¹² Khenpo Kunzang Palden (Tib. མཁན་པོ་ཀུན་བཟང་པལ་པདྨ་, Wyl. mkhan po kun bzang dpal ldan) (1862–1943), or Kunpal for short, also known as Gekong Khenchen Kunzang Palden or Tubten Kunzang Chokyi Drakpa, was a great scholar of the Nyingma tradition, and a close disciple and biographer of Patrul Rinpoche. He was born in Dzachukha Valley in Kham and was ordained as a monk by Khenpo Yonten Gyatso of Dzogchen Monastery. After receiving the transmission from Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and the fifth Dzogchen Rinpoche, he became one of the great holders of the Longchen Nyingtik lineage. He was also an important student and biographer of Mipham Rinpoche. He taught at Gekong Monastery of Dzachukha and was the first teacher at the shedra of Kathok Monastery, where he was assisted by Khenpo Ngawang Palzang (Khenpo Ngakchung). He left many important writings like *The Stories of Vinaya* and a commentary on Mipham Rinpoche's *Beacon of Certainty*. He is best known for his commentary on the *Bodhicharyavatara*, by Shantideva, which is taught to this day in most shedras. He was the main teacher of Popa Tulku, and also taught Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

¹³ Changma Khenchen Thubten Chöphel (Tib. རྒྱལ་མཁན་ཆེན་ཐུབ་བློ་མཁན་པོ་ལའེ་པ་, Wyl. lcang ma mkhan chen thub bstan chos 'phel) aka Bathur Khenpo Thupga, or Thubga Yishyin Norbu (1886–1956) was an important student of Khenpo Yonga and Orgyen Tenzin Norbu who followed the footsteps of Patrul Rinpoche. He was renowned for his great scholarship, especially in relation to the Guhyagarbha Tantra, his contribution to the flourishing of the monastic tradition, and his realization of the Dzogchen teachings. Some of his most important students were: Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, Gonpo Tseten Rinpoche, Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche and the Sixth Dzogchen Rinpoche, Jikdral Changchub Dorje. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* accords with Longchenpa's (1308–1364) *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind* on practice sequences: practitioners start with the four common preliminaries, including “the precious human life,” “the impermanence of life,” “the principle of cause and effect,” and “the defects of samsara,” and then proceed to the uncommon preliminaries.

Patrul Rinpoche was known as a master of great intelligence and wisdom, as reflected in his writings. Nevertheless, such a brilliant master still chose to hear teachings on the preliminaries more than twenty times from his guru Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu (1765–1843) before compiling *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, one of the most remarkable commentaries on the preliminary practices. Patrul Rinpoche's dedication to deeply understanding the preliminaries suggests how important he considered them for Buddhists of future generations. Without leveling a solid foundation through preliminaries, if practitioners carelessly go straight to the main tantric teachings and practices, all their efforts will be in vain, leading to no fruition.

One of the greatest enlightened Nyingma masters, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–1991), wrote in *The Excellent Path to Enlightenment*:¹⁴

Do not think that the Ngöndro is a sort of simple beginner's practice, or that it is not as profound as Mahamudra, the Great Seal, or Ati Yoga, the Great Perfection. In fact, the preliminary practice comes at the beginning precisely because it is of such crucial importance and is the very basis of all other practices. If we were to go straight to the so-called main practice without the preparation of Ngöndro, it would not help us at all. Our minds would be unprepared and untamed. It would be like building a beautiful house on the surface of a frozen lake—it simply would not last.

Many beginner Buddhists hope to attain realization quickly. Once they find a qualified teacher, they will ask for empowerment one day and guide instructions the next day, so they can get enlightened the day after. They are especially demanding!

This puts the teacher in a dilemma. If they offer no higher teachings, the

¹⁴ Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *The Excellent Path to Enlightenment: Oral Teachings on the Root Text of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo*, Snow Lion (Jan. 1, 1996), translated by the Padmakara Translation Group.

student will be unhappy. But if they offer higher teachings to a student who hasn't completed proper preliminaries, the teacher will be acting contrary to the tradition and the legacy of the lineage masters.

Once, a person from afar visited the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.¹⁵ He tied his horse to a post close to the doorway and entered Rinpoche's room, asking, "May you please bestow me an empowerment and give me the teachings of the Great Perfection?"

"I will consider it, but first please stay for a period of time," Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche replied.

"No way!" the man responded. "My horse is already tied at the doorway. I must return home as soon as possible. Please bestow on me all the pith instructions of the Great Perfection!" Alas! This incident was often brought up by the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

Some gurus who place great emphasis on the preliminaries won't offer the highest teachings right away. However, some gurus, due to specific reasons, may immediately offer the highest teachings.

In the past, I've met practitioners who told me that they had received the highest teachings from certain gurus. When I asked if they had finished preliminary practices, they said, "No. My guru said it's not necessary because I have pretty good capacities as a practitioner."

Moreover, some people have not even received empowerment, yet they go for the Great Perfection teachings. This differs greatly from the tradition passed down by the lineage masters. I can't say this is completely wrong. After all, each guru has their own skillful means to train disciples, and people have very different faculties. There are also many cases of sudden realizations in Chan Buddhism. But for most average practitioners, a step-by-step training is absolutely necessary.

Lama Yukhok Choying Rangdrol (1872–1952),¹⁶ a practitioner in the lineage of Patrul Rinpoche, is a perfect example of the power of preliminary practice. Lama

¹⁵ Translators' note: As a gesture of veneration, Tibetan disciples rarely call the guru by their real name. Instead, they use an honorific name. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's disciples, including Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, normally call him "The Dharma King of Wish-Fulfilling Jewel." For the sake of clarity for readers, the translation team decided to use "Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche" throughout the seven volumes of this commentary.

¹⁶ Yukhok Choying Rangdrol (Tib. གཡུ་ཁོག་ཐྱོག་རང་དྲོལ་པཌ་ལོ་འཕྲུལ་པ་, Wyl. g.yu khog bya bral ba chos dbyings rang grol) (1872–1952) was a student of Tertön Sogyal Lerab Lingpa and Adzom Drukpa, and the root teacher of Dodrupchen Rinpoche. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Yukhok was renowned in Sertar County¹⁷ of the Tibetan region, and he often undertook long, solitary practice. His students didn't hear higher teachings in the first two or three years but practiced preliminaries day after day under his guidance. This strict focus on the preliminaries laid a solid foundation for those students.

During the ten terrible years of the Cultural Revolution, many Buddhists who had gone through only superficial training lost faith and regressed on their paths. Some even defamed the Dharma. But in contrast, Lama Yukhok's students persevered despite hardships, and almost none of them reneged on their dedication to the Three Jewels.

Many Buddhists aspire to become qualified practitioners to attain profound realization. To reach this goal, they must devote themselves to Dharma practice. However, practitioners who don't understand the importance of preliminary practice may underestimate the effort needed and eventually complain to everyone about their lack of realization.

Those who downplay the preliminaries sometimes generate wrong views toward the guru and the Dharma, and their practice fails miserably. Therefore, practitioners, whether householders or monastics, should place great emphasis on the preliminaries.

Venerable Atisha (982–1054) was a renowned, highly enlightened Indian Buddhist master and scholar. After arriving in Tibet, he went about teaching the preliminaries, but not the highest tantric teachings. Some of his bewildered students protested, saying, "Dear lama, you've taught too much on the preliminaries. Tibetans are calling you 'Lama Ngöndro.' It seems like you only know the preliminaries and nothing higher! How embarrassing!"

Upon hearing this, Atisha was very happy. "If I indeed become 'Lama Ngöndro' for Tibetans," he said, "it means many have established a solid foundation for the Dharma!"

Whichever main practice we are doing, its success depends on the preliminaries. A solid foundation laid by the preliminaries allows an adept Dharma student to study and practice more effectively in the future. It is like us studying reading and writing. If we fail to recognize the letters of the alphabet, we will encounter

¹⁷ Sertar County or Serthar County is located in the northwest of Sichuan Province, China. It borders Qinghai Province to the north and is one of the eighteen counties administered by the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The county spans approximately 9,340 square kilometers and is home to the Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy.

difficulties in studying grammar. Yet many people don't understand the importance of the practice sequence. The moment they embark on the Dharma path, they wish to immediately engage their minds in the highest, most profound, and most miraculous teachings of the Buddha. Though this goal is honorable, they have to examine whether their levels of faculties align with the highest teachings. If the answer is no, it is likely that they will generate wrong views toward the teachings and, consequently, fail miserably in their Dharma practices.

It is not easy to take ordination or to study the Dharma. Now that you are already on the Dharma path, you should strive to retain in your mind the extraordinary doctrines of Buddhism because no other studies or philosophies can exceed the Dharma.

It is not because I am Buddhist that I deliberately give high praise to the profundity of the Buddha's teachings. After encountering various kinds of knowledge in the past many years, I truly believe the Buddha's wisdom is the only jewel sparkling.

Every happening in the world—political, economic, military, social—is just like fleeting clouds to Buddhists. Buddha Shakyamuni taught that everything is impermanent, and that birth, old age, sickness, and death are unavoidable, so nothing can make us fuss. For example, the 2008 financial crisis tormented many people: many small and medium-sized enterprises went bankrupt, and many rich people became penniless due to the plunging stock market.

In fact, Buddha Shakyamuni had clearly revealed the truth of impermanence:

What has been gathered will be dispersed,
What has been accumulated will be exhausted,
What is born will die,
What has been high will be brought low.

Thus, in the face of hardship and failure, true Buddhists will not bury themselves in despair.

I often think: The Buddha has attained the greatest state of enlightenment; even if we only receive a drop from his ocean of wisdom, this will benefit our lives tremendously. These doctrines of wisdom are very rare and precious. We must aspire to not lose them in this life and in many lives yet to come.

To ensure this precious wisdom stays with us life after life, we must practice

diligently. This is why I advocate the practice of preliminaries. It has nothing to do with any intention to recruit disciples into the tantric practice.

Dispelling a few doubts

Many Buddhists may ask, “Why must we practice the preliminaries and not something else?”

Preliminaries are very necessary. First, let’s consider the four common preliminary practices, which are undertaken as a foundation for the main practices of Vajrayana. We need to contemplate “the precious human life.” Otherwise, we won’t make the best use of our human lives to practice the Dharma. While we may be fully aware that human life is precious, without contemplating “impermanence and death,” we won’t be motivated to practice diligently. Next, through contemplating “the cause and effect of karma,” we come to understand rebirth and how our virtues will bring us to the three higher realms, and our vices to the three lower realms. Finally, we need to contemplate “the defects of samsara” and realize that no matter whether we are reborn in a lower or a higher realm, we are still trapped and not liberated. Instead of settling for entrapment, we should aim for liberation from cyclic existence. The four common preliminaries allow us to generate a desire for renunciation.

Thus, in the next class, we will start to meditate on “the precious human life.” Each of us must take the practice seriously and not simply regard it as a sort of formality. Many of you may have received the teachings of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* multiple times. You may know the theoretical part very well. However, mere intellectual understanding is far from being enough. Even if you can describe the teaching eloquently and even recite all the texts, you still need to put it into practice, again and again, to internalize the teachings.

Take “the precious human life” for example: Simply verbalizing it or writing an essay about it is not enough; we should always contemplate and meditate on it until we fully grasp and experience the true meaning of “the precious human life.” As said in Chan Buddhism: “Only the person drinking the water knows if it is cold or warm.” Therefore, to internalize the Buddha’s teachings, one must engage in real practice; otherwise, no matter how eloquently one can speak about the Dharma, it is meaningless.

While many academic researchers and scholars are proficient in Buddhist

doctrine, the Dharma hasn't penetrated their minds because they don't practice the teachings. Without real practice, the teachings generate no substantial meaning, no matter how eloquently the scholars delineate the teachings. As a result, when they encounter negative life events including sickness, old age, and death, they cannot cope with or transform those adversities. They just suffer helplessly.

On the contrary, some practitioners appear very ordinary outwardly. But when they face challenges, including death, they can remain calm and at peace because the Dharma has deeply merged into their minds.

So, we must practice preliminaries very well. As Lama Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) said,¹⁸ after realizing the four common preliminaries, a practitioner will sever attachment to this life and future lives and will generate genuine renunciation.

Next, we proceed to practicing the uncommon preliminaries: taking refuge and arousing bodhicitta, recitation of the Vajrasattva mantra and meditation on that deity, mandala offerings, and Guru Yoga.

Why do we practice the uncommon preliminaries? “Taking refuge” signifies that we’ve embarked on the Buddha’s path. “Arousing bodhicitta” distinguishes between Theravada and Mahayana, so that we understand we practice not just to liberate ourselves, but all sentient beings. “The recitation and meditation of Vajrasattva” purifies all our wrongdoings and downfalls since beginningless time. “Mandala offering” accumulates extensive merit and wisdom that move us toward perfect enlightenment. “Guru Yoga” frees us from all obscurations, so we can realize the true nature of everything.

Some may ask, “Why one hundred thousand repetitions of each uncommon preliminary?”

This is the tradition from lineage masters. Not everyone can finish the prelimi-

¹⁸ Lama Tsongkhapa says in *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*:

The freedoms and advantages are rare, and there's no time to waste—
 Reflect on this again and yet again, and dispel attachment to this life.
 To dispel attachment to your future lives, contemplate repeatedly
 The unfailing effects of karma and the sufferings of samsara.
 When, through becoming accustomed to thinking in this way,
 Hope for the pleasures of samsara no longer arises even for an instant,
 And throughout both day and night you long for liberation,
 Then, at that time, true renunciation has been born. (Translated by Adam Percy)

naries with high quality, but if one can at least repeat each practice one hundred thousand times, one's mind will become peaceful and controlled. For example, an arrogant person practices prostration in front of the field of refuge. One prostration is definitely not enough, neither are two or three. This person must repeat prostrations one hundred thousand times, so that their arrogance will be dispelled. The person will also take it to heart that they are a Buddhist who has already taken refuge. Their attitude will be very different from that of a worldly person.

Therefore, the preliminary practices, which involve six hundred thousand repetitions¹⁹ with at least one hundred thousand prostrations and other supporting actions, are the supreme method to tame our monkey minds. To unveil our primordial wisdom, we must first tame our minds. To tame the mind, we must complete the preliminary practices.

Although you may claim to be a convert to Buddhism for more than ten years, without engaging in such practices, your mind remains stubborn and rigid, and your conduct and character stay unchanged. As a result, you are a Buddhist in name only. Thus, it is of great importance to practice preliminaries.

Some may wonder, "Practicing preliminaries is a tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Does this differ significantly from Chinese Buddhism?"

The answer is no. In fact, all these practices are dispersed in Chinese Buddhism. It's just that they are not organized and highlighted in a systematic manner.

Many Pure Land practitioners are concerned upon hearing the requirement of practicing preliminaries, so they dare not register for the teaching on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Seeing this, I decided to set up a Pure Land study group. This is also a great thing: because of their "concerns," I made up my mind to teach the commentary of Karma Chagme Rinpoche's (1613–1678) *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Land*. Otherwise, I may not have had such an opportunity.

In fact, there is no need to be concerned. Think about it: In Chinese Buddhism, is there any sutra or shastra discouraging prostration? Although the postures of prostration may vary, no achieved master has ever claimed that one hundred thousand repetitions of prostration are superfluous.

As for the practice of refuge, no one ever claims that refuge is simply to get an

¹⁹ It consists of one hundred thousand repetitions of each of the following practices: prostration, taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, reciting the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, mandala offering, and Guru Yoga for Padmasambhava.

official certificate or to receive approval from a master. One must often repeat the prayer of refuge before gurus and the Three Jewels, and no one ever says this recitation is unnecessary.

It is the same for the practice of bodhicitta. A Mahayanist who aspires to benefit all sentient beings will definitely recite the prayer of bodhicitta and appreciate the corresponding practice.

The practice of purification carries great weight, as there is a great number of purification prayers in Chinese Buddhism, as well as many texts in the tantras of Tibetan Buddhism which address the innumerable benefits of reciting “the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva.” Therefore, there is no reason to doubt the preliminary practice of purification.

The practice of mandala offering is not unique to Tibetan Buddhism, as Chinese Buddhists also make offerings to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Similarly, we make offerings by reciting the prayer of offerings one hundred thousand times.

All this makes complete sense. Concerns about preliminaries stem only from one’s lack of understanding. It has nothing to do with the practice itself.

The sequence of preliminary practices

1) Common preliminaries

We will start with the common preliminaries.

If possible, you should put aside trivial affairs and practice by means of sitting meditation. The so-called meditation here doesn’t mean that you sit cross-legged, with eyes closed, and think about nothing. You don’t have to meditate in such a way for the moment. You may practice the signless meditation in the future when the right time comes. I was told that a few Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar could generate no thought during their meditation and always remain resting in *alaya*, or the all-ground consciousness. This kind of meditation is not necessary.

While practicing the common preliminaries, if possible, you’d better practice sitting meditation four times a day. This is the tradition from Lungtok Tenpe Nyima and Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang. Please consult *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang. This commentary is renowned in Tibetan Buddhism. The content covered in the three hundred-plus page

commentary can't be found elsewhere. Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang suggested that beginner practitioners should meditate four times a day: early morning, before noon, afternoon, and evening. Each meditation should last from half an hour to two hours. The exact duration is up to the practitioner.

Of course, this meditation schedule is not always applicable to lay practitioners who have to make a living. If they practice like this all day long, who will provide them food for survival? Especially in today's world, competition is so fierce, and life is getting more demanding. After buying a house or a car on an installment plan, many people have to work for the rest of their lives to pay off loans. They have to pay tens of thousands of dollars every year within a specific period.

Regarding the pressure of making a living, monastics are totally different from householders. Monastics are happy just living in a small makeshift cabin. They do not need to work to pay a house mortgage throughout their lives. Householders, on the contrary, have to work hard all their lives to make a living. So, it is really hard for them to practice sitting meditation four times a day. Nevertheless, householders should at least practice twice a day—once in the morning and once at night. Unless there's a special reason, one should set aside enough time to meditate twice a day.

Before sitting meditation, make sure to remove all potential distractions: turn off your phone and organize other things properly. Then, say to yourself, "I am going to meditate for half an hour, and I'm not going to care about anything else during this time." Then sit with the door closed. Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar may hang a sign on the door that reads "Retreat for Preliminaries," so that no one will disturb you.

During the sitting meditation, first take refuge and generate bodhicitta, then keep contemplating the content in the meditation guidance. For example, when you practice the first meditation guidance of "the precious human life," which is on the eight lacks of freedom, you should read the text over and over again, and then proceed to contemplate its meaning. In the end, you will get a very different feeling from the mere literal understanding of the text.

Of course, at the beginning, the meaning of the Dharma may not arise in your mind. However, as long as you read the text repetitively and contemplate the meaning between the lines, an in-depth understanding of the meditation guidance will surely appear in your mindstream. In this way, you will not easily regress on

the spiritual path in any circumstances. Otherwise, even if you've learned *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* several times—you learn the text this year and you learn it again next year—as long as you have not internalized the teachings, you will still get lost when encountering unfavorable conditions. Therefore, real practice is very important. You should practice following each meditation instruction through sitting meditation.

After the sitting meditation, make sure you dedicate the merit at the end.

While practicing the common preliminaries, I hope you divide your practice into meditation and post-meditation sessions, if possible. Of course, when you are eventually able to remain in the meditative state at any time, you can continue the practice while walking or eating, like many enlightened masters. However, you surely will not be able to do so as a beginner practitioner. For example, if you are contemplating “the precious human life” while walking, and then you meet a good friend and start chatting with him, your practice on “the precious human life” will be interrupted by this friend, and you can't return to your previous meditative state. Therefore, it is very important for an ordinary practitioner to put aside all distractions and engage in sitting meditation. This is most suitable for beginner practitioners.

To sum up, you must practice following the sequential order: At the beginning, start by taking refuge and generating bodhicitta; in the middle, meditate one-pointedly; after the meditation, reflect on the practice you've just completed. If you have not practiced well, admonish yourself; if you have practiced well, rejoice in yourself; in the end, dedicate the merit. You should practice in this manner every day.

I won't repeat this every day while you are practicing the preliminaries. I hope you will keep these instructions in mind and practice steadily for a long time. It took some masters three, four, or six years to practice the common preliminaries alone. You may not be able to spend as much time as they did. Nevertheless, there are fifty-five instructions on the common preliminaries in Longchenpa's *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*,²⁰ and if you practice each instruction for three days, it will take at least a few months to finish the common preliminaries.

2) Uncommon preliminaries

²⁰ You may find Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's teaching here: <https://khenposodargye.org/meditations/introduction-longchen-nyingtik-ngondro/>

Normally, uncommon preliminaries start with “taking refuge,” but on this special occasion, we start with “Guru Yoga.”

It has been a long while since I aspired to bring everyone together to pray to Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and to recite his prayer one hundred thousand times. If we can do this, the guru’s blessings will undoubtedly merge with our minds, and our experience in the practice will be very different. Our Dharma practices, whether preliminaries or main practices, all rely on the blessings of the guru. Without these blessings, it will be very difficult for us to attain enlightenment on our own.

In the past at Larung Gar, refuge practice and prostrations were combined in the preliminaries. Each prostration and recitation of the prayer of refuge was done at the same time. In the end, when the practitioners completed the refuge practice, the prostrations were also done.

But for this time, we shall instead combine prostrations with Guru Yoga. We will prostrate while reciting the prayer of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. This way, we will first complete the practice of Guru Yoga before moving on to other uncommon preliminaries.

There is another reason for this change: many lay practitioners cannot finish one hundred thousand prostrations within one or two months. It is already very challenging for them to do just one hundred a day, let alone five hundred prostrations. Therefore, we should first pray for the guru’s blessings so that we can successfully complete the preliminaries.

Of course, it might take a little longer to finish the entire round of preliminary practices. It can take one or two years for a diligent practitioner to finish the preliminaries, while it can take three or four years for a busy householder to finish. Nevertheless, no matter whether you are a householder or monastic, let us all aspire to finish the preliminaries.

During the process, I believe quite a few practitioners will manage to finish the preliminaries, whereas some practitioners may give up halfway, and some even right away. The last group of practitioners may simply surrender after barely completing one hundred prostrations, exclaiming, “No way! My feet are sore and my whole body is exhausted!”

In fact, this is very normal. When I prostrated for my preliminaries, I felt so tired in the first one or two days. But gradually, my body got used to it. In order to gain monetary reward or fame, athletes are willing to train tirelessly. Our practice

is for the ultimate liberation from samsara, so what is the big deal in feeling a little sore and exhausted?

Therefore, we must try our very best to prostrate. We should not start to complain after two or three prostrations, “Ah! It hurts so much! ‘Stars’ are appearing before my eyes!” Well, these “stars” may be the *bindu*, or essence-drop, of the Great Perfection! We don’t need to practice preliminaries anymore. I am just kidding here.

Prostration practice in the preliminaries

While prostrating, we can visualize the Field of Refuge described in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, or we can visualize our own gurus as the object of veneration, as per Karma Chagme Rinpoche’s instruction.

If you visualize the Field of Refuge in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you can consider the guru as Padmasambhava (8th-9th century), or Buddha Shakyamuni, or another deity in whom you have faith. Let me use an analogy to explain this: If you put a crystal on colorful clothes, it will reflect the adjacent colors; the crystal is blue when placed on a piece of blue cloth and red when placed on a red cloth.

In the same way, if we visualize the guru as inseparable from Padmasambhava, then the blessings of Padmasambhava will merge with our minds; if we visualize the guru as inseparable from Buddha Shakyamuni, then the blessings of Buddha Shakyamuni will merge with our minds; if we visualize the guru as inseparable from Yellow Jambhala,²¹ a wealth deity, then we will receive blessings of wealth and prosperity. Therefore, the most important thing is to visualize the guru as the object of refuge.

First, visualize the field of refuge. Consider the place where you are seated to be a Buddha-field, beautiful and pleasant. Right in front of you grows a wish-fulfilling tree with five great branches. On the central branch is your root guru, manifesting as Padmasambhava, seated in the royal posture²² and dressed elegantly.

²¹ Jambhala (also known as Dzambhala, Dzambala, Zambala or Jambala) is the God of Wealth and, appropriately, a member of the Jewel Family (see Ratnasambhava). He is sometimes equated with the Hindu deity Kubera. Jambhala is also believed to be an emanation of Avalokitesvara or Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. There are five different wealth Jambhalas; each has their own practice and mantra to help eliminate poverty and create financial stability. The Yellow Jambhala is considered the most popular and powerful of the Wealth Gods.

²² The posture of royal ease, with the right leg half extended and the left bent in.

On the right-hand branch,²³ visualize the entire noble sangha of bodhisattvas, headed by the eight great bodhisattvas including Manjushri, Vajrapani, and Avalokiteshvara. On the left-hand branch, visualize the noble sangha of shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, headed by the two principal shravakas, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana. On the front branch sits Buddha Shakyamuni, surrounded by all the buddhas of the past, present, and future and of the ten directions. On the rear branch visualize piles of books, mainly comprising tantras of the Great Perfection. In a word, on the central and front branches is the Jewel of the Buddha, on the right and left branches is the Jewel of the Sangha, and on the rear branch is the Jewel of the Dharma. The field of refuge encompasses the Three Jewels.

Next, visualize that you are emanating innumerable bodies like your own. In front of each body gather all your foes, evil spirits, and demons who detest and harm you. Visualize that your mother in this lifetime is with you on your left and your father on your right. Around you are all beings of the six realms. All these beings with you are standing up, with the palms of their hands joined, and expressing respect with body, speech, and mind. Then, the innumerable bodies start to do prostrations.

If it is hard for you to generate faith toward Padmasambhava, you may visualize the guru appearing as Buddha Shakyamuni or Amitabha and prostrate in front of them instead.



Lotus-bud style

The Sutra of Great Liberation says, “I join my hands above my head like an opening lotus-bud.” When you prostrate, cup your hands together in the shape of a lotus-bud about to blossom, leaving a space in the middle. It is not right to press our palms tightly together, leaving no space between them, or to touch together only the tips of your fingers.

²³ This is to the right side of the guru.

Start by putting your hands together and placing them at your heart. According to Longchenpa, this posture expresses our veneration to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Then, follow the sequential order:

Step one: Put your hands together and place them on the crown of your head (some people place their hands on the forehead, which is not correct). Visualize that you are prostrating to the vajra body of the Buddha so that all the harmful deeds that you have done through the body in your samsaric lives from beginningless time are completely purified, and you receive the blessings of the Buddha's vajra body.

Step two: Place your joined hands at your throat and visualize that you are prostrating to the vajra speech of the Buddha, so that all the harmful deeds you have done through speech in your samsaric lives from beginningless time are completely purified, and you receive the blessings of the Buddha's vajra speech.

Step three: Place your joined hands at your heart and visualize that you are prostrating to the vajra mind of the Buddha. This will purify all the harmful deeds that you have done through your mind in your samsaric lives from beginningless time, and you will receive the blessings of the Buddha's vajra mind.

After joining your hands and placing them on your crown, then at your throat, and finally at your heart, visualize that you have purified the obscurations of body, speech, and mind respectively, and have attained the corresponding merits.

Next, touch the floor with your body at five points. You may choose to do either full-body or half-body prostrations. After each prostration, make sure to stand up straight. During the prostration, ensure that the forehead, two palms, and two knees are touching the floor. Visualize that you have purified the five poisons, attained the five kayas, and received the five blessings of the Buddha's body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities.

Both full-body and half-body prostrations are mentioned in the Buddha's teachings. Nevertheless, if you are physically fit, practicing full-body prostrations is optimal. When making full-body prostrations, some people join their hands together on the crown while the body is lying on the floor and then stand up. I have not found this posture mentioned in any Buddhist text, so it is totally optional.

Make sure you concentrate on the practice while doing prostrations. For example, your body should not move unexpectedly to look around; your speech should not include nonsense, such as "How much is cabbage today? What am I

going to eat for lunch?”; your mind shouldn’t wander aimlessly. You should prostrate with your body, recite the guru prayer with your speech, and visualize the Field of Refuge as clearly as possible in your mind. (When you have done one hundred thousand prostrations, you will have completed one hundred thousand guru prayers.) If you cannot visualize all the details of the Field, at least maintain a faithful and reverent thought of the objects in the Field. Otherwise, if you generate thoughts of envy, anger, or greed, you are prostrating in the state of the three poisons, which carries no merit whatsoever.

In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche gave a detailed explanation in this regard and urged practitioners to prostrate properly, saying, “You must understand that to make an outward show of doing prostrations like that, letting your mind be taken over by distractions while your body lurches up and down by itself, is just a physical ordeal that serves no purpose whatsoever.” Regarding “serves no purpose whatsoever,” many Dharma teachers comment that it means that such prostrations only generate very little merit.

Practicing prostrations properly can generate great merit. As stated in the sutras, a single prostration is so powerful that it can enable one to become a universal monarch as many times as the number of grains of dust beneath one’s body, reaching all the way to the depths of the earth. It also says in the sutras that prostrations will finally lead us to obtain the unfathomable *ushnisha*,²⁴ the protuberance that crowns the heads of the perfect buddhas.

Particularly, as said in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* and *The Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*, if one prostrates and prays to the guru with great veneration, the merits are innumerable. Therefore, I would urge everyone to visualize your guru in the form of Padmasambhava or your deity, and prostrate while praying to the guru. As stated in the tantras, “Better than meditating on a hundred thousand deities for ten million kalpas is thinking of one’s guru for a single instant.”

It is indeed a supreme opportunity for so many of us to practice preliminaries altogether. During the process, some of us are bound to encounter various unfavorable circumstances, such as poor health or being misunderstood. Naturally, a coward will panic at even the sight of a blade of grass, fearing it will pierce his heart, and daring not to move forward. Such a person is overly anxious and has little courage to practice Dharma. In comparison, a person with strong will can deal with

²⁴ It is the symbol of the Buddha’s enlightenment.

any difficulty and problem. With the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, such a person will successfully complete the practice of preliminaries.

Several sangha members at Larung Gar have finished the preliminaries three or four times, which is quite remarkable. On the other hand, some householders have never practiced the preliminaries, even though they took refuge ten or twenty years ago. In 1989, I met some elderly householders who earnestly promised me, “Dear teacher, I want to practice the preliminaries! Please rest assured that in two years I will perfectly finish the preliminaries!” Over a dozen years have passed, and they have not even finished half of it. Due to a lack of diligence, many practitioners are rather slack, and when encountering unfavorable conditions, they procrastinate again and again, preventing them from completing the preliminaries and other meaningful Dharma practices.

We shouldn’t aim at reaching a high level of realization at this moment. Instead, we must start with the foundational practices. Our mindstream is not different from that of an ordinary person, so we must follow the practice sequence suitable for an ordinary person.

Educational programs in worldly schools are designed to suit an ordinary person’s capacity: starting from kindergarten, then elementary school, secondary school, university, and going forward. Similarly, Buddhist practice should follow the same pattern.

Although there exist “exceptional practitioners” in Buddhism who attain sudden realization after hearing a single verse, before we manifest specific signs of realization, we should simply consider ourselves ordinary practitioners and steadily devote ourselves to Buddhist practice. Some of you may find it challenging to make three prostrations a day. You may feel that practicing the preliminaries is a “vast” project consisting of five or six hundred thousand repetitions of several practices. Without perseverance, this project seems like an insurmountable challenge. Nevertheless, as long as your will is strong, one day you will accomplish it.

I am truly happy that, with the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, I have the opportunity to practice the preliminaries with you at this time. Even if some unfavorable circumstances arise during the process and I am unable to finish it, I remain content, for my aspiration is pure.

I dare not claim to be a perfectly qualified practitioner, but at least I didn’t

disrobe, and I am not trapped in the eight worldly concerns.²⁵ I ascribe this to having studied *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* at the very beginning of my monastic life.

When I was a novice monk, I was very motivated to study the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and the teachings have merged with my mindstream. Guided by the teachings, I never regressed on my monastic path. Some of my peers who took ordination at the same time either disrobed or failed as practitioners. It is because they had never studied the text which strengthened their convictions in Buddhism. Therefore, one scripture or just one Buddhist teaching can make an incredible impact on our lives and many lives yet to come.

In the course of Dharma practice, one should always pray to the guru and the Three Jewels, especially to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. It is not because Rinpoche is my root guru that I deliberately praise him. After these many years of following Rinpoche and practicing Dharma, I deeply sense his incredible power of blessings in this degenerate age.

Without his blessings, what would many of us disciples at Larung Gar have become? We might have been deeply trapped in this world and become even more deluded. But now the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche has pulled us off the shore of the samsaric ocean of suffering and placed us on the shore of liberation. His kindness is beyond description, and there is no way we can pay it back. It is only through praying to the guru and practicing properly that we may return one millionth of his kindness. Therefore, we should all aspire to complete the whole cycle of preliminaries.

Of course, some Dharma practitioners are currently very busy with staffing, so it is difficult for them to finish the preliminaries on time. Nevertheless, you should aspire to try your very best to complete the preliminaries at least once in this lifetime. By doing so, and with the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, you will have the opportunity to complete the practices.

In my opinion, completing the preliminaries is the most important thing to do in this life. Worldly people may think that career, money, and marriage are most important, but for me, they are not. The practice of preliminaries marks the best

²⁵ The eight worldly concerns or eight worldly dharma are a set of worldly or mundane concerns that generally motivate the actions of ordinary beings. They are: hope for gain and fear of loss; hope for pleasure and fear of pain; hope for good reputation and fear of bad reputation; hope for praise and fear of blame. Preoccupation with these worldly concerns is said to be an obstacle to genuine spiritual practice.

start for this life and many lives yet to come. Therefore, please give it the attention it deserves. Aim to finish it not only in quantity but also in quality.

For each practice, you should start with generating bodhicitta and end with dedicating merits to all beings.²⁶ You should truly be committed in your mind. If you are able to do so, the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas will gradually dissolve into you, eradicate your selfishness and egocentrism, and increase your selflessness and altruism.

In particular, please ensure that you cultivate the right motivation when practicing preliminaries. I have personal reflections on this matter. When I started my preliminaries, I was a novice monk who had just quit worldly school. My master Khenpo Depa asked me and my peers to complete one hundred thousand prostrations and one hundred thousand refuge practices within one month. So, we did one thousand prostrations in the morning, one thousand at noon, and one thousand at night. We prostrated with such dedication that we finished the required quantity on time. However, we were not aware of the motivation of bodhicitta at that time; as a result, the quality of our prostrations was compromised.

As I have progressed in my Dharma studies, I have come to understand that doing prostrations is not for health purposes like yoga. Some people say, “Prostration is a very healthy activity. You exercise the whole body. After a few days of prostrations, you won’t get sick anymore.” Well, this is not the primary purpose of prostration practice. It is only a secondary purpose at best. Our main purpose in doing prostrations is to benefit all beings!

²⁶ This refers to the three supreme methods. Here is Patrul Rinpoche’s explanation in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*: “Before beginning, arouse the bodhicitta as a skillful means to make sure that the action becomes a source of good for the future. While carrying out the action, avoid getting involved in any conceptualization, so that the merit cannot be destroyed by circumstances. At the end, seal the action properly by dedicating the merit, which will ensure that it continually grows ever greater.”

PROLOGUE



Lesson 1

The commentary in Lesson 1 corresponds to the root text of “Venerable teachers whose ... *Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa, I prostrate myself before you.*” [page 3] Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010.

Starting from today, we will study the supreme teaching of Tibetan Buddhism—*The Words of My Perfect Teacher: A Guide to the Preliminaries for the Heart-Essence of the Vast Expanse from the Great Perfection.*

Every one of us should recognize that this text, endowed with supreme lineage blessings, is extremely extraordinary in Tibetan Buddhism. It encompasses instructions of lineage masters, like a treasury filled with jewels. Whoever opens it will discover the guidance they need and the right methods to overcome their afflictions. So, I think we are truly fortunate to have the chance to study this remarkable text. Of course, not everyone shares my perspective, so I am not sure if we are all on the same page.

I have two requirements of you when you study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

First, I hope you will hear the teachings from beginning to end, complete the

transmission, and contemplate the text. Specifically, the contemplation can include the following: What is *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* talking about from the first page to the last? What is the meaning of each phrase and sentence? And whether you can truly apply the teachings.

Second, you should meditate on the text. Not only should you hear the teachings and understand the meaning, but you should further engage your mind and heart in your practice. Through practicing the common and uncommon preliminaries, you will tame and transform your mind and become a qualified practitioner of the Dharma.

During the study of this text, I hope you will generate great aspirations and make noble vows. Meanwhile, I hope you will have the courage to overcome all difficulties. A few of you may encounter obstacles during the study. For example, you may get sick, feel bad, or be trapped in mundane matters. Yet, as long as you are mentally strong, you will undoubtedly overcome all obstacles. During the study, if you can always pray to the Three Roots and the Three Jewels with devotion:

Please grant me blessings. May I complete the study and transmission of the teaching. May my mind be fully aligned with the teachings. May I attain the wisdom inseparable from that of the past lineage masters!

If you always pray to all the noble enlightened ones with devotion, their rays of wisdom will surely shine upon the white lotus of your faith, so that the lotus will blossom in spite of difficulties and release the fragrance of liberation.

Following the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* starts with prayers to lineage masters before proceeding to the main text. The prayers might be a bit hard to understand literally, but they have a lot to do with receiving lineage blessings and attaining enlightenment. We will do well not to forget the prayers.

Meanwhile, I would urge you to remain open-minded in your learning. Please refrain from thinking, “The text is from Tibetan Buddhism, so Dharma students of Chinese Buddhism have no need to study it,” or “The text is from the Nyingma school, so people of other lineages don’t need to study it.” Such perspectives can be narrow and reflect limited vision.

People across the world are learning from each other with open-mindedness

and drawing on others' strengths to offset their own weaknesses. Only in this way can we have a chance to progress. Thus, it would be unwise if lineages or schools of Buddhism choose to work only behind closed doors and stay confined to their own territories.

As shown in the biographies of lineage masters, many of them were well-versed in teachings from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. One of these prominent masters was Mipham Rinpoche's guru—Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo Rinpoche (1820–1892), a great lineage holder of both the Sakya and Nyingma schools. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo Rinpoche is known to have studied with great masters from all major schools of Tibetan Buddhism and is regarded as an authoritative figure on all the seven main schools of Buddhism in Tibet. Another example is the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, who studied and practiced teachings from various schools, including Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug. Thus, teachings of different schools do not contradict each other. It's important for everyone to take note of this!

About the foreword by the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche wrote a “foreword” for the *Chinese version*²⁷ of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and mentioned the following points:

This text encompasses the practice guides of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, namely, *Instructions to the Triple Vision and Triple Tantra*²⁸ of the Sakya school, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*²⁹ and *The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*³⁰ of the Gelug school, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*³¹

²⁷ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche translated the text from Tibetan to Chinese in 1999.

²⁸ This is related to the Lamdre (Skt. margaphala; Tib. ལམ་བླ་མ་, Wyl. lam ‘bras), ‘Path with the Result’ instructions, which are the highest teachings within the Sakya school. It consists of two parts: the first part is called Triple Vision explains the Sutrayana path, and the second part is called Triple Tantra explains the Vajrayana part focusing on esoteric Hevajra teachings. The root text of the Lamdre tradition is Virupa's Vajra Verses. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

²⁹ *Lamrim Chenmo* (Tib. ལམ་རིམ་ཆེན་མོ་, Wyl. lam rim chen mo) or *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* is perhaps the most famous work of Tsongkhapa Lobzang Drakpa, written in 1402. It is ostensibly a commentary on Atisha's *Lamp for the Path of Awakening*, although it is also influenced by Drolungpa's *Tenrim Chenmo* and quotes extensively from the works of Indian masters. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

³⁰ *Sngagsrim Chenmo* or *The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra* is an extensive theoretical work on the classes and stages of tantra, written by Tsongkhapa Lobzang Drakpa.

³¹ *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (Tib. དུམ་པ་རིན་པོ་ཆེའི་རྒྱུན་, Dakpo Targyen; or Tib. དམ་ཆོས་ཡིད་ཆེན་གྱི་རྒྱུན་, Wyl. dwags po thar rgyan, or dam chos yid bzhin nor bu rin po che'i rgyan)

of the Kagyu school, and *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*³² of the Nyingma school. So, it sets out the stage of the spiritual path of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Moreover, it also covers the Sutrayana teachings from the main schools of Chinese Buddhism, including the Pure Land school with the *Amitabha Sutra* as its core text, the Huayan school with the *Flower Ornament Sutra*³³ (*Avatamsaka Sutra*) as its core text, the Chan school with the *Diamond Sutra* as its core text, and the Tiantai school with the *Lotus Sutra* as its core text.

The Words of My Perfect Teacher has become one of the most cherished introductions to the fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism, and practitioners of various schools of Buddhism in other parts of the world, including Nepal, India, Bhutan, the United States, Canada, and more, are studying it. Many of them have received great blessings and benefits from practicing it.

This is the text that masters of various schools have constantly recommended and taught in the past, continue to teach now, and will definitely teach in the future. So, you don't have to worry that studying it will cause any harm to you. For instance, the fourfold disciples³⁴ studying at the Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy are from various schools of Buddhism, and all of them study and practice *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

To a Mahayanist, the practice involves first generating bodhicitta, then accumulating merit and wisdom, and in the end manifesting Rupakaya (form body) and Dharmakaya (truth body). This path is equally shared by all schools of Mahayana Buddhism, so ultimately the authentic teachings from all these schools are completely integrated with each other. Thus, all of us should embrace *The Words*

— a famous survey of the ground, path, and fruition of the Buddhadharma, written by Gampopa, the foremost disciple of Milarepa. It is said to capture the essence of both the Kadampa and Kagyüpa lineages of Mahayana teachings. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

³² This is the commentary on the root text of *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, which is the first volume of Longchenpa's *Trilogy of Finding Comfort and Ease*, a work within the Dzogchen tradition that covers both sutra and tantra. It is a profound and comprehensive presentation of the Buddhist view and path that combines a scholastic expository method with direct pith instructions designed for serious practitioners. It can be considered to be a lamrim text in the Nyingma lineage, presenting the entire scope of the Buddhist view combined with pith instructions for pointing out the nature of one's mind. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

³³ This sutra is translated as "*The Flower Ornament Sutra*" in the later text. This sutra is also called the *Sutra Arranged like a Tree*.

³⁴ The fourfold disciples include 'bhikkhu' (monks), 'bhikkhuni' (nuns), 'upasaka' (laymen), and 'upasika' (laywomen).

of *My Perfect Teacher* with great confidence and faith. It is preferable not to think this way: “This text is intended for followers of other schools and does not pertain to me. Studying and practicing it is unnecessary for my purposes!” This thought is incorrect.

About the keywords in the subtitle

(A Guide to the Preliminaries for the Heart-Essence of the Vast Expanse from the Great Perfection)

The Great Perfection (Dzogchen): It is regarded as the pinnacle teaching of Tibetan Buddhism. In the Great Perfection, everything in samsara and nirvana is the display of the mind, and the nature of mind is the union of emptiness and luminosity. Whoever attains realization of this view achieves the Great Perfection. In other schools or lineages, such state of the Great Perfection is also referred to as “recognizing the nature of mind,” “non-dual wisdom,” “the Great Seal” (*Mahamudra*), etc.

Heart-Essence of the Vast Expanse (Longchen Nyingtik): There are various categories of the Great Perfection teachings in the lineage history. The teachings of *Nyingtik*, or heart-essence, which are the innermost secret doctrines of the Great Perfection, include texts such as *Vima Nyingtik*, *Khandro Nyingtik* and *Longchen Nyingtik*. Specifically, Longchen Nyingtik, with “longchen” meaning “vast expanse,” combines the innermost pith instructions in Vimalamitra’s (8th century) *Vima Nyingtik* and Padmasambhava’s *Khandro Nyingtik*.

Longchen Rabjam (or Longchenpa, 1308–1364) became the lineage holder of the *Vima Nyingtik* and *Khandro Nyingtik* traditions and wrote a commentary on each tradition. Specifically, Longchenpa’s commentary on the *Vima Nyingtik* is “Lama Yangtik,” and his commentary on the *Khandro Nyingtik* is “Khandro Yangtik.” The *Vima Nyingtik* and *Khandro Nyingtik* are known as the “mother” *Nyingtik* texts, and the *Lama Yangtik* and *Khandro Yangtik* are known as “child” texts. Altogether, the four texts are referred to as “*Nyingtik Yabshyi*,” meaning “the four parts of the *Nyingtik*.”

Therefore, Longchen Nyingtik, a *terma* or hidden treasure discovered by Jigme Lingpa, encompasses all the quintessential teachings of *Nyingtik Yabshyi* and *The Seven Treasures*³⁵—one of Longchenpa’s writing series on the Great Perfection.

³⁵ *The Seven Treasures or Treasures* (Tib. མཛོད་བདུན་, Dzo Dün; Wyl. mdzod bdun) are works by

Thus, Longchen Nyینگtik is indeed a genuine wish-fulfilling jewel in Tibetan Buddhism.

Many of you might not have studied the above-mentioned texts, so I should not elaborate too much for now. I will cover this topic in greater detail in more advanced classes. As for me, I have spent many years studying the Dharma, and half of my time was spent on tantric teachings. Words alone cannot express my faith and bliss in Vajrayana.

Preliminaries: Before proceeding to any more advanced practice of Sutrayana or Vajrayana, as long as you aspire to attain enlightenment, you must complete preliminaries regardless of lineages or schools. Otherwise, you may not be well equipped for the advanced practice.

Guide: We will need a guide if we go somewhere. In the same way, if we want to practice preliminaries, we need this text as our practice guide. Through studying the text, we will understand many things we didn't understand in the past and find the real direction to liberation.

The Words of My Perfect Teacher is not only renowned in the Tibetan regions but also in other parts of China. People have great confidence in the text. I believe it is due to the blessings of the author and the lineage masters. When studying the Dharma, we must value “blessings.” For those who disregard blessings and faith, studying the Dharma is simply an intellectual pursuit. They know the Dharma in theory at most, but it brings no change to their minds.

I believe the blessing of this text is incredible. For example, among the over twenty books I have translated, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is the one in highest demand. We normally print ten thousand to twenty thousand copies each time, and within a few days, they would all be sold out. Then, we would reprint, only to

the omniscient Longchenpa, including:

- The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury (Tib. ཡིད་བཞིན་མཛོད་, Yishyin Dzo; Wyl. yid bzhin mdzod)
 - The Treasury of Pith Instructions (Tib. མན་ངག་མཛོད་, Mengak Dzo; Wyl. man ngag mdzod)
 - The Treasury of Dharmadhatu (Tib. ཆོས་དབྱིངས་མཛོད་, Choying Dzo; Wyl. chos dbyings mdzod)
 - The Treasury of Philosophical Tenets (Tib. གུ་མཐའ་མཛོད་, Drubta Dzo; Wyl. grub mtha' mdzod)
 - The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle (Tib. ཐེག་མཆོག་མཛོད་, Tekchok Dzo; Wyl. theg mchog mdzod)
 - The Treasury of Word and Meaning (Tib. ཆོག་དོན་མཛོད་, Tsik Don Dzo; Wyl. tshig don mdzod)
 - The Treasury of the Natural State (Tib. གནས་ལྷགས་མཛོད་, Neluk Dzo; Wyl. gnas lugs mdzod)
- (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

find the new batch gone again. This has been the case for the Chinese version of the text in recent years.

The Padmakara Translation Group finished translating the text from Tibetan to English in 1990. It was said that the English version of the book was sold very fast as well. Therefore, this text indeed bestows an extraordinary blessing.

Moreover, this classic text was prepared by Patrul Rinpoche with his supreme wisdom. It is a faithful recording of the teachings of his root guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu. Whoever reads it, be it Tibetan or non-Tibetan, will receive immeasurable benefits.

Khenpo Kyiwang, from whom I have heard many teachings, made the following statement when he taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*: “Not to mention the whole text, just the content of a single page, be it on ‘following a teacher’ or ‘the defects of samsara,’ has incredible power of blessing, despite its seemingly plain language, and can permeate and swiftly transform your mind.” That being said, make sure you complete hearing the teachings of the text and do not give up halfway. After hearing the teachings, you must contemplate and then practice accordingly.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had a teacher called Lama Lodro, who was a disciple of Lama Yukhok Choying Rangdrol. Following Lama Yukhok Choying Rangdrol’s tradition, Lama Lodro also placed great importance on having his disciples practice preliminaries. The so-called preliminary practices don’t just refer to the five hundred thousand repetitions of the uncommon preliminaries.³⁶ As Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said:

The practice of the five uncommon preliminaries is not exceedingly hard, and the repetitions can be completed in a short period of time. The most essential practice is actually the four common preliminary practices, which should not just last for a few days, months, or years. The common preliminaries should be regarded as the most important lifelong practice. Only practicing in such a way can we transform our minds.

Owing to this, those senior lineage disciples of Lama Lodro and the great

³⁶ One hundred thousand repetitions for each of the five uncommon preliminary practices.

Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche never deviated from the path, regardless of the difficulties and obstacles they encountered.

However, when giving the Dharma teachings, some gurus start with the most profound main practice of the Great Perfection. They proceed straight to giving pointing-out instructions, enabling their disciples to quickly experience the nature of the mind.

Blessed by the guru, some disciples may “feel good” on the spot and seem to have attained the highest state of realization in Vajrayana or Chan practice. Nevertheless, without building a solid basis through preliminaries, particularly without renouncing this life through the common preliminary practice, these disciples are still attached to worldly pursuits, such as fame and wealth, so their Dharma practice may be short-lived. Some monastics may eventually disrobe; some lay practitioners may generate wrong views and go astray on the path. Some used to practice well in the first half of their lives, however, without a solid basis through practicing preliminaries, they start to develop wrong views of the Dharma in the second half of their lives, leading them further away from liberation, let alone benefiting beings out of great compassion.

In contrast, if we start by practicing the common preliminaries well, such as “the precious human life,” “the impermanence of life” etc., then the great qualities from practicing the uncommon preliminaries—faith in the Three Jewels, bodhicitta, accumulation of merit, purification, and guru devotion—will arise naturally.

On the one hand, some of us may feel embarrassed about our current progress in Dharma practice; however, on the other hand, those true, long-standing senior disciples, who received Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s teachings for years, can confidently say, “I have laid a solid foundation.” Therefore, the latter practitioners are bound to attain the extraordinary state of realization.

Naturally, the higher a practitioner’s level of realization is, the less likely they are to disclose their spiritual state, saying, “I had a vision of so-and-so,” or, “I have attained the realization of so-and-so.” Such practitioners won’t casually reveal their state of realization in the Great Perfection practice of *trekcho*, or thoroughly cutting through, and *togal*, or direct crossing. In fact, they appear very humble; for example, they might tell others they have done a bit of preliminary practice or have meditated a bit on impermanence. In fact, they have reached a very deep level of realization.

Not only have they established a solid basis through practicing preliminaries, but they have also attained all the realizations of the main practice.

Many gurus place great emphasis on the practice of preliminaries before introducing the main practice to their disciples. Some gurus even discipline their disciples by different means in order to make them appreciate and practice the preliminaries. Lama Yukhok Choying Rangdrol was such a guru. He harshly scolded those disciples who disregarded the preliminaries or who didn't practice the preliminaries well. It is said that the disciples who were scolded by Lama Yukhok attained certain realization later. After all, Lama Yukhok would not impose special disciplines on a disciple of lesser capacity; through harsh scolding, Lama Yukhok was able to dispel the disciple's obstacles. As a result, those who were scolded many times attained a higher level of realization in the end.

While I was following the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, he didn't scold me very often. But when I was practicing preliminaries or engaged in extracurricular Dharma activities, he would occasionally scold me. It was only later that it became clear that the scolding was indeed an extraordinary blessing from the guru, as said in Tsongkhapa's *Commentary on the Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*.

Even after their passing, the guru may sometimes appear in the disciple's dream or through other means, scolding the disciple or showing displeasure as a way to transform the disciple's mind. This shows that the guru's blessings can come in different forms to penetrate the disciple's mind.

The practice of preliminaries is essential for every practitioner, although some gurus appear to place no particular importance on it. Except for a very few practitioners of especially sharp faculties who swiftly attain enlightenment through the guru's blessings, most practitioners have to start with preliminary practices.

Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche has many lineage disciples who have established impactful Dharma activities. The fact that hardly anyone would wrongfully criticize or slander these qualified lineage disciples is because they appear very humble: they rarely reveal their level of enlightenment or their power of telling one's past and future lives. Their impeccable behavior is the result of practicing preliminaries.

As for me, my life has been transformed from studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It might be the same case for many of you. For sure, what each of you may get from this group study will surely vary, but make sure you grasp the following

basic points during the studies: on the one hand, you should internalize the teachings through hearing and contemplating the content word by word, and on the other hand, you should pray to the lineage masters with faith and devotion. Once all causes and conditions are present, even the most ordinary person can achieve the highest level of enlightenment. Perhaps my teachings may not impress you, but I do hope they will inspire you. I have taught the text a few times in the past, so some of you may already know the content. During this study, if you don't understand certain parts of the text, you can always ask and discuss them with your Dharma peers.

About the keywords in the title

(The Words of My Perfect Teacher³⁷ or The Oral Teachings of the Samantabhadra.)

Samantabhadra: Patrul Rinpoche had extreme faith and devotion to his root guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu. To Patrul Rinpoche, his guru is inseparable from the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra.

Oral Teachings: This guide of preliminary practices is a complete, faithful written record of the oral teachings Patrul Rinpoche received directly from his guru Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu. As Patrul Rinpoche stated in the conclusion, this text is faithful to the words of his peerless guru, which his own vajra-brothers can still bear witness to.

For us practitioners of later generations, it would be perfectly fine if Patrul Rinpoche had added his own words in the text, because Patrul Rinpoche's words are inseparable from his guru's. Both Dharma masters were truly great enlightened ones. In Tibet, Patrul Rinpoche was actually more renowned than his guru. Nevertheless, Patrul Rinpoche said in great humility that he faithfully recorded every single word of his guru's oral teaching, so that practitioners in future times, when reading the text, would experience the same deep devotion as if they were meeting their guru in person.

For us followers of the Nyingtik tradition, to attain realization, there's really no need to exhaustively study scriptures or rely on other ascetic practices. Simply combining the blessings of the lineage masters with our own prayers can lead to

³⁷ The literal translation of the original Tibetan title of the text (ཀུན་བཟང་བླ་མ་གྱི་ཞལ་ལུང་) is: *The Oral Teachings of the Samantabhadra*.

realization effortlessly. For example, many practitioners recite *The Root Verses of the Longchen Nyintik Preliminary Practices* while practicing the preliminaries, and through this, they can achieve realization. According to the legacy of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, practitioners recite Mipham Rinpoche's *Illuminating the Path to Liberation* while practicing the preliminaries, and through this, they can recognize the nature of the mind.

About the author: Patrul Rinpoche

The biography of Patrul Rinpoche was placed before the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in the compiled book of the Chinese language. Patrul Rinpoche was considered the emanation of *Shantideva*,³⁸ *Shavaripa*,³⁹ and *Avalokiteshvara*.⁴⁰ He was a lineage master with realization, wisdom, and compassion. Patrul Rinpoche always carried with him the scriptures of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and *Chanting the Names of Manjushri*⁴¹ in his life.

³⁸ Shantideva was a scholar in the 8th century from the monastic university Nalanda, one of the most celebrated centers of learning in ancient India. According to legend, Shantideva was greatly inspired by the celestial bodhisattva Manjushri, from whom he secretly received teachings and great insights. Yet as far as the other monks could tell, there was nothing special about Shantideva. In fact, he seemed to do nothing but eat and sleep. In an attempt to embarrass him, the monks forced Shantideva's hand by convincing him to publicly expound on the scriptures. To the amazement of all in attendance that day, Shantideva delivered the original and moving verses of the *Bodhicharyavatara*, or *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. When he reached verse thirty-four of the ninth chapter, he began to rise into the sky, until he at last disappeared. Following this, Shantideva became a great teacher. (Source: Shambhala Publications)

³⁹ Shavaripa was an Indian Buddhist teacher, one of the eighty-four Mahasiddhas, honored as being among the holders of the distant transmission of Mahamudra. He was a student of Nagarjuna and a teacher of Maitripa. He is one of the forefathers of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁴⁰ Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo wrote a prayer to Patrul Rinpoche during the festival of Chokhor Düchen in 1860.

One of the verses from this prayer is widely used to this day:

Outwardly, you are Shantideva, Bodhisattva;

Inwardly, you are Shavaripa, Lord of Siddhas;

Secretly, you are Avalokiteshvara himself, the supreme self-liberation of suffering;

Jigme Chokyi Wangpo, I supplicate you.

⁴¹ *Chanting the Names of Manjushri* (Skt. Manjusrinamasamgiti; Tib. འཇམ་དཔལ་མཚན་བརྗོད་, Wyl. 'jam dpal mtshan brjod') (Toh. 360) is a famous praise of Manjushri, sometimes known as the 'king of all tantras'. Taught directly by Buddha Shakyamuni, the tantra lists names that praise Manjushri, who is here to be understood not as a bodhisattva but as the embodiment of the primordial wisdom of all buddhas. It consists of 160 verses and mantra sentences. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Patrul Rinpoche propagated Sutrayana teachings through *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and Vajrayana teachings through *Longchen Nyingtik*. There are many introductions about the life of Patrul Rinpoche, so I won't elaborate further in today's teaching.

About the prologue

Homage to the Three Roots!

This is the supplication prayer from the translator.⁴² At the very beginning of the translation process, the translator adds this prayer in order to dispel obstacles and increase favorable conditions.

There are a few Chinese translated versions of the text. The earliest version was translated by the lay practitioner Yuanxing Guo. I once taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* at Larung Gar, using his version. Nevertheless, his translation was in classical Chinese, making it difficult for later generations to fully understand the text.

Later, Kunzang Tsultrim, a disciple of Gangkar Rinpoche (1892–1957), also provided a brief translation and compiled the text into a guide called *The Preliminaries for the Nyingtik from the Great Perfection*. I taught his version to some Dharma students in 1987. However, the text was incomplete as it only offered general descriptions of the common and uncommon preliminaries.

Then, as causes and conditions finally ripened, I completed the translation of the full text in 1999. Since then, some people have also “translated”⁴³ the text. Nevertheless, with the blessings of the Three Roots, my translation went smoothly without any obstacles.

Homage to all the supreme teachers endowed with unconditional, great compassion!

This is the general supplication prayer. Patrul Rinpoche paid homage to all his gurus at the very beginning of writing this text.

⁴² Here “the translator” refers to Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche himself. Rinpoche finished translating the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* from Tibetan to Chinese in 1999.

⁴³ Some people simply copied Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's translation of the text and put their names as the translator instead. Without changing a single word of the Chinese translated text, they published the translation under their own names.

All the gurus have realized the wisdom of the ultimate nature of everything and generated the great compassion of benefiting all beings. Wisdom and great compassion form the basis of all great virtues. Since these gurus possess all the great qualities, the author prostrates to the gurus with great veneration.

Alternatively, the prayer can be explained in another way. “Infinite and unconditional compassion” refers to Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. All his gurus possess “infinite and unconditional compassion” and are indistinguishable from Avalokiteshvara. To them, the author prostrates with great veneration.

The following verses are arranged in the following order: first, homage to the gurus of the three lineages, Venerable Longchenpa, Jigme Lingpa, and Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu respectively; second, the abstract of the text; last, the author’s vow.

1) Homage to the gurus of the Three Lineages

*The mind lineage of the Conquerors; the symbol lineage of the
Vidyadharas;*

The most fortunate beings of the hearing lineage

*Who are guided by the sublime ones and have attained the
twofold goal:*

To all the teachers of the three lineages, I pay homage.

The Three Lineages are the mind lineage of the Conquerors, the symbol lineage of the Vidyadharas, and the hearing lineage of ordinary beings.

- The mind lineage of the Conquerors

The buddhas teach without teaching, transmitting all the doctrines without words or symbols. The countless disciples fully embody the essence of this ultimate teaching without any error, and their qualities of freedom and realization⁴⁴ become one with those of the buddhas.

For example, as it says in the history of Vajrayana Buddhism, the twelve

⁴⁴ The qualities of a buddha include freedom from all obscurations and tendencies, and realization of the two kinds of knowledge—knowing all that there is to know and knowing the nature of everything.

primordial teachers⁴⁵ of the Great Perfection transmitted the unconditioned wisdom to their circle of disciples, and the latter attained full realization.

Such mind-to-mind transmission also has a similar correspondence in Sutrayana. For example, at the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, the entity of precepts in the Buddha's mindstream was naturally and effortlessly realized in a few exceptional disciples, indicating that the transmission was through the wisdom mind of the Buddha.

Thus, the buddhas in the mind lineage of the Conquerors are also our lineage masters. If it were not the case that Buddha Shakyamuni had this primordial transmission, it would be hard to set up the homage to Buddha Shakyamuni.

Some people think Vajrayana doesn't carry a legitimate, genuine lineage of Buddhism. Actually, Vajrayana is legitimate, considering that Buddha Samantabhadra⁴⁶ and Buddha Shakyamuni are among its lineage masters.

- The symbol lineage of the Vidyadhara⁴⁷

Without relying on any speech or words, a Vidyadhara guru transmits the Dharma simply through showing a symbol, like pointing to space, whereby the mind of the guru merges with that of the disciple, enabling the latter to realize the true nature of reality. The disciple attains realization through nothing more than being shown a symbol. This is similar to the symbolic teaching of Chan Buddhism.

Gurus of the symbol lineage of the Vidyadharas were mainly from India. The order of transmission was: Garab Dorje (Prahevajra) – Sarasiddhi (Manjushrimitra) – Shri Singha⁴⁸ – Jnanasutra – Vimalamitra – Padmasambhava, and Vairotsana.

⁴⁵ The twelve primordial teachers are Nirmanakaya buddhas that took forms in various realms. Each appeared to specific gatherings of beings and revealed certain teachings and doctrines. The twelfth primordial teacher is said to be Buddha Shakyamuni. The twelve primordial teachers are (1) Acintyaprabhasa, (2) Akshobhyapraba, (3) Pel Jikpa Kyopei Yi, (4) Zhonu Rolpa Nampar Tsewa, (5) Vajradhara, (6) Kumaravirabalin, (7) Drangsong Trhopei Gyelpo, (8) Arhat Survarnaprabhasa, (9) Tsewe Rolpei Lodro, (10) Kashyapa, the elder, (11) Yab Ngondzok Gyelpo, (12) Shakyamuni

⁴⁶ Samantabhadra (Skt.; Tib. ཀུན་ཀྱང་འཇུག་པོ་, Kuntu Zangpo; Wyl. kun tu bzang po): In the Dzogchen teachings, our true nature, that state of the Ground, is given the name the 'Primordial Buddha.' (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁴⁷ About the meaning of vidyadharas: Vidya, or "awareness," means wisdom free from eternalism and nihilism. Those who always, beyond meditation and postmeditation, hold (Skt. dhara) awareness in their hands within the space of compassion are called vidyadharas (awareness holders). (Source: Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *Primordial Purity: Oral Instructions on the Three Words That Strike the Vital Point*, Shambhala Publications, 2016.)

⁴⁸ Shri Singha's name also appears as "Sri Simha."

- The hearing lineage of ordinary beings

When Padmasambhava came to Tibet, he conferred the teachings of the Great Perfection through speech and words. His disciples heard the teachings and achieved realization through meditation.

The transmission passed down from Padmasambhava to Yeshe Tsogyal and Trisong Detsen, then to Nyang Tingdzin Zangpo, Dangma Lhundrup Gyaltsen, Chetsün Senge Wangchuk, Shyangton Tashi Dorje, Drupchen Khepa Nyima Bum, Guru Jobe, Trulshik Senge Gyabpa, Drupchen Melong Dorje, Rigdzin Kumaradza, and continued to Longchen Rabjam, Jigme Lingpa, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, Patrul Rinpoche, Mipham Rinpoche, Khenpo Kunzang Palden, Khenchen Thubten Chöphel, and then to Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

This kind of unbroken lineage tradition is similar, but not identical, to that of the Pure Land School of Chinese Buddhism, in which transmissions are passed down from generation to generation.

Many of you might not have heard of these three lineages of transmission. As for me, I have heard the teachings multiple times from Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Now that we have had perfect transmissions of many Dharma teachings, especially the transmission of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, which is one of the last two texts⁴⁹ that Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had fully and completely expounded right before his parinirvana. I believe many of you have received the perfect transmission, and I hope you will really internalize the teachings.

Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu once said, “Except myself, all the lineage holders before me are the real embodiments of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.” While teaching the text, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche also said, “Except myself, all the lineage holders before me are great Vidyadharas.” Although these are their humble words, they reflect the superiority of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Now that the transmission is passed on to us, we must cherish and pay special attention to it.

I hope you always have faith in the gurus of the three lineages. Without faith, enlightenment is out of the question. Some young people can present the Buddha’s teachings well, even comparable to an academic professor of Buddhist Studies. However, they lack faith in the guru and the Three Jewels, generate no compassion for all beings, and cultivate no revulsion toward samsara. Therefore, no matter how

⁴⁹ The other text is the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*.

good they are as Dharma presenters, their eloquence can hardly help themselves at the time of death, and their engagement in Dharma merely sows a seed of liberation.

Hence, Dharma students need not only intellectual capacity to understand the doctrines but also faith in the lineage masters. If the biography and life story of your guru have moved you to tears and generated enormous gratitude toward them, it means the blessings of the Dharma are with you, and your practice is likely to be of success. On the contrary, if you feel nothing after reading or hearing your guru's life story a hundred times, the future of your practice is worrisome.

It is very important to transform your mind through Dharma studies. Before embarking on the Buddhist path, you may have been busy pursuing a worldly life and engaging in unwholesome conduct and thoughts. Now, with the guru's blessings and the Dharma practice, you should see a total transformation in your life.

Of course, all of our transformations and realizations arise from the blessings of the three lineages, so we must arouse true, uncontrived devotion to all of the lineage gurus. Recently, many of you have been practicing prostration every day. Make sure you prostrate to the guru while seeing the guru as the embodiment of all the holders of the three lineages. At the same time, you should be mindful: "I feel deeply grateful to all of our lineage gurus who have passed on the precious transmissions to us." We would feel thankful to the scientist whose invention has brought benefits to us in this life. Likewise, those of us who have wisdom and insight would feel a much stronger sense of gratitude to our lineage gurus who have shown us the path to eternal happiness, not only in this life but in many lives hereafter.

2) Homage to Venerable Longchenpa

*In the absolute expanse of Dharmadhatu, you realized the
wisdom of Dharmakaya;*

*In the expanse of luminosity, you saw the Buddha-fields of
Sambhogakaya;*

*For the benefit of sentient beings, you appeared in the form of
Nirmanakaya;*

To the Omniscient Dharma King, I pay homage.

Omniscient Longchenpa is an incomparable great luminary in Tibetan Buddhism. The verse gives praise to the three kayas of Longchenpa. Regarding Dharmakaya, in terms of the profound, unspeakable, and unfabricated Dharmata, or suchness, Longchenpa has primordially realized the ultimate nature of everything in the vast expanse—there is no birth and no cessation. Regarding Sambhogakaya, in the sphere of luminosity, Longchenpa had a direct vision of the Sambhogakaya Buddha-fields endowed with the five certainties.⁵⁰ Regarding Nirmanakaya, in front of the beings of samsara, Longchenpa appeared as an ordinary monk and brought benefits to innumerable beings through means including hearing, contemplating and meditating, teaching, debating, and composing. Before Longchenpa, the omniscient Sovereign of Dharma who is the embodiment of the three kayas, the author prostrates with body, speech, and mind with great veneration.

As later practitioners, we should also supplicate omniscient Longchenpa with uncontrived faith. Longchenpa's contribution to Tibetan Buddhism is everlasting, and the benefits he brings to all beings are inconceivable. He well deserves to be called "the Sovereign of Dharma." These days, quite a number of people bear the title "the Sovereign of Dharma" or "the King of Dharma." With little spiritual realization and contribution to benefit beings, they claim the title by self-promotion and networking. This renders their title meaningless and their blessings void.

In contrast, the lineage disciples of Longchenpa, Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike, receive true blessings from him as long as they supplicate before him with devotion. These disciples will eventually achieve the level of realization that

⁵⁰ In his *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang explained the five certainties of the Sambhogakaya Buddha-fields:

1. The certain place is the array of Buddha-fields such as the unexcelled Buddha-fields of the Dense Array, which is the spontaneous vision of the supreme primal wisdom: because it is beyond measure, it is especially exalted.
2. The certain teacher comprises the buddhas of the five families: Vairocana-Hemasagara in the center, Vajrasattva-Hemasagara in the east, Ratnasambhava-Hemasagara in the south, Amitabha-Hemasagara in the west, and Amoghasiddhi-Hemasagara in the north. Alternatively, by further dividing them into subfamilies, we can speak of twenty-five Hemasagara buddhas: in the center, the five buddhas of the Body family, in the east the five buddhas of the Vajra family, in south the five buddhas of the Quality family, in the west the five buddhas of the Lotus family, and in the north the five buddhas of the Karma family.
3. The certain assembly is composed of bodhisattvas on the tenth level.
4. The certain teaching is that of the Great Vehicle.
5. The certain time is the ever-revolving wheel of eternity.

corresponds to their level of devotion. This is something many lineage disciples have personally experienced.

Longchenpa's personal life story can be found in his spiritual biography, which I translated from Tibetan to Chinese in 2002. His biography shows that Longchenpa excels any ordinary Dharma teacher in accomplishment. However, many "teachers" exaggerate or even fabricate their spiritual achievements. I have read the biography of this so-called teacher. Given what's written, it would appear that this "teacher" has far surpassed Longchenpa. Alas!

These "teachers" leave me speechless. How do these "teachers" compare with enlightened masters of the past, such as lineage masters of the Pure Land School or Huineng (638–713),⁵¹ the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School in Chinese Buddhism? I believe you have the right answer. The breadth and depth of these authentic lineage masters' accomplishments and blessings almost defy description. They brought remarkable contributions to the propagation of the Dharma and activities of benefiting beings.

Take the example of Longchenpa's *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*, which Patrul Rinpoche highly praised. This text sets out the stages of the path in Tibetan Buddhism and is filled with scholastic exposition. Due to the blessings of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, we have studied the entire text together. We have all experienced the bliss of the Dharma, including me, the teacher, and you, the students. This bliss may always be kept in your heart. I myself received the teachings and transmission of *The Great Chariot* from Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. I regarded this as the most unforgettable and meaningful thing in my life.

Now that we can still hear teachings and receive transmissions, this is invaluable to those faithful devotees who believe in rebirth. However, those who know nothing about the Dharma may just consider this Dharma class another ordinary seminar, and the benefits they receive will then be insignificant.

3) Homage to Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa

⁵¹ Master Huineng, also commonly known as the Sixth Patriarch of Chan, is a renowned master of Chinese Chan Buddhism. It is said that he was an uneducated layman who suddenly attained an initial awakening upon hearing a man reciting a phrase from the *Diamond Sutra*. With his mother's permission he then left home and devoted himself to religious life. Despite his lack of formal training, he demonstrated his understanding to the fifth patriarch, Daman Hongren, who then supposedly chose Huineng as his true successor. Huineng is regarded as the founder of the "Sudden Enlightenment" Southern Chan school of Buddhism, which focuses on an immediate and direct attainment of Buddhist enlightenment.

*Through your transcendent wisdom, you saw the ultimate
nature of all knowable things;*

*The light of your great compassion shined upon all sentient
beings;*

*You elucidated the teachings of the most profound path, the
summit of all yantras.*

To Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa, I pay homage.

This verse praises Jigme Lingpa's wisdom, compassion, and power. Jigme Lingpa fully realized the wisdom of relative truth and ultimate truth. His compassionate luminosity pervaded all beings. Through his extraordinary power, Jigme Lingpa revealed *Longchen Nyintik*—the innermost tantric teachings on the profound path of the Great Perfection—and subsequently propagated it to the world. Before Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa, the author prostrates with great veneration.

The name “Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa” means “Fearless Holder of Awareness.” At the age of six, his guru named him “Khyentse Ozer,” which means “Light Rays of Wisdom and Compassion.” While still a young adult, he started to reveal spiritual treasures (terma⁵²) and received the name “Jigme Lingpa.” He is one of the most prominent masters of Tibetan Buddhism. His biggest contribution to Buddhism is having revealed the teachings of *Longchen Nyintik*.

Practitioners of the later generation should often pray to the lineage gurus. If you don't have other prayers to use, you may recite the verses we have just studied in today's class. If you can pray to the lineage gurus of the three lineages, such as Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa, the defilement in your mind will be dispelled swiftly with the gurus' blessings, and wisdom and great compassion will arise naturally.

Therefore, I believe that it is extremely important to pray to lineage gurus with reverence.

⁵² Terma (Tib. གཏེ་མ་, Wyl. gter ma) means spiritual treasures hidden by Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal in the earth and in the minds of disciples to be revealed at the appropriate time by 'treasure revealers' or tertons. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

PROLOGUE



Lesson 2

“You were Lord Avalokiteśvara ... the swift path of transference.”
[page 3–4]

We started learning *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* from the prayers to the gurus in the prologue. Yesterday’s class covered the prayers in which Patrul Rinpoche supplicated the lineage holders of the three lineages, Venerable Longchenpa, and Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa. Today’s class starts with learning the prayers to his one and only root guru: Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu.

4) Homage to Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu

*You were Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in the form of a
spiritual teacher;*

*Through hearing your teachings, one was guided onto the path
to liberation;*

*You engaged in limitless activities to suit the needs of sentient
beings;*

To my root lama of immense kindness, I pay homage.

As it says in the historical record and prophecy, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu was

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in the form of a qualified teacher who appeared in this world to benefit all beings. Thus, he is regarded as an “emanation of Avalokiteshvara.”

It is recorded in revealed treasures (termas), sutras, and shastras that any sentient being who has a direct or indirect positive affinity with Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu will enter the path of liberation and be reborn in the Pure Land.

Meanwhile, he delivered beings according to their differences in capacity, motivation, and disposition. Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu’s Dharma activities were vast, and now his lineage disciples are everywhere. Before his supreme root guru of threefold kindness,⁵³ the author prostrates with body, speech, and mind in uncontrived faith.

At the age of nineteen, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu became a disciple of Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa and received empowerment and pith instructions on the Great Perfection from his guru. Later, he went to Dzachukha,⁵⁴ and practiced in retreat at a place called Tsacharl Melong⁵⁵ for twenty-one years. Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu recognized *rigpa*, the innermost nature of the mind. He attained full realization of the Great Perfection and was regarded as a great enlightened master.

His disciples were as numerous as stars, the most remarkable of whom were his two main disciples, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and Patrul Rinpoche, who are like the sun and the moon, respectively.

Patrul Rinpoche followed Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu for long periods, and through guru devotion, he attained all the great qualities of his guru’s mind. Thus, Patrul Rinpoche’s one and only root guru was Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu.

In Tibet, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu is not as renowned as Patrul Rinpoche. Nevertheless, if later practitioners hear about Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu’s name and study his teachings, they will naturally receive extraordinary blessings and eventually achieve experience, realization, or even the state of vidyadhara.

Later in his life, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu built the Zagya Monastery (*Dza*

⁵³ Threefold kindness refers to conferring empowerment, explaining the tantras, and granting pith instructions in Vajrayana.

⁵⁴ Dzachukha, also known as Sershul, Sérxü, Serxu, or Shiqu, is a county of the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the northwest of Sichuan Province, China, bordering Qinghai to the west and the Tibet Autonomous Region to the southwest.

⁵⁵ This place is near Changma Hermitage (the present Changma Buddhist Academy), founded by Khenchen Thubten Chöphel (or Thubga Rinpoche)—the root guru of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

Gyelgon) at Sershul. Prior to his parinirvana, he gave his nails to Patrul Rinpoche and said, “You will build a statue of me at the Zagya Monastery and put my nails inside for its consecration. This statue will be inseparable from me.” This statue has now become a pilgrimage spot for numerous Buddhist devotees. His lineage descendants are numerous and scattered in Lhasa, Amdo, Qinghai, Kham, Sichuan, and more. Many of them renounced this life and practiced in a quiet place, and eventually attained the state of vidyadhara.

Therefore, we should pray to the lineage gurus with uncontrived faith and fervent veneration. If you don’t yet have any specific prayers to recite, you may use the homage verses that Patrul Rinpoche put in the prologue of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Many eminent masters of Tibetan Buddhism would chant these prayers to supplicate the lineage gurus at the very beginning of their Dharma teachings.

Patrul Rinpoche studied with many teachers, but here he pays homage mainly to several of his foremost gurus, who made remarkable contributions to Buddhism and humanity through their vast Dharma activities. These contributions include their monumental written works and enlightened disciples. Anyone who knows a little history of Tibetan Buddhism is aware of the great achievements of these gurus.

However, few people truly know the history of these gurus. When historical figures are introduced at school, the teacher simply describes when and how they were born, when they died, how many works they composed, etc. Such introductions are entirely scholarly. I have read some Dharma masters’ biographies in which the authors barely delve into the masters’ inner spiritual achievement and realization but instead focus primarily on external details, such as age, timeline, political background, and life stories.

As Buddhists, we are definitely interested in extrinsic information, such as the historical background of our gurus, but most importantly, we should learn about their spiritual path and seek to attain their realization. This is very important for every practitioner.

5) The abstract of the whole text

The entire Buddha’s teachings are contained in the works of the omniscient Longchenpa and his lineage;

*The innermost essence of the pith instructions that yields
Buddhahood in one lifetime:*

*The outer, inner, ordinary, and extraordinary preliminary
practices of the path,*

*Together with the additional instruction on the swift path of
transference.*

This guide encompasses the essence of the Buddha's 84,000 teachings. Combining the scholarly or *pandita's* approach and the practical or *yogi's* approach, this text comprises the teachings in the monumental works of two omniscient masters—Longchenpa's *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, and Jigme Lingpa's *Treasury of Precious Qualities*. Therefore, the text is full of quintessential pith instructions that can bring Buddhahood in a single lifetime if one practices accordingly.

The text consists of three parts: Part one is the ordinary or common preliminaries; part two is the extraordinary or uncommon preliminaries; and part three is the swift path of transference.

The Words of My Perfect Teacher comprises quintessential pith instructions from the works of Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa. One example is Longchenpa's *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*, which many of you have studied. In his *The Golden Key to Pith Instructions*, Patrul Rinpoche praises this work of Longchenpa, saying, "It unerringly contains the entire teachings of various schools of Buddhism. Such a remarkable composition is never before seen."

Patrul Rinpoche continued, "All the teachings of the nine vehicles⁵⁶ are within the text." *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind* covers all the essential teachings of the nine vehicles, so this work of Longchenpa is of utmost supremacy. I go through the text whenever I am free and feel very blissful while reading it.

However, many people are deeply entrapped by their karmas and are reluctant to read works of spiritual blessings. Instead, they are attracted to works of discursive thought, such as novels. They regard them as precious and worthy of being cherished. Alas! This phenomenon is not uncommon during the degenerate age.

In fact, the works of Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa are of utmost profundity,

⁵⁶ The nine yanas (Skt. nava-yana; Tib. རྟེན་པ་དགུ་, tekpa gu), or nine vehicles, refer to nine successive stages of the path within the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

and all the quintessential pith instructions from these works are compiled in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. So, this text from Patrul Rinpoche encompasses the essence of the Buddha's teachings and provides a pivotal outline of the Dharma. It can bring perfect Buddhahood in a single lifetime.

Please make sure you do not think this way: "This text is about preliminary practice, so it may not be of primary importance." Actually, it contains the Buddha's entire teachings and can be regarded as a guide to both the preliminary practice and the main practice.

The text consists of three parts: the common preliminaries, the uncommon preliminaries, and the swift transference practice. The common preliminaries, also known as ordinary or external preliminaries, include "the precious human life,"⁵⁷ "the impermanence of life," "the defects of samsara," "the principle of cause and effect," "the benefits of liberation," and "how to follow a guru."

The uncommon preliminaries, also known as the extraordinary or internal preliminaries, include "taking refuge, the foundation stone of all paths," "arousing bodhicitta, the root of the Great Vehicle," "meditating and reciting on the teacher as Vajrasattva to cleanse all obscurations," "offering the mandala to accumulate merit and wisdom,"⁵⁸ and "Guru Yoga, the entrance-way for blessings, the ultimate method for arousing the wisdom of realization."

The last section includes "transference of consciousness, the instructions for the dying: Buddhahood without meditation." It covers three types of swift transference practice, a shortcut to enlightenment, which belongs to the main practice of the supreme Vajrayana.

Patrul Rinpoche integrated the works of lineage holders and the oral teachings of his root guru, and with his own wisdom, composed *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. This text is like a wish-fulfilling jewel, and if we assimilate its content, we can be considered qualified Buddhists.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a Dharma master would instruct a beginning practitioner to start with *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. This great tradition is now gradually permeating other areas of the world.

⁵⁷ In the English version of the text (translated by Padmakara Translation Group), "the precious human life" is "the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages."

⁵⁸ In Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's Chinese translation, "the kusāli's accumulation: destroying the four demons as a single stroke" is put within the mandala practice, while the English version separates the kusāli practice into a new chapter.

Now that you are starting to build Dharma affinity through studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I hope you will share the teachings with others, so more people will understand the basics of Buddhism. Otherwise, many people appear to have taken refuge, to be Vajrayana practitioners, or even more, claim to have attained enlightenment and possess miraculous power, yet they don't even know the basic teachings of Buddhism. This is truly disappointing.

This kind of behavior is self-deceptive and delusional. Deception is already very widespread in today's world, and it is best not to use Buddhism as a disguise to deceive others. Now that we have attained precious human bodies and the connection to take refuge in Buddhism, we should be true to the teachings and practice the Dharma correctly.

Of course, without the guidance of qualified teachers and Buddhist scriptures, ordinary people can barely understand the profound Dharma with their own conceptual thoughts. Therefore, we must follow the teachers and scriptures that have the power of blessings. By doing so, our minds will become virtuous, our afflictions will be tamed, and we will become more capable of benefiting others.

6) The aspiration statement

This text is highly profound and unique, yet clear and easy to understand.

*It presents the unerring oral instructions of my peerless guru,
Which I have recalled in my mind and explained unequivocally.*

Gurus and deities, please grant me your blessings.

Here is what Patrul Rinpoche wanted to express in this verse: "In writing down *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I have not been guided primarily by aesthetic or literary considerations. I clarify the entire stages of the path in a way that is easy to understand. Although the text is written in plain language, the embedded meaning is immensely profound. The instructions are the unerring oral instructions of my revered guru. I heard the teachings again and again and composed the text according to my own definitive understanding about the teachings. May the Buddha and gurus bless me so that I may explain the teachings definitively as I have remembered them."

These instructions in plain language are easy to understand, and even a novice monk can understand them. However, if you think deeply, their meanings are extremely profound, and even learned Dharma masters, including those holding a geshe⁵⁹ degree, may have difficulties understanding some parts. That means, although *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is easy to understand literally, the meaning is very profound. The more we contemplate, the more profound meaning we can derive from it. This is the characteristic of the vajra speech of an enlightened being.

Patrul Rinpoche didn't fabricate the text in a casual manner. He faithfully recorded the oral instructions of his root guru, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu. In the conclusion section of the book, he writes, "This text is not some confection of invented phrases, a cleverly painted rainbow of fanciful words by some erudite expert superficially versed in complex texts, having nothing to do with the words of my kind teacher."⁶⁰

Therefore, the whole text is from Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu's unerring oral instructions. Patrul Rinpoche listened to the teachings twenty-five times before compiling the instructions into *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Eminent masters of the past had a very different attitude toward hearing Dharma teachings compared to ours today. Some people feel impatient after listening to the same teaching three or four times, let alone twenty-five times. They say, "How come we have to study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* again?" This is not the right attitude. You may have read through the text, yet you may not have fully understood the meaning. Therefore, it is still very necessary to hear the teachings again and again.

In 2002 in Xiamen,⁶¹ when I had just finished translating the great biography of Buddha Shakyamuni,⁶² I met a professor from Xiamen University at the Buddhist College of Minnan. We had a long conversation and covered topics related to the Dharma and worldly dharmas, including the convergence between

⁵⁹ Geshe (Tib. dge bshes, short for dge-ba'i bshes-gnyen, "virtuous friend"; translation of Skt. kalyāṇamitra) or geshema is a Tibetan Buddhist academic degree for monks and nuns. The degree is emphasized primarily by the Gelug lineage but is also awarded in the Sakya and Bön traditions. The equivalent geshema degree is awarded to women.

⁶⁰ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 372.

⁶¹ Xiamen is a port city in Fujian province on China's southeast coast, across a strait from Taiwan. It encompasses two main islands and a region on the mainland.

⁶² *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*

quantum physics and Buddhism. The professor exclaimed, “It is very important to build a solid foundation for Dharma practice, under the guidance of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Even Patrul Rinpoche had to hear the teachings from his guru twenty-five times, let alone ordinary practitioners like us. I have read the text five or six times, but I feel it is far from being enough. I vow to read through the text every year!”

Many years have passed. I don’t know whether he indeed has read the text every year. If I had his telephone number, I would like to call him to find out.

University professors often appear overconfident and have a strong sense of intellectual superiority. Nevertheless, he was wise enough to increase his appreciation every time he read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Unlike him, many people put the book aside after reading it only once. We shouldn’t get tired of studying the Dharma or feel it’s enough to study only one Buddhist scripture.

Some time ago, someone said, “I have studied *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*. Should I study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time? Would it be too much?” Well, don’t you worry!

The biography of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo says this great master studied and received transmissions of more than seven hundred volumes of scriptures. I was so impressed when I read this. Many people have not studied seventy volumes in their lives, let alone seven hundred! Actually, they might not even have completed the transmissions of seven books, let alone seventy!

After learning only one or two Buddhist texts, some people feel they have studied enough. This is not a right attitude to have. Buddhist students should have a strong desire to learn the Dharma and not easily be satisfied. But when it comes to worldly desires, be satisfied with less. For example, having one residence is enough, and there is no need for more.

As for the Dharma, more is better. It is not enough to study just one book—study one more; not enough to listen to a Dharma teaching just once—listen to it again; not enough to complete one round of five hundred thousand repetitions of preliminaries—do a second round, a third, a fourth...

Of course, while practicing preliminaries, we cannot only work on the five hundred thousand accumulations of uncommon preliminaries. A Dharma master once said, “It is easier to practice the uncommon preliminaries. It can be done in a very short period of time, so it is nothing challenging. The most challenging part

is the practice of the four common preliminaries. One must devote a significant amount of time to these practices.”

This master considered the uncommon preliminaries very easy to practice, yet many practitioners think that doing one hundred thousand prostrations is already a very demanding “mission.” This attitude is an indication that the practitioners are not mentally strong enough. If their will is strong, they will not mind how much time and energy they spend eradicating the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance.

The instructions in the text are faithful records of Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu’s supreme oral teachings. Patrul Rinpoche listened to the teachings again and again and attained solid understanding. He then wrote down everything, including his own spiritual experiences and the pith instructions. This is how *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* was brought into existence.

As practitioners of later generations, we should also firmly keep in mind the words of our own gurus. I mentioned before that Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had a disciple from Batang⁶³ county. He appeared to be a very ordinary monk, but he had been noting down all the daily talks of Phuntsok Rinpoche for more than ten years, including jokes and criticism of his disciples.

Last year⁶⁴ was the third anniversary of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s parinirvana. This disciple compiled his notes into a book. Everybody considered this book very precious. When Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was still with us, we didn’t reflect too much on many of his words. We took them for granted because these were words and criticisms that we heard from our guru every day.

But after the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche left us, after careful contemplation of his words we began to see the extraordinary secret meanings of even his seemingly very ordinary words. We felt these words could not have been spoken by any ordinary person. In the same manner, Patrul Rinpoche faithfully noted down the words of his guru Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, including the quoted verses of eminent Indian and Tibetan masters.

While composing this text, Patrul Rinpoche prayed to his root guru, lineage holders, deities, dakinis, and Dharma protectors for blessings, wishing the text

⁶³ Batang County is a county located in western Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province.

⁶⁴ 2007

would be passed down to future generations and benefit innumerable beings. With his prayers and aspiration, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is endowed with incredible blessings.

Many people had their lives transformed in a short period of time after reading it. Many of you here in class have also found solutions in this text to the big questions of worldly affairs in this life and of spiritual liberation in the many lives yet to come. Through the blessings of the lineage holders, you are able to cultivate the untainted spiritual treasures in your mind.

I always believe that praying to lineage gurus is particularly important while studying the Dharma. Once the guru's blessings have dissolved into our mind, whichever text we are studying and practicing upon, and whichever Dharma activity we are engaging in, we will find that they may be accomplished more easily. Otherwise, many things seem insurmountable.

Hence, we should often pray to our lineage gurus, wishing that their great compassion, wisdom, and extraordinary power to benefit beings will all merge with our own minds, so that in the future, we can be like them and also have the extraordinary capacities to benefit all beings. This is all we should pray for.

We don't pray for the temporary happiness of the realms of gods and men. For example, we don't seek blessings for living longer or for getting full pensions after retirement. The only thing we pray for is to benefit all beings. Even if this is at the cost of our own lives, we will not be afraid or withdraw.

"May I have the power to benefit beings in this life and many lives to come! May I have the courage to deliver all beings!" This is the aspiration of a bodhisattva.

This concludes the teachings on the prayer verses in the prologue.

APPENDIX FOR LESSON 2

Essential Points for the Daily Meditation Retreat

Many of you are now practicing the outer or common preliminaries in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Before you embark on the actual practice, I would like to briefly describe the essential points of Dharma practice.

These points are applicable to the common preliminaries as well as the uncommon ones. They are the essential instructions of Patrul Rinpoche and Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang and have been my own practice guidelines throughout the years.

It is my hope that after today's teaching, you will all gain mastery of the guidelines and continue to follow them for the rest of your life.

Many people engage in exercises, such as yoga or martial arts, for the purpose of retaining health or curing illnesses. Unlike them, what we are practicing here by following the instruction guidelines is driven by a very different motive.

In my case, ever since I started following the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, I have been practicing according to these essential points. May you also practice like this in the years to come.

The following introduces the practices one performs in a daily retreat, which is what one does from morning until night, including sitting meditation and post-meditation. Practitioners can complete formal sitting meditation sessions two, three, four, or six times a day, given their own situations.

Even if you cannot find time for six formal sessions, you should strive to complete at least one in the morning or evening. One of my former classmates is a very busy high-ranking official in the government, but she has managed to practice one session in the evening without interruption for six or seven years.

Faith plays a very important role in your practice. As long as you have established faith, you can always find time and conditions to practice Dharma. With faith, even serving jail time cannot stop one from attaining the rainbow body, as shown by many great eminent masters of the past.

These days, we often hear complaints like, "I just don't have the freedom to practice; my family is not supportive." But no matter how meager our freedom is,

it cannot be worse than that of a prisoner. If a prisoner can manage to practice Dharma, why can't we spare time for practice?

So please, no matter how tight your schedule is, at least try your very best to spare time for one sitting meditation per day. This minimal requirement also applies to sangha members with administrative duties at Larung Gar. If one cannot even squeeze out thirty minutes for sitting meditation, one may as well have already been reborn among the “realms devoid of leisure.”

The following is a brief introduction to daily practice. In general, the Longchen Nyingtik lineage places strong emphasis on formal sitting meditation, which is carried out during the three daily periods of morning, daytime, and evening.

Early Morning Practice

In the morning, visualize first that all buddhas, bodhisattvas, and lineage masters are playing vajra bells and drums, awakening you from the sleep of ignorance and confusion.

As you wake up, immediately chant “Lama chenno, Lama chenno,” calling your guru's kind attention to you, or recite the hundred-syllable mantra twenty-one times. Then sit up in bed for a while and reflect upon your dreams from the night: Were they virtuous or non-virtuous? If you had non-virtuous dreams, criticize yourself; if you had virtuous ones, rejoice and dedicate the merit.

After getting up from the bed, prostrate at least three times. Then do your morning routines, including washing your face, brushing your teeth, and going to the bathroom. Afterward, clean up the shrine room and offer water, incense, and other offerings to the buddhas.

Formal Sessions During Daytime

This includes three parts: preparation, main practice, and conclusion.

1) Preparation

First, complete all necessary chores, then close the door and start practicing. According to *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, there are three essential points:

i. The essential point for the body:

Sit on a comfortable cushion, relax your body and mind, and rest. Assume the seven-point posture of Vairochana:

- a) Legs are crossed in the full vajra posture or half-vajra posture.
- b) Hands are placed in the gesture of equanimity below the navel. The right hand is on top of the left, thumbs touching each other.



GESTURE OF EQUANIMITY

- c) The spine should be straight and still, not tilting to the left or right, nor moving back and forth. It is said in some pith instructions that a straight body leads to a straight channel, a straight channel to an even mind, and an even mind makes awareness arise spontaneously.
- d) The neck is slightly bent forward; do not lean backward, nor skew to the left or right.
- e) Shoulders are stretched apart and relaxed, not closed tight to the chest.
- f) The eyes are slightly open, not too wide, gazing softly in the direction of the tip of the nose.
- g) The tongue is touching the palate.

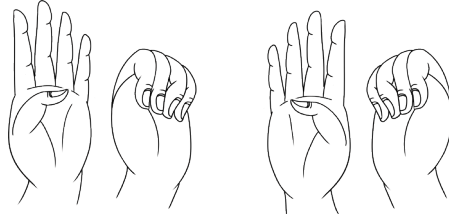
ii. The essential point for the speech:

Usually, this term refers to chanting or recitation, but that's not the case here. This point is about breathing—expelling the stale breath nine times.

To expel the stale breath, make a vajra fist⁶⁵ with your right hand and press your fist down on the artery at the base of your right thigh. With your left hand in the three-pronged vajra hand gesture, block your left nostril. Blow the stale air out

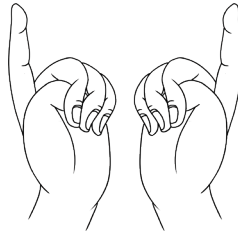
⁶⁵ Vajra fist: Press the thumb onto the root of the ring finger and make a fist with the other four fingers.

three times from your right nostril, imagining that all karma from hatred, accumulated by you and other beings from beginningless time, turns into white vapor that evaporates outside.⁶⁶



VAJRA FIST

Next, make a vajra fist with your left hand and press your fist down on the artery at the base of your left thigh. With your right hand in the three-pronged vajra hand gesture, block your right nostril. Blow the stale air out three times from your left nostril, imagining that all karma from greed, which you and other beings have accumulated from beginningless time, turns into red vapor that evaporates outside.



THREE-PRONGED VAJRA MUDRA

Finally, make the vajra fists with both hands and press them down on the artery at the bases of both of your thighs. Blow stale air out three times from both your nostrils, imagining that all karma from ignorance, which you and other sentient beings have accumulated from beginningless time, turns into black vapor that evaporates outside.

This is the so-called expelling the stale breath nine times. In some instructions, this is followed by the recitation of Sanskrit vowels,⁶⁷ Sanskrit consonants,⁶⁸ and

⁶⁶ Do the breathing as it suits each individual; there's no specific requirement on its length.

⁶⁷ a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, ṛ, ṛī, ḷ, e, ai, o, au, am, aḥ [om a a i i u u ri ri li li e ai o au am aḥ]

⁶⁸ k, kh, g, gh, ṅ, c, ch, j, jh, ṇ, ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ, t, th, d, dh, n, p, ph, b, bh, m, y, r, l, v, ś, ṣ, s, h [ka kha

the Mantra of Dependent Arising.⁶⁹ If you have difficulty reciting those, say *Om Ah Hum* instead, to purify speech through the three vajras⁷⁰ blessings of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Expelling stale air this way may seem nothing more than an ordinary yoga exercise, but in fact, this process enables us to expel negative emotions of greed, anger, and ignorance from our minds. Just as we clean a bowl before we eat from it or wash a pail before filling it with clean water, we too rinse dirt from our minds by expelling stale air prior to meditation.

iii. The essential point for the mind:

This includes two aspects: the right attitude and praying to the guru.

a) The right attitude

It is crucial to examine your attitude or motivation for doing the Dharma practice.

If the attitude is neutral, change it into a virtuous one.

If it is non-virtuous, renounce it once and for all and prevent it from arising.

There are two kinds of virtuous attitudes—worldly and transcendent. Worldly virtuous attitudes are those that seek protection from fear, including the desire to alleviate illness or to avoid harm from enemies, and the desire to better one's lot, including wishing for wealth, good health, a good career, beauty, and fame. These are not proper attitudes for practicing the Dharma and should be abandoned.

Transcendent virtuous attitudes include those at the levels of shravaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva. Among these, the attitudes of shravaka and pratyekabuddha are not to be followed, as they seek only personal liberation by achieving nirvana. What we should solely aim for is the attitude of the bodhisattva: wishing to benefit limitless sentient beings by helping them to be free from suffering and its causes, and to eventually attain perfect Buddhahood. In short, cultivating a correct attitude means we give rise to genuine bodhicitta, completely renouncing ethically neutral thoughts, harmful thoughts, and even worldly virtuous attitudes.

ga gha nga/ cha chha ja jha nya/ tra thra dra dhra nra/ ta tha da dha na/ pa pha ba bha ma/
ya ra la wa/ sha shha sa ha ksha soha]

⁶⁹ Mantra of Dependent Arising: om ye dharma haytu prabhava haytunte shan tatagato hyawadat teshan tsayo nirodha ewam wadi maha shramanaye soha

⁷⁰ Three vajras: vajra body, vajra speech, vajra mind.

b) Praying to the guru

Visualize in the space in front of you, about a foot above your head, a precious lion throne and cushions of a lotus with one thousand petals in full bloom, upon which sits your glorious root guru. If you have very strong faith in your guru, visualize them as they appear, similar to the visualization of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche as described in *The Swift Bestowal of Blessings: A Guru Yoga*. Otherwise, visualize your guru in the form of a deity such as Avalokitesvara, Buddha Shakyamuni, or Padmasambhava.

With intense devotion, pray single-mindedly, “Precious guru, the wisdom embodiment of buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions, the wish-fulfilling jewel, I pray to you from the very depths of my heart. Always hold me with your compassion, and grant me your blessings! Bless me that my mind merges completely with the Dharma! May all my confusion and obscuration be eradicated! May I accomplish my goals in practice and attain supreme enlightenment!”

Specifically, if you are at the stage of meditating on the preciousness of human life, pray, “Precious guru, whatever is your realization of the preciousness of human life, may the same realization arise in my mind!”

If you are meditating on impermanence, pray, “Precious guru, whatever your realization of impermanence is, may it arise in my mind also, right now, at this sitting!” With utter respect and earnest devotion, place your hands together, pray continuously, and recite the guru’s prayer for seven or twenty-one times.

After you are done with prayer, visualize the guru melting into light and dissolving into you, and your mind becomes indivisible with the wisdom mind of the guru. Rest in this state for as long as you can without following past thoughts, holding present thoughts, or engaging in future thoughts. Do not cling to anything as much as possible.

This concludes the essential points of body, speech, and mind for the preliminary, the preparation for the main practice.

2) The Main Practice

Although Guru Yoga may be called a preliminary, it could definitely be performed as a main practice, during which we combine prostration with prayers to the guru and conclude it with dedication. If you do Guru Yoga as part of your

preliminaries instead, you will start your main practice after finishing the Guru Yoga.

What is the main practice? It includes meditations on the preciousness of human life, impermanence, and so on. Meditate on these, one by one, following each specific instruction. For instance, yesterday you meditated on the eight freedoms, and then today you move on to the ten advantages. By doing so, the conviction will arise in you that it is extremely fortunate to obtain a human birth, free from the sufferings of the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals. You should devote your life solely to practicing the true Dharma unceasingly until you attain complete enlightenment.

These are the pith instructions of Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang. Commentaries compiled by disciple Sangye Dorje, an eighty-year-old Nepalese, say one should devote at least 146 days to the meditations from “the precious human life” to “arousing bodhicitta.” If one practices along with the preliminaries in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, at least one hundred days are required to complete the four common preliminaries, according to many lineage holders’ traditions.

This time I urge you to practice the preliminaries; it is not just a whim or a sudden impulse of mine. In all my life, I have very much valued *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind* and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. For this reason, ten years ago I gave teachings on *The Meaning Instructions on Three Virtues of Relaxation in the Natural State of the Mind* and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Today I feel exactly the same way.

However, there are people who switch from one practice to another, change teachers one after another, or even follow non-Buddhist traditions and start to exercise yoga. The result of their practice is a hodgepodge—a messy mixture. It is quite sad. It is my sincere wish that you will establish your fundamental practices, following them day and night. Here I am sharing with you my own practice; it may strike a chord with some of you but not with others.

3) The Conclusion

After meditating on one meditative instruction for half an hour or one to two hours, dedicate to all beings the merit of your practice. Seal the dedication with non-conceptual wisdom. If that is not within your reach yet, simply think, “Just as

all the buddhas and bodhisattvas perfectly dedicated their merit, so likewise, I perfectly dedicate all my merit.”

Recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra’s Aspiration to Excellent Conduct* in full, if you have time. Otherwise, recite the following verses: “Emulating the hero Manjushri, Samantabhadra, and all those with knowledge, I too make a perfect dedication of all actions that are positive.”

Practice at Bedtime

In the evening, after you have completed your practice of up to four to six meditation sessions and put away the offerings to the buddhas and the Dharma protectors, you should prostrate three times before you prepare to sleep.

Then sit in bed and review thoroughly your practice for the day. If you find you have done well, rejoice and dedicate the merit to all beings. If you find you have fallen short, blame yourself, thinking: “Other people practice so well every day, yet I’m still doing so poorly even though I have received many pith instructions from my guru. What a fool I am!” Punish yourself sharply, as Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang said, by pinching yourself until it hurts. Then go to sleep.

When you go to sleep, assume the lion’s posture or sit in meditation pose all night, as some practitioners do. Following the instructions from Longchen Nyingtik masters, visualize a four-petal lotus⁷¹ in your heart, into which the guru dissolves into light; we then fall asleep basking in the infinite light emanating from the guru. Or, visualize the guru’s brilliant light illuminating the entire world, and the entire world dissolves into us, and then we ourselves dissolve into the guru, and the guru melts away in the Dharma realm. In this state free of conceptual thoughts, enter the luminous dream. (If you have not received the teaching on dream yoga, just fall asleep in the state of non-attachment.)

Many older-generation practitioners start the day by chanting the hundred-syllable mantra or praying to the guru upon waking. During the day, in all of their activities—sitting, walking, lying down, and so forth—their minds never separate from praying to the guru and the Three Jewels. As night comes, they continue chanting “Lama chenno, Lama chenno.” They fall asleep in the state of oneness,

⁷¹ The term “four-petal lotus” has been mentioned in “*The Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru*” and “*The Fundamental Mind*.”

merging together the guru's wisdom and their own minds. They spend every day like this.

Practitioners in today's world, however, are nowhere close. They don't bother to do any contemplation when waking up and spend all day in distractions. When going to sleep, they pass out as if a rock had been tossed onto the bed and immediately begin snoring. Drifting aimlessly day after day, years can slip by in a wink; it's really not the best way to live. That said, we should all strive to be authentic practitioners by practicing well every day and continuing to live like this for the rest of our lives.

Wish you always pray to the guru and the Three Jewels. Pray that your mind will transform for the better. The Omniscient Longchenpa said, "Unless one has really practiced, even mastering the entire Tripitaka would not be helpful at the time of death." Therefore, when we study the Dharma, we must practice very diligently!

Additional Advice

I have just transmitted to you the pith instructions from Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang combined with the teachings from the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, as well as the instructions from Longchen Nyingtik. I have followed this practice for many years. Having done it during the earlier part of my life, I will certainly continue on the same practice in the later part of my life. I never imagine that when I wake up, I can fly here and there at will, and when I go to bed, I can immediately enter the state of a luminous dream. These are impractical things to think about; neither are they likely to happen.

Not being a great practitioner myself, perhaps I should not say too much. But as you have started the actual practice this year and are likely to do so in the future, I feel I should share my practice instructions with you. I do not consider it a secret; rather, it's a practical guide for spiritual advancement.

As beginning practitioners, your practice throughout the day is like this. You may find some variations among teachings and thus wonder, for instance, why the color of expelled stale air is described as black in one text and multicolor in another. There's no need to make a big deal out of minor differences. Each teacher interprets things in a slightly different way. I've followed the commentaries on Longchen

Nyingtik and also incorporated pith instructions that I received from Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. There is no need to worry about any seeming contradictions.

Please bear in mind that it is essential to begin any of your main practice by practicing Guru Yoga first. Our lineage masters taught that the perfection of all attainment always arises from total devotion and earnest prayer to the guru. Through Guru Yoga, we call for blessings from the guru for whatever we are going to meditate on, so its meaning may internalize in our minds. If, on the other hand, we rush into meditation immediately after reciting the refuge prayers, we are veering away from the traditions of the Longchen Nyingtik lineage.

I do not have a lot of my own instructions on the main practice to impart to you. But ever since the day I followed my root guru twenty-some years ago, I have practiced following the above instructions and nothing else. Other practice instructions given in various books never enticed me to switch my daily practice. Many lineage masters, as well as my own kind gurus, have always stayed with one pith instruction all their lives. I, for one, am doing exactly the same. I hope you will follow the same way, too.

The teaching given today is very, very important. Please bear it firmly in your mind!



Lesson 3

“The main subject of the chapter ... it is always essential to give rise to bodhicitta.” [page 7–8]

This guide is the record of Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu’s oral instructions on the outer and inner preliminaries for the Longchen Nyingtik Great Perfection. Patrul Rinpoche received the oral teachings twenty-five times and faithfully recorded the instructions of his guru. The text is comprehensive and carries the extraordinary blessing power of the lineage.

The first session primarily discusses the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. Before delving into this main topic, it introduces how to properly listen to Dharma teachings.

1. THE PROPER WAY TO LISTEN TO SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

The proper way to listen to the teachings includes the right attitude and the right conduct.

1.1. ATTITUDE

There are two types of right attitude: the vast attitude of the bodhicitta and the vast skill in the means of Vajrayana. The latter refers to pure perception.

You should be aware that *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* isn’t meant for everyone. Although the guide covers fundamental teachings and preliminary

practices, it actually demands qualified Dharma students. A college entrance exam is unsuitable for those without a certain level of knowledge. Likewise, this guide is not for those who have not established the right attitude.

Many people don't listen to the Dharma teachings. And even if they occasionally hear the teachings, they rarely do it for the benefit of all beings, nor do they uphold the Vajrayana view of pure perception when receiving the Dharma. When listening to the Dharma teachings, some people are simply driven by curiosity, while others are seeking wealth, good health, fame, and career success. None of these constitutes the right attitude.

This guide encompasses very profound Mahayana teachings and Vajrayana pith instructions, which may not suit the needs of those devoting themselves to the eight worldly concerns, including gaining fame and wealth. From this perspective, we can tell how supreme and profound this guide is when the teaching starts with cultivating and understanding the right attitude.

1.1.1. THE VAST ATTITUDE OF THE BODHICITTA

In general, many worldly people tend to be self-focused and narrow-minded. They are primarily concerned with their own benefit and only with this life. Other than this, it has never occurred to them to wish, "From now until the attainment of Buddhahood, I aspire to benefit innumerable beings, and to bring them the indescribable supreme enlightenment."

As Shantideva says:⁷²

Could our father or our mother ever have so generous a wish? Do the very gods, the rishis,⁷³ even Brahma⁷⁴ harbor such benevolence as this? For in the past, they never, even in their dreams, wished for something like this even for themselves. How could they do so for another's sake?

But a Mahayana practitioner must first generate bodhicitta before listening to the teachings of this guide. Then, how can we generate bodhicitta?

⁷² This verse is translated by the Padmakara Translation Group.

⁷³ According to ancient Indian tradition, the rishis were sages who perceived the sound of the Vedas and transmitted them to the world. They form a class by themselves between gods and humans.

⁷⁴ Brahma, the creator of the universe according to the Vedas.

There are two aspects embedded in bodhicitta:

1) The great compassion for all beings

You need to first understand this: All beings in the six realms of samsara have been our parents since the beginningless time. As our parents, they have always done their utmost to take care of us and treated us with the greatest kindness possible; they provided us with the best food and clothing and showered us with boundless affection as we grew.

It is stated in the sutras that all beings of the six realms have been our parents. Here is a story recorded in *The Buddha Speaks about the Deep Kindness of Parents and the Difficulty in Repaying It*:

One day, Buddha Shakyamuni was leading his disciples to the south. Along the road, the Buddha saw a pile of bones and started to make five-point prostrations.⁷⁵

Ananda was puzzled and asked, “You are the teacher of the three worlds, the loving father of all beings born in four ways,⁷⁶ the sacred object of refuge and veneration to everyone. Why are you prostrating to these bones?”

The Buddha answered, “This pile of bones may either belong to my former ancestor or my parent of past lives. For this reason, I shall prostrate to the pile.”

The Buddha also says in the *Brahma’s Net Sutra*:

All men have been my father,
All women have been my mother...
Beings of the six realms have all been my parents.

We don’t remember this because the parent-child relationship may have happened countless eons ago and because we lost the memory of that relationship due to “confusion through rebirth.”

Nevertheless, noble beings and great practitioners who have truly practiced bodhicitta can develop conviction on this. For example, once at Nyethang, a Tibetan village close to Lhasa, Venerable Atisha noticed that a horse had gotten its neck stuck in a tree. The horse was screaming and struggling desperately, and

⁷⁵ When doing five-point prostration, one touches five points of their body to the floor: two knees, two hands, and the forehead.

⁷⁶ In Buddhism, there are four ways or four types of birth: womb, egg, moisture/heat, and apparitional/miraculous.

Venerable Atisha urged the man beside him, “My old mother is suffering; please help her quickly!”

People who have truly practiced bodhicitta will consider all beings, whether a Brahma or an Indra, an ant or a bug, as their parents in past lives. Thus, these people will never even want to harm a tiny bug because each of these beings is no different from their parent of this life. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche says in his *The Words of the Magnetizing Time*:

Beings of the three worlds have all been our parents,
So we shall protect them impartially with great love and
compassion.

Since all beings of the three worlds have been our parents, we shouldn’t only treat our parents of this life nicely while neglecting or even slaughtering others, including our enemies and animals. Otherwise, it is a shame for our humanity at large and also a reflection of a Mahayanist’s lack of bodhicitta.

Actually, this is the most challenging part of our practice. Many people say that they wish to generate bodhicitta; eminent masters repeatedly emphasize the importance of generating bodhicitta. But have you truly aspired to generate bodhicitta? Can you treat all beings in the same manner as they treat their parents of this life?

The question is worth further examination. If you have not put what you have learned into practice and have never generated bodhicitta for even a split second, then however eloquently you can talk, you are simply parroting others. As a result, you will bring little benefit to yourself, let alone to others.

So, when you study the guide, make sure you always think this way:

“All beings have been my parents, taking care of me with the greatest possible kindness. As Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang said, ‘Even if my parents became beggars due to poverty, when they received a small morsel of fat or a piece of meat in the few poor scraps they got, they would give it all to me, keeping nothing to themselves. If my parents found an article of clothing in a garbage bin, torn and tattered, they would find a piece that was cleaner and thicker, and make my clothes from that or use it to patch the clothes I had.’

Except for very few parents who don't love their children due to special karmic causes, almost all parents, be they rich or poor, love their children beyond verbal description."

Each one of us has been a child. Let us reflect, "How much attention have my parents given me? How much attention have I given them?" Some of us as adults may treat our parents well, yet we do not spare even thirty minutes in a month to meet and chat with them. How pitiable the parents are!

Of course, if we want to repay our parents for their kindness, it is not enough to just be with them. The key is to have them study the Dharma.

In the culture of filial piety,⁷⁷ the service most often advocated for repaying parents' kindness is to wash their feet. Nevertheless, their feet, be they dirty or clean, are not crucial. What is most important is to help them clean their minds.

Since beginningless time, their minds have been contaminated by the poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. If they cannot remove these poisons by themselves in this life, we should guide them to seek help from the Dharma. This is the best way to repay their kindness.

Of course, what has been said refers to our parents of this life. In the same way, all beings have ever been our parents since the beginningless time, and they have treated us with the greatest kindness. Sadly, although they all earnestly pursue happiness, they don't really know the cause of true happiness—the ten positive actions—due to their ignorance and their lack of knowledge in Mahayana Buddhism, and because they don't have the guidance of a qualified spiritual teacher.

As a result, they steal to become rich and slaughter animals for their own benefit. They destroy the causes of their own happiness, as if they were destroying their enemies. As Shantideva says,

They long for joy, but in their ignorance destroy it, as they would
their foe.⁷⁸

None of them want to suffer, but they do not know how to give up the causes of suffering—the ten negative actions, which are the root of all suffering. As a result, they commit sexual misconduct or gamble, hoping to alleviate suffering and find

⁷⁷ In Confucian, Chinese Buddhist and Taoist ethics, filial piety is a virtue of respect for one's parents, elders, and ancestors.

⁷⁸ This verse is translated by the Padmakara Translation Group.

happiness. As Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, “Beings long to free themselves from misery, but misery itself they follow and pursue.” Thus, there is a contradiction between what they wish to have and what they actually do.

From a global perspective, advanced innovations in technology have helped wrongdoers connive myriad ways to refine their negative acts, while wholesome deeds remain sporadic and scarce. Bewildered, many people go astray, applying their worldly knowledge to wrongdoings. They know nothing about the law of karma or cause and effect, so what awaits them is only confusion, darkness, and terror. Poor beings, devoid of direction and bewildered, are like blind people left stranded in the vast expanse of an empty plain.

Poor beings! Once they are reborn as hell beings, hungry ghosts, or animals, when will they get the chance to understand the law of cause and effect? We should reflect on this: Will I fall into one of the three lower realms? If we do fall, our chance of liberation is extremely slim—nearly zero. Now that we have a precious human birth, we must seize this opportunity. Otherwise, if we make a big mistake due to an impulsive wrong decision, it will be too late for regret. Therefore, while we still live as human beings, we must guide ourselves in the right direction. In the meantime, we should generate great compassion for the deluded beings who have been our parents. This is the first aspect of generating bodhicitta.

2) The wisdom of complete enlightenment

Think further: “Nothing other than the Dharma can truly liberate all beings from suffering. Now that I’ve encountered a qualified teacher and the Mahayana teachings and I am fortunate enough to be a suitable recipient for the teachings, all the favorable causes and conditions have been met. Therefore, I must devote myself to hearing, contemplating, and meditating on Mahayana Buddhism, which can uproot the causes of samsara. This is not driven by pursuing my own happiness or fame. Instead, it is motivated by the wish to lead all sentient beings—my parents of this life and past lives who are tormented by the miseries of the six realms—to the state of Buddhahood, thus freeing them from karmic debts, habitual patterns, and the sufferings of samsara.” This is the second aspect of bodhicitta: the wisdom of enlightenment.

In a nutshell, bodhicitta is, as Maitreya says:

Wishing to benefit others and longing to attain complete

enlightenment.

Bodhicitta has two aspects: first, the great compassion for all beings, and second, the wisdom of enlightenment.

Jigme Lingpa says bodhicitta is free of selfishness. Bodhicitta is the motivation that one aspires to attaining Buddhahood for all beings, and this motivation is as strong as that of a hungry person seeking food or a dehydrated person seeking water. Bodhicitta is supreme, so we should have it all the time.

The training of bodhicitta is covered in this guide through pith instructions. In Tibetan Buddhism, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, a precious guide full of pith instructions, is considered the most profound “lamp” illuminating the path.

This time my teaching doesn’t have to meet a specific schedule, so I will simply follow my own pace. During the study of the text, I hope you will internalize the teachings and examine your minds with Patrul Rinpoche’s vajra words, like a pretty girl who checks herself in a mirror again and again for black spots.

After the examination, you will find you have committed unimaginable wrongdoings before. Even after studying the Dharma, many of your practices are simply “simulation,” not even qualified to be a Theravada practice, let alone a Mahayana one. You may be very eloquent in your speech, but you may not walk your talk.

After listening to the Dharma teaching, some of you comment, “I didn’t know the Dharma before, but now I know something about it.” In fact, if you examine your minds from the standpoint of the teachings in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you will realize you have not known enough. So please, do vow to continue your Dharma study.

In fact, the more you study the text, the more challenging it becomes. Take, for example, the chapter on arousing bodhicitta; anyone can deliver an eloquent presentation on the topic for half a day, and I have been teaching it for over twenty years.

However, when examining my thoughts, I realize my mind doesn’t always remain in the state of bodhicitta. Sometimes my mind is in a neutral state when I teach—my teaching is neither for the sake of myself nor for others. I just simply finish the teaching task because I don’t want to be absent. Although I mention in

class that the teaching is for the benefit of all beings, I may not always hold this motivation in my mind, which should be improved.

Therefore, it is important that everyone adjusts their motivation when hearing the routine motivational statement, “To benefit all sentient beings, please generate the supreme bodhicitta,” which is normally addressed at the very beginning of a Dharma teaching. If your motivation is well-adjusted, you can uphold the merits of hearing the Dharma in a split second. This is very pivotal!

Of course, this adjustment is also related to daily sustained practice. If you’ve never done such a practice, you may not be able to generate bodhicitta, even if you have listened to teachings for years. In contrast, if you always think of benefiting others when conducting a virtuous action, gradually bodhicitta will naturally arise as a habit.

Hence, whenever you do something positive—be it listening to the Dharma teaching in front of the guru or via audio/video files, releasing captured animals, reciting mantras, engaging in philanthropy, doing volunteer work, and more—it is very important to arouse bodhicitta. However major or minor the scale of virtuous deeds—as major as saving thousands of yaks or building a multi-story Dharma hall, or as minor as reciting once the short mantra of Avalokiteshvara or the name of Buddha Amitabha, before beginning to do it, you should arouse bodhicitta as a skillful means, to make sure the action becomes a source of good for the future.

While carrying out the positive action, make sure to avoid getting involved in any conceptualization,⁷⁹ so that the merit cannot be destroyed by unfavorable circumstances.⁸⁰ If you have realized the Great Perfection, the Great Seal, or the Great Middle Way, you may remain in such a state—this is “the Supreme Non-Conceptualization.” If you have no such realization, you may concentrate your mind and focus on the action wholeheartedly.

⁷⁹ True freedom from concepts can only be achieved by experienced practitioners. For beginning practitioners, it is important to avoid having an inappropriate attitude toward the practice.

⁸⁰ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang listed four circumstances that destroy one’s sources of merit: 1) Not dedicating the action to the attainment of perfect Buddhahood for the sake of others. 2) Anger: one moment of anger is said to be capable of destroying kalpas of positive actions. 3) Regret: regretting the beneficial actions one has done, even partially. 4) Boasting of one’s positive actions to others.

Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004, page 27–28.

No distraction is also considered action without conceptualization. Some Dharma students can concentrate on the teachings at the very beginning, but then their minds start getting scattered. This is not action without conceptualization.

At the end, seal the positive action properly by dedicating the merit, or “the Supreme Dedication of Merit.” This dedication will ensure that the merit continuously grows and becomes even greater.⁸¹ This is like depositing cash at a bank, so the money is “sealed,” and the interest is growing. If you choose not to deposit, the money will be stolen or misspent at any time. Therefore, many experienced Tibetan practitioners place great importance on dedication. For example, if someone comes to them unexpectedly while they are meditating or doing other good deeds, they will tell the person, “Please wait a minute; I will get back to you after dedicating my merit.” If they don’t have time for a long dedication prayer, they will at least recite the following verses:

*Just as the bodhisattva Manjushri attained omniscience,
And Samantabhadra too,
All these merits now I dedicate
To train and follow in their footsteps.
As all the victorious buddhas of past, present, and future
Praise dedication as supreme,
So now I dedicate all these roots of virtue
For all beings to perfect Good Actions.*

By doing so, the merit won’t be exhausted until the attainment of Buddhahood. It is indispensable to enhance virtuous actions with these three supreme methods.

I have introduced the three supreme methods many times in the past, and here I have brought up the methods again. I hope you will always remember to practice the methods for the rest of your life, not for only one or two days.

⁸¹ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang explains: “Just as when a drop of water becomes part of the ocean it will continue to exist as long as the ocean exists, when the merit of one’s actions is completely dedicated to ‘the fruit, the ocean of Omniscience,’ it will not be lost until one has attained complete Buddhahood.”

Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004, page 29.

As for me, I don't study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* as if it were a newspaper to be read today and thrown away tomorrow. I don't seek new practices or teachings everywhere else after studying the text. Instead, I greatly value each and every word and sentence in the text.

In the past, many practitioners regarded this guide as a wish-fulfilling jewel. Back then, there were no printed books available, so if a person could hand-copy the text very well, someone was willing to exchange a yak for a copy.

In those days, the value of a yak was about one-third of the wealth of a medium-income household. Therefore, the exchange reflected how much people valued this guide. However, more copies of books are now available, yet people's desire for the Dharma is gradually decreasing. When a practitioner has an indifferent attitude toward the Dharma, it will be very hard for blessings to permeate the mind.

I will give extensive teachings this time, which may generate a few volumes of transcripts. It is impractical to always carry the transcripts with you. But I do hope you will always carry with you a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, which is full of the vajra words of Patrul Rinpoche.

You may regard this guide as your "qualified teacher." After all, a real teacher cannot follow you all day long, because over time you will be weary of the teacher, and they of you. But this guide is a "teacher" who never gets angry. You can read it at any time to dispel your afflictions and sufferings.

In summary, it is very important to first take a proper approach to listening to the teachings. If you don't listen in a proper manner, for example, if you generate greed or anger while listening to the Dharma, this listening can hardly do you good. In such a case, you can stop listening and just leave, which is allowed in the sutras.

The way you listen to the Dharma teachings is of great importance. But what is of greater importance is the motivation behind your act of listening. As Jigme Lingpa says in his *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

What makes an action good or bad?
Not how it looks, nor whether it is big or small,
But the good or bad motivation behind it.⁸²

⁸² The translation of the version is from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 8.

The merit accrued from your good actions, big or small, depends on your motivation. If your motivation is mixed with afflictions, such as rivalry or conceit, even if you have built a thirteen-story Dharma hall, this action won't generate big merit. In contrast, if your motivation is bodhicitta, even if your action is seemingly trivial, its merit is boundless.

Take, for example, the story of a poor beggar woman in the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*. The woman made great efforts to obtain a little oil for a lamp offering and made the offering with a bodhicitta aspiration. Even a realized shravaka (an arhat) could not blow her lamp out.

Therefore, whenever you have a bit of money to give or an opportunity for a good action, you should do so with a bodhicitta motivation. For example, even if you cannot finish listening to the entire Dharma teachings due to your serious karmic obstruction, even if you attend a single session, you should listen to that teaching using the three supreme methods. You should arouse bodhicitta in the beginning, concentrate on the teaching in the middle, and dedicate the merit at the end by reciting a prayer of a noble being's vajra words.

If you cannot afford to make offerings over a long period, whenever you make a bit of money, you can buy a bag of milk powder and offer it to the sangha. At the beginning, generate bodhicitta, wishing, "To benefit all beings and bring them to supreme Buddhahood, I hereby offer this to the sangha." Concentrate on making the offering, and it will be done quickly. At the end, dedicate the merit. By so doing, the good action starts well and ends well. Its merit will play an important role on your path to enlightenment.

Therefore, the degree of merit is not measured by the mere presence of the action. Some of you appear to perform good deeds on a large scale, such as devoting yourselves every day to listening to the Dharma. Regardless of how many teachings you have received, it is important to know that being driven by ordinary concerns, such as a desire for status or fame, is not aligned with the true essence of the Dharma.

Some Tibetan lamas study the Dharma to receive the title of khenpo or geshe; some Chinese Buddhist monks listen to teachings to be called a great Dharma master; some lay practitioners attend Buddhist teachings to become Dharma instructors or to achieve worldly benefits such as family harmony, prosperity, eloquence, or wealth. People like these are not yet authentic students and

practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism, no matter how much they have studied. This is because Mahayanists have only one goal in mind: to benefit all sentient beings and to lead them to Buddhahood.

If your motivation is not right, studying any Dharma, no matter how profound it is, will bring little benefit.

Once, Venerable Atisha appeared very sad, and his disciple Dromtönpa asked him why. Atisha answered, “I have a disciple who has been practicing deity yoga. Today, he fell into a lower realm.” Normally, deity practice won’t cause rebirth in lower realms. However, if a practitioner has a vicious motivation, such as killing others, this practitioner will experience a negative karmic result.

Therefore, the motivation behind an action is very important. If the motivation is pure, everything will be pure. This is like a tree: if the tree has a poisonous root, its branches, flowers, and fruit will be poisonous. If the tree has a medicinal root, its branches, flowers, and fruit will all bring miraculous healing.

Therefore, first and foremost, it is crucial to look inward and adjust your motivation. Whatever you want to say or do, you should arouse bodhicitta at the very beginning of any action. As said in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

When you feel the wish to move about,
Or even to express yourself in speech,
First examine what is in your mind,
For steadfast ones should act correctly.⁸³

If you can adjust your motivation in this manner, skillful means will permeate your positive actions, and you will have embarked on the path of those great beings, even with a seemingly trivial virtuous deed.

In fact, the merit of simply generating an altruistic mind can far exceed that of offering to all the buddhas. As Shantideva says:

The simple thought to be of help to others
Exceeds in worth the worship of the buddhas.

The Sutra of the Maiden Excellent Moon says:

⁸³ The verse is translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shambhala Publications, 2011.

If the merit of hoping to help others knows no bounds, what
need is there to speak of the actual deeds of helping others?

If you cannot cultivate the right motivation, you might think that you are studying and practicing the Dharma, but it will only be a mere imitation of the real thing. As a result, you won't attain real liberation. It is said in the *Commentary on Bodhicitta*:

Aside from bodhicitta,
There is no other means within the world
With which to gain the benefit of others and oneself—
No other methods have the buddhas seen.

Some people appear very diligent, yet their motivation is not well established. For them, the reason for practicing the Dharma is to receive praise and offerings, which is not very meaningful. During the pilgrimage trip to Mount Wutai, I once noticed a monk meditating. I checked on him from behind a pillar and found he would remain in proper posture with eyes closed when someone was around; but he would open his eyes and look around when nobody was around.

Such things also happen in the Tibetan regions. When I was in Lhasa, I noticed some monks reciting the prayer of *Praises to the Twenty-one Taras* with vajra and bell in their hands, begging for alms. When someone walked by, they would start chanting hard, “*om jetsunma pakma drolma la chaktsal lo*”;⁸⁴ when nobody was around, they would stop chanting.

Such people may appear diligent, yet their seemingly good actions are motivated by a desire for fame or money. Their actions accumulate no merit and can even cause harm. But on the other hand, if people generate bodhicitta in their minds, even if their actions are trivial and negligible, the merit will not be lost until they have attained complete Buddhahood.

Seeking an external personal image is not worth praising. Indeed, some great masters naturally and unintentionally gain fame as their Dharma activities grow, but this fame is not their goal; it is simply a natural by-product of their bodhicitta. It is meaningless if a practitioner deliberately boasts or promotes themselves in front of others.

⁸⁴ Om homage to the noble lady Tara!

Therefore, whatever Dharma activity you engage in, you should hold bodhicitta in your mind. This includes listening to Shravakayana or Mahayana teachings, meditating on deities such as Manjushri or Avalokiteshvara, chanting mantras such as the pure land rebirth mantra or the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, prostrating as part of the preliminary practices, circumambulating any sacred site such as a mandala tower, a stupa, a Dharma hall, or a monastery, and even reciting a single six-syllable mantra - *Om Mani Padme Hum*, or turning a prayer wheel. Thus, it is always essential to cultivate bodhicitta whenever you engage in positive actions.

For those volunteering for Dharma activities, please make sure to arouse bodhicitta when you are involved in good actions. These could include making phone calls for a philanthropic cause or preparing transcriptions of Dharma teachings.

In the *Sutra of the Great Assembly (Mahasamnipata Sutra)*, Bodhisattva Ratnapāṇi asked, “What is the essence of all Dharmas?”

Bodhisattva Akasagarbha replied, “Bodhicitta. When permeated by bodhicitta, all Dharmas can advance.”

Without bodhicitta, no matter how big a good action may look, the accumulated merit is small.

The above teaching is about arousing bodhicitta. We have studied a lot on the same topic in the past, but here it is introduced through pith instructions, so please practice accordingly. Everyone can talk about bodhicitta, yet whether one can truly arouse bodhicitta depends on one’s effort and practice. At the current stage, it is not advisable to hastily go after the high state of five eyes⁸⁵ and six psychic powers,⁸⁶ seeing the bindu (essence-drop), or realizing the luminous nature of reality.

⁸⁵ The five kinds of vision, or literally “five eyes,” are:

1. the eye of flesh, which refers to an eye faculty developed through the force of one’s merit, having the ability to see all forms, gross or subtle, from one hundred leagues through to the limits of the three-thousand-fold universe;
2. the divine eye, which is the effortless ability to see the births and deaths of all beings and is a result of the practice of meditation in past lives;
3. the wisdom eye, which sees the truth of dharmata;
4. the Dharma eye, which is the knowledge of the Dharma of scripture (or transmission) and realization, and of the faculties of noble beings who possess this Dharma;
5. the Buddha eye, which is the primordial wisdom (yeshé) that sees all aspects of everything that can be known. (Source: tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com)

⁸⁶ The six psychic powers are: 1. The psychic power of the heavenly eye; 2. The psychic power of the heavenly ear; 3. The psychic power with regard to past lives; 4. The psychic power

What is much needed now is to generate bodhicitta, so that whatever you do becomes the source of merit for the Mahayana path. By doing so, any of your actions will be motivated by the intention of benefiting others, which means bodhicitta, the motivation mentioned in the first one of the three supreme methods, has arisen in you. If you are not able to develop this bodhicitta motivation, your overall practice won't progress well. Therefore, you should still make great efforts to generate bodhicitta, because it is pivotal for a Mahayanist to practice in the context of bodhicitta!

with regard to the minds of others; 5. The spiritually based psychic powers; 6. The psychic power of the extinction of outflows.



Lesson 4

“The Torch of the Three Methods says ... ever-revolving wheel of eternity.” [page 8–9]

I have several objectives in teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time around. First, to help Dharma students lay a solid foundation in Buddhism; second, to motivate those who took refuge years ago to complete Ngöndro, or the preliminaries, within one or two years; third, to dispel some people’s wrong views toward Vajrayana and help them establish untainted faith in tantric teachings.

During our last class, we discussed bodhicitta in the Sutrayana teachings. We learned that our motivation for listening to the Dharma should be positive, not negative or neutral. In terms of positive motivation, we should avoid having a renunciation mind that seeks only personal liberation and instead cultivate the bodhicitta mind that aims for the enlightenment of all beings.

The aspiration for liberation is essential when studying the Dharma. It’s not the “liberation” part that we should avoid, but rather the “self” part — listening to teachings solely for our own liberation. Before listening to the Dharma, take a moment to examine your motivation: “Am I doing this for myself, for all beings, or for no particular reason at all?” Genuine bodhicitta arises when your motivation is to benefit all beings. This is the right attitude to cultivate when listening to the Dharma.

In addition to listening to and practicing the Dharma with bodhicitta, you should also use your capacity, intelligence, wisdom, or wealth to help others as much as possible in your daily life. This is a requirement for Mahayanists.

In many parts of the world, where people suffer both physically and mentally due to strong mental afflictions and complex cultures, the nectar and elixir of the Dharma are crucial for them to navigate this life and to eventually attain liberation in future lives.

Each of you should let your light shine brightly to illuminate the path for others. Even if you can only persuade one person to take refuge in Buddhism, generate bodhicitta, engage in virtuous actions, or refrain from harmful deeds, this is already a significant contribution.

At present, the propagation of the Dharma requires great efforts in producing audio or video files, transcribing teachings, and giving live teachings. These endeavors are worthwhile, even if they benefit only one person who is nourished by the Dharma.

Some Dharma friends around me have been working very hard from morning till night. I appreciate their work. They work tirelessly because they aspire to bring the wisdom nectar of the Dharma to people living outside Larung Gar, so those people will attain peace and happiness, develop a virtuous affinity with the Three Jewels in this life and in future lives, and embark on the path to enlightenment. Therefore, no matter how hard those Dharma friends have to work, they make not a single complaint.

In fact, we are surrounded by pitiable persons who are so attached to life, relationships, and everything! In order to reach their goals, they are running after the latest trends of everyday life. Yesterday, one of my relatives told me that a herdsman, who earned the equivalent of \$ 8.5 from two or three days of labor, spent all his earnings on the prepaid service for his mobile phone, which he had bought with a loan.

This herdsman's behavior is really disturbing to me. Like many others, he is trying so hard to improve his quality of life. He wants to follow the social trends and own a mobile phone like his peers, but he has no stable resource of income. Therefore, he chose to do labor jobs. These jobs in the Tibetan regions are quite strenuous, especially during the winter. However, the money he earned from the hard work was spent on the prepaid service, which he used up after a few days. It is not worth it.

In society, there are many people like him who are not aware of their own delusion. They rush forward in their own manner, chasing their perceived ideal life

like ants in a race. They don't even know anything about the fundamentals, such as rebirth and karma, let alone the view of emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism and pure perception in Vajrayana Buddhism.

When this mirage-like life is beckoning to them, such people dash forward unceasingly, like children chasing rainbows, until they reach the end of their lives. They have rarely done anything valuable and meaningful in their lives, and they have accumulated unwholesome deeds as high as a mountain.

Dharma can save these people and bring them genuine happiness, so we Buddhists are willing to devote ourselves unconditionally to benefiting others. Even if we do so at the expense of our health or even life, we will have no regret.

Naturally, it is impossible, even for the Buddha, to make all people believe in Buddhism. Nor do we think we can. Nonetheless, please never underestimate the influence you may have on others. Each of you should aspire to bring Dharmic bliss to some people, such as your friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances. It's like when we try some new medicine and are cured by it, we want to recommend the medicine to other patients like us.

In the same manner, after studying and practicing the Dharma for years, many of you have truly developed the conviction that Dharma can bring immeasurable benefits to all sentient beings in this life and many lives to come. It is such a great pity to see millions of people walk past the Dharma and suffer, which is like dying of thirst when there is water close by. Therefore, you should strive to wake people up from their delusion, and this, in itself, is the practice of bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is particularly important for practitioners. When listening to the Dharma, make sure you aspire to benefit all sentient beings. The power of such an aspiration is inconceivable, through which you will definitely bring benefit to beings when causes and conditions arise.

Some disciples of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche were quite renowned, but due to various conditions in their lives, they passed away before launching their own Dharma activities to benefit others. Some other disciples were relatively unknown at the time, but they aroused intense bodhicitta, so later they were able to guide numerous beings onto the path of liberation.

To benefit sentient beings, you don't have to excel in intelligence, skill, or wealth. As long as you firmly embrace the aspiration of helping others in your mind, you will, in time, develop the capacity to benefit all beings.

Of course, arousing bodhicitta is not about merely talking about it. You must actively *practice* bodhicitta. For those of us who have practiced bodhicitta for decades at Larung Gar, while we may not be able to claim to have attained the fruition of an enlightened noble being, we surely have received blessings as ordinary beings. In particular, we have indelibly inscribed in our minds an irreversible faith in Buddha Shakyamuni and gratitude toward our gurus. We would like to share these with others.

If you continue practicing diligently step by step, attaining enlightenment may not be too far in the future. At that point, your defilements and obscurations will be uprooted, and your spiritual state will be truly remarkable.

Therefore, you should sustain the practice of bodhicitta. For instance, if you notice a roadkill, you should recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra several times, and dedicate the merit to the poor animal. Little by little, your mind will be transformed, and you will be able to totally integrate views with your practice.

The above is about the importance of arousing bodhicitta. The following is about the proper attitude of Vajrayana, or the secret Mantrayana. To those who know the fundamentals of Buddhism and the Vajrayana views, this attitude is very extraordinary, whereas to those who have never come across Vajrayana and know nothing about the doctrine of emptiness in Mahayana, it may be hard to be attuned to the Vajrayana view. Nonetheless, the pure perception of Vajrayana remains paramount.

1.1.2. VAST SKILL IN MEANS: THE ATTITUDE OF VAJRAYANA

The Torch of the Three Methods says of Vajrayana:

It has the same goal but is free from all confusion,

It is rich in methods and without difficulties.

It is for those with sharp faculties.

The Mantra Vehicle is sublime.⁸⁷

“The same goal” in the verse refers to the fact that Sutrayana and Vajrayana have the same ultimate goal of attaining full enlightenment. Both vehicles agree on attaining the ultimate fruition of Buddhahood through arousing bodhicitta at

⁸⁷ The translation of the verse is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 9.

the beginning, accumulating merit and wisdom in the middle, and attaining the union of Rupakaya⁸⁸ and Dharmakaya⁸⁹ in the end.

However, Vajrayana surpasses Sutrayana in terms of views, meditation, action, and practitioners' faculties. It may be hard for some of you to immediately accept the superiority of Vajrayana. But if you seriously study Sutrayana and Vajrayana and compare both together, you will understand why Vajrayana is so extraordinary.

The Vajrayana views that some people from Chinese Buddhism find most hard to understand include *attaining Buddhahood in a single lifetime* and that *afflictions are bodhi, or enlightenment*. In fact, in these points, there are similarities between Vajrayana and Chan Buddhism.

If you reject Vajrayana, you might also be skeptical about the tradition of "sudden enlightenment" in Chan Buddhism, which also embraces the means of masters' instructions, the blessings of Buddhist scriptures, or the *Hua Tou*⁹⁰ method. Through these methods, Chan practitioners with sharp faculties, like their counterparts in Vajrayana Buddhism, may at once recognize the nature of the mind and attain the fruition of an enlightened noble one.

Of course, it is very difficult for an ordinary, conceptually minded person to clearly discern the difference between Sutrayana and Vajrayana. Thus, you must first listen to the Dharma and contemplate the teachings, so you will discern which approach is superior to the other.

The verse of *The Torch of the Three Methods* summarizes Vajrayana's four distinguishing features, which make it superior to Sutrayana.

First, Vajrayana's view is "free from all confusion." Buddhist views consist of the ultimate truth and the relative truth. Sutrayana, via the doctrine of the Middle

⁸⁸ Rupakaya (Skt. rupakaya; Tib. རུཔ་ཀུ་མུ་, zukku; Wyl. gzugs sku) refers to the two 'form kayas' of a buddha: Nirmanakaya and Sambhogakaya. It is said that the rupakaya arises from the accumulation of merit and the Dharmakaya from the accumulation of wisdom. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁸⁹ Dharmakaya (Skt. dharmakaya; Tib. རྣམ་ཐོ་མུ་, cho ku; Wyl. chos sku) refers to 'the Absolute or Truth Body'. Upon the attainment of Buddhahood, enlightenment manifests at three levels, which are known as the three bodies of the Buddha: The Absolute or Truth Body, or Dharmakaya; the Enjoyment Body, or Sambhogakaya; and the Emanation Body, or Nirmanakaya. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁹⁰ Hua Tou (Korean: hwadu, Japanese: wato) is part of a form of Buddhist meditation known as Gongfu (not to be confused with the Martial Arts) common in the teachings of Chan Buddhism, Korean Seon and Rinzai Zen. Hua Tou can be translated as 'word head', 'head of speech' or 'point beyond which speech exhausts itself'. A Hua Tou can be a short phrase that is used as a subject of meditation to focus the mind.

Way, establishes that the ultimate nature of phenomena is the great emptiness, devoid of any conceptual proliferation. However, unlike Vajrayana, Sutrayana doesn't explicitly elaborate on the luminous nature of Buddha-nature.

As for relative truth, Sutrayana perceives all phenomena as illusions and dreams, which appear yet lack inherent existence. But unlike Vajrayana, Sutrayana doesn't recognize the appearance of everything as the essence of the five Buddha families⁹¹ and the five wisdoms.⁹² Therefore, Vajrayana is superior to Sutrayana in terms of the views.

Second, Vajrayana's action is "without difficulties." After receiving supreme pointing-out instructions, Vajrayana practitioners directly transform the sensual pleasures of the five senses—sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste—into the path to enlightenment. Such practitioners can swiftly perfect the paths and stages and attain enlightenment without giving up or rejecting anything, including negative emotions.

The Vajrayana vehicle requires less extremely ascetic practice to reach enlightenment. For example, King Indrabhuti⁹³ recognized the nature of the mind while retaining hedonistic pleasures. In terms of actions, Vajrayana is very similar to Chan Buddhism.

Third, Vajrayana is "rich in methods." It consists of many uncommon methods, including the generation stage, the completion stage, and the Great Perfection of the Nyingma tradition. The Vajrayana path also includes abundant pith instructions from the gurus. These methods are only brought up indirectly and covertly in Sutrayana.

Fourth, Vajrayana is for "those with sharp faculties." Practitioners develop five spiritual faculties: faith, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. For Vajrayana practitioners, the most essential one is faith. With fervent faith in the guru and Vajrayana, such practitioners can rapidly realize the nature of mind, as repeatedly shown throughout the history of Vajrayana Buddhism.

⁹¹ Five buddha families (Skt. pañcakula; Tib. རིགས་ལྔ་) are the buddha family (Skt. tathagata-kula), vajra family (Skt. vajrakula), ratna or jewel family (Skt. ratnakula), padma or lotus family (Skt. padmakula), and karma or action family (Skt. karmakula).

⁹² Five wisdoms (Tib. ཡེ་ཤེས་ལྔ་) — five aspects of primordial wisdom (Tib. ཡེ་ཤེས་, yeshe). They are the wisdom of dharmadhatu, mirror-like wisdom, wisdom of equality, wisdom of discernment, and all-accomplishing wisdom.

⁹³ Indrabhuti (Skt. Indrabhuti; Tib. རྒྱལ་པོ་མེ་འཕྲུག་) aka Indrabodhi, plays a vital role in the tantra revelation myth of both Sarma and Nyingma schools.

Thus, according to the aforementioned four features, Sutrayana is inferior to Vajrayana. Many people who have long studied Sutrayana yet know little about Vajrayana might find it hard to accept this statement upon first hearing. I have even encountered some Dharma masters who are unwilling to accept the supremacy of Vajrayana, despite a lack of legitimate reasons for their positions. But their reluctance is understandable, as acceptance requires a process.

In fact, Vajrayana elucidates the hidden teachings found within Sutrayana. Without the help of pith instructions in Vajrayana, it would be very hard to reveal the profound hidden meaning in sutras such as the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and more.

A person only learned in Sutrayana won't be able to interpret teachings in Vajrayana well, whereas a person learned in Vajrayana surely can expound the teachings in Sutrayana.

If you know little about Vajrayana, you may ask about it from a Dharma master who is learned in Vajrayana. Please don't carelessly slander, publicly condemn, or even easily abandon Vajrayana—these actions will cause terrible negative karmic effects.

It is not because I myself am a tantric practitioner that I am trying my best to promote Vajrayana and solicit your agreement. My words are from an unbiased standpoint and based on objective assessment. I always try to be objective and impartial when I deal with people or things. Although some may disagree and view me as biased, I can honestly say that I have a clear conscience.

My conviction about Vajrayana is not blind faith. After all, I have been studying Vajrayana for many years, so I understand a bit more about the teachings. One day I joked with a Dharma friend, saying, "Although I don't have a doctoral degree, I do have doctoral knowledge—my Dharma studies may be equivalent in content and level to a doctoral degree."

The friend asked me why, and I answered, "The secular knowledge I had pursued is relatively easy. Although I didn't eventually end up in a university, the school subjects I attended were very easy, so if I had chosen to continue my secular education, I don't think it would have been hard for me to get a doctoral degree. I know some people who are less smart than I am but who already have one or two doctoral degrees."

In relation to studying secular knowledge at schools, I knew what "diligence"

really was only after I became a monk. One teacher from the normal school I attended said to me, “You were a hard-working student at school. How have you been after you became a monk?” I answered: “I actually didn’t study hard. I was the mischievous kid at school, about which I feel embarrassed. It was not until I became a monk that I knew how to study hard, and to devote all my time to studying the Dharma.”

I have spent more than twenty years hearing, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma, and half of that time on Vajrayana. The more I study Vajrayana, the more faithful I become.

Some outsiders criticize Vajrayana for this or that reason. These people are not necessarily learned. Even if they are, they have not studied as long as we have. After delving into the Dharma for years, I am entirely convinced that if we want to become proficient in Buddhism, we should first have a general understanding of Vajrayana teachings.

It will be very challenging for an ordinary person to completely grasp and understand Vajrayana. But at least one should establish the understanding that the views in some Sutrayana teachings are the same as those in Vajrayana teachings, but without question, Vajrayana contains many extraordinary pith instructions and superior means.

Speaking of the superiority of Vajrayana, please do not consider it a unique viewpoint of Tibetan Buddhism. It is just as it is. Those who don’t acknowledge this superiority don’t acknowledge the truth, and those who don’t acknowledge the truth are not worth arguing with.

Vajrayana not only can be entered through numerous entry pathways but also contains many methods for accumulating merit and wisdom. Take, for example, the seven-branch offering, which can be practiced in many ways according to the pith instructions in Vajrayana. Also, practices such as Guru Yoga, the generation stage, and the completion stage not only accord with Sutrayana teachings but also align with the capacities of sentient beings of this degenerate age.

These days, many Han Chinese people are studying Vajrayana. When an eminent master of Tibetan Buddhism visits a Han area, many people go to see the master. The explanation is twofold. First, these Han Chinese have a supreme affinity with Vajrayana; second, Vajrayana has profound skillful means to make

the primordial Buddha-nature within us manifest without our having to undergo great hardships.

The basis for these profound skillful methods lies in the way we direct our aspirations—to see everyone and everything as primordially pure and perfect. A short while ago, several monastic members of Larung Gar went to my home monastery⁹⁴ and visited Khenpo Legshed, who is in his eighties. They asked for teachings from Khenpo and videotaped the meeting.

Later, I watched the video in which Khenpo Legshed's words can be summarized in three points:

First, renounce the world: nothing is worth clinging to, so we must generate renunciation.

Second, living beings are suffering, so we must try our very best to arouse bodhicitta and help them.

Third, the most fundamental and essential view is the perception that everything is primordially pure. However, this true reality of everything is veiled by beings' ignorance and afflictions, so we must cultivate pure perception.

These three points, albeit very brief, are quint essential. I congratulated the monastic members, saying, "Indeed, you have got something very important from the visit. Senior practitioners like Khenpo Legshed may not be eloquent speakers, so some people don't appreciate their talks. But what's covered in the talk contains the quintessence of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, and what's particularly important is the pure perception in Vajrayana."

Pure perception is not about imagining something impure as pure. As Mipham Rinpoche says in his *Beacon of Certainty*,⁹⁵ it is truly laughable if we believe samsara

⁹⁴ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's home monastery is Dhomang Monastery, where Rinpoche took his ordination. According to Khenpo, Dhomang Monastery was built in the 18th century, during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty. Since its establishment, Dhomang Monastery has had thirteen great practitioners who attained the rainbow body. And the author of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche, also had been practicing at Dhomang Monastery.

⁹⁵ The corresponding verse in Mipham Rinpoche's *Beacon of Certainty* is:

If you don't know things that way, meditating on deities while holding the nature of samsara to be impure is like spraying a vomit-filled vase with perfume. Alas! That sort of meditation on the Vajra Vehicle of equanimity is just like a drawing of a butter lamp.

(The verse is translated by John W. Pettie.)

to be impure but forcefully perceive it as pure—this is akin to considering a vomit-stained vase as clean.

It is stated clearly in the tantras that everything is primordially pure. Even if someone doesn't accept tantra, that person can always find the same view in the definitive teachings in sutras. For example, there is a story about Brahma Sikhin in *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, which is also mentioned in *The Guhyagarbha Tantra (The Essence of Secret Tantra)*:

Once, the Buddha was giving teachings on the topic of “when one's mind is pure, one's buddha-land will be pure.” Sariputra didn't understand the teachings, thinking, “If it's true that the purity of the Buddha-field arises from the purity of mind, does it mean that the Honored One's mind was impure during his causal stage? Otherwise, why is his Saha⁹⁶ world so filthy?”

Knowing what Sariputra was thinking, the Buddha said, “The blind cannot see the sun and the moon in the sky. Is it the fault of the sun and the moon?”

Sariputra replied, “No! It is the shortcoming of the blind, not the sun and the moon.”

The Buddha said, “Likewise, my Buddha-field is pure, but living beings cannot see it. This is not the fault of the Buddha.”

Then Brahma Sikhin said to Sariputra, “Please do not think the Saha world is impure. In my eyes, the Buddha-field of the Buddha Shakyamuni is pure and taintless, as splendid as the heavenly palace of Ishvara—the abode of the highest deity.”

Sariputra was not convinced, saying that all he saw were thorns, precipices, abysses, and excrement. (Plus, he said, roads were icy in winter, so it is hard to walk, and cities are crowded with cars. Okay, Sariputra didn't add the “plus” part; I am going too far here.)

Then the Buddha touched the ground with his big toe, and the universe suddenly was transformed into a display of splendor and purity, with boundless great qualities. Sariputra was in great awe.

The Buddha said, “My Buddha-field is always this pure; it is just that you failed to see its purity. Similarly, when different god beings eat the same food, they

⁹⁶ Saha, or more formally the Saha world (Sanskrit: sahaloka or sahalokadhatu), in Mahayana Buddhism refers to the mundane world, essentially the sum of existence that is other than nirvana. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

experience different tastes due to variations in their merits. Likewise, living beings have different karmas, so some cannot see the splendor of the Buddha-field. Those who have a pure mind can see the purity of everything.”

The *Flower Ornament Sutra* also says:

Just as the mind-king jewel appears
In different colors to different minds,
When beings’ minds are pure,
They can see pure lands.

Thus, the views in the sutras, including the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, and the *Lankavatara Sutra*, are the same as the view of pure perception in tantras.

Therefore, please don’t think that pure perception is only the tantric view. In fact, if you delve into these classical sutras of Chinese Buddhism, you will find many related teachings on pure perception. If you have never studied Vajrayana and only know key instructions in Sutrayana, you may not be able to delve deep into the ultimate meanings taught in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* and the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. Therefore, Buddhist schools of Sutrayana and those of Vajrayana should break through differences and achieve perfect integration so that we can grasp the ultimate meanings of Buddha Shakyamuni’s teachings.

Cultivating pure perception and honing our aspirations is very important throughout our practice. *The Root Manual of the Rites of Manjushri (Skt. Manjusri-mulakalpa)* says:

Everything is circumstantial,
So it depends entirely on one’s aspiration.

Everything arises depending on circumstances, and circumstances depend completely on one’s aspiration, or mind. If the mind is pure, then everything is pure, whereas if the mind is impure, then everything is impure. The appearance of everything reflects the state of mind.

As it is said in many tantras, if the mind is pure, even hell is the Blissful Pure Land; if the mind is impure, even the Pure Land is a filthy place. For example, when a person with a pure mind visits Mount Wutai, he will feel it is no different from a paradise on earth—the monastics appear stately and elegant, and all the

mountains and rivers are within the realm of Dharmakaya, the space of emptiness. In contrast, a person with a tainted mind will only see the mountains as ordinary and the people as those with heavy afflictions, so the person's trip to Mount Wutai will end up uninspiring.

Thus, a pure mind and an impure mind differ immensely. With a pure mind, everything will become accordingly pure. *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* says:

Sentient beings and the world they live in are of one Dharma-
nature;
Hells and heavens are all pure lands.⁹⁷

Master Zhiyi⁹⁸ says in his *Mohe Zhiguan*:⁹⁹

The realm of Mara is the Buddha-field.

To those with strong conceptual thoughts, the realm of Mara is nowhere near as nice as the Buddha-field. Yet the reality is that in ultimate truth everything is beyond conceptualization, and in relative truth everything is pure and equal.

The highest view within Sutrayana only refers to the great emptiness or shunyata—freedom from all elaborations and conceptuality. Although the teaching on pure perception is also brought up in sutras including the *Flower Ornament Sutra* and the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, it is introduced in a hidden manner without detailed elaboration.

In Buddha's definitive view everything is pure, and afflictions are bodhi, or enlightenment. Thus, only through Vajrayana can *The Platform Sutra*¹⁰⁰ be interpreted perfectly and thoroughly. Otherwise, upon hearing "afflictions are bodhi," some may get confused, thinking, "Afflictions such as desire, anger, and ignorance are supposed to be eliminated because no Buddhist wants to have them. How are they actually the wisdom of the Buddha?" Or someone may think, "If afflictions are bodhi, does this mean the Buddha and all beings are one?" There

⁹⁷ The translation of this verse is adopted from *Complete Enlightenment—Zen Comments on The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, by Chan Master Sheng Yen, Shambhala Publications, 1998.

⁹⁸ Master Zhiyi is the fourth patriarch of the Tiantai tradition of Buddhism in China.

⁹⁹ A major focus of the *Mohe Zhiguan* is the practice of samatha (zhi, calming or stabilizing meditation) and vipassana (guan, clear seeing or insight).

¹⁰⁰ *The Platform Sutra* consists of a record of the teachings of Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School in China.

are many such doubts arising in the mind. However, if you know the views of Vajrayana, you won't have such confusion.

However, you should first switch your understanding. You should know that everything is entirely the manifestation or appearance of the pure Buddha-field. It is due to our ignorance and afflictions that we do not recognize the pure nature of all things, just as an eye disease causes someone to perceive a white conch as yellow. If you follow the teachings of a qualified guru and cultivate pure perception of everything, conviction in the Vajrayana view will naturally arise within you.

The views in Vajrayana are not entirely independent of those in Sutrayana. Some people think Sutrayana requires the aspiration of bodhicitta, whereas Vajrayana requires pure perception. Such a clear distinction is wrong. Your aspiration depends on your level of faculties. If you can only arouse bodhicitta, or loving-kindness, then you may direct your aspiration to benefiting all sentient beings.

If, on the basis of bodhicitta, you also recognize that everything is primordially pure, you may further generate pure perception. The Vajrayana view of pure perception is not like forcing yourself to imagine a bad person as good, a deluded person as wise, or black charcoal as white; it is about recognizing reality as it is.

Everything is primordially pure. We fail to recognize this because our minds are not pure. There was once a priest with an allergy to roses. One day, while preaching in church, he noticed two pots of roses near him. Immediately, he started to have allergy symptoms—eyes tearing, nose running, and nonstop sneezing—so the preaching didn't go well. Later, he scolded a staff member in the church, saying, "Why did you put roses close to me, knowing that I am allergic?" The staff member replied, "Those are actually plastic roses! Who knew you were also allergic to fake roses!"

Therefore, there is nothing impure that inherently exists outside our minds. Everything is merely a reflection of the mind. The mind can confuse the real with the fake, and vice versa.

In fact, nothing is impure, including our desire and anger, and the essence of everything is entirely wisdom. Tantras, including the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, make many inferences about this view. Now that you understand that aspiration is very important, when listening to teachings, we should not perceive the place where the Dharma is taught, the teacher, the teachings, and so on, as ordinary and

impure. Instead, we should keep the *five perfections* clearly in mind as we listen to the Dharma teaching.

The *five perfections* are key elements, including character, time, place, and so on, just like the elements of a narrative. According to some Dharma masters, we can visualize the *five perfections* in the following ways.

The perfect place where we listen to teachings is the Deer Park in Sarnath, India. The perfect teacher is Buddha Shakyamuni. The perfect assembly consists of the Buddha's five initial disciples¹⁰¹ and eighty thousand celestial gods. The perfect time is forty-nine days after the Buddha's awakening.¹⁰² The perfect teaching comprises the Four Noble Truths of the first turning of the Dharma wheel.

Or you can think the perfect place is Vulture Peak near Rajagriha, India. The perfect teacher is Buddha Shakyamuni. The perfect assembly consists of five thousand *bhikkhus* (monks), including Sariputra and Maudgalyayana; five hundred *bhikkhunis* (nuns), including Mahapajapati Gotami; upasakas or male lay practitioners, including Anathapindika;¹⁰³ upasikas or female lay practitioners, including Migaramata, and numerous other beings. The perfect time is within twelve years after the Buddha first taught. The perfect teaching is the Prajnaparamita, or the perfection of transcendent wisdom, from the second turning of the Dharma wheel.

Or, you can think the perfect place is the city of Vaisali or Rajagriha, or some other place in the human and god realms. The perfect teacher is Buddha Shakyamuni. The perfect assembly consists of numerous beings, including bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, lay women, lay men, devas, nagas, rakshasas, etc. The perfect time is within thirty-two years after the Buddha first taught. The perfect teaching comprises that of Buddha-nature and Yogacara.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ The five initial disciples received the first teaching of the Buddha after he reached enlightenment. They are: Kaundinya, Bhadraka, Vashpa, Mahanaman, and Ashvajit.

¹⁰² After Buddha Shakyamuni attained complete enlightenment, seeing that what he had achieved was not possible to communicate directly, he remained silent for forty-nine days. Then the Buddha gave his first teachings in the Deer Park, which is known as "the first turning of the wheel of dharma."

¹⁰³ Anathapindika (Pali: Anathapiṇḍika; Sanskrit: Anathapiṇḍada), born Sudatta, was a wealthy merchant and banker, believed to have been the wealthiest merchant in Savatthi in the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. He is considered to have been the chief male patron of the Buddha.

¹⁰⁴ Yogacara (literally "yoga practice"; "one whose practice is yoga") is one of the two main philosophical schools within Mahayana Buddhism (the other being Madhyamaka). Yogacara emphasizes the study of cognition, perception, and consciousness through the

Or, according to Vajrayana teachings, the perfect place is the palace of the absolute expanse—Akanistha, which is beyond any conceptualization, defies any description, and is naturally pure. The perfect teacher is the Dharmakaya Buddha Samantabhadra,¹⁰⁵ the embodiment of the primordial wisdom awakened since before the very beginning. The perfect assembly comprises male and female bodhisattvas and deities¹⁰⁶ of the mind lineage of the Conquerors, as well as those of the symbol lineage of the Vidyadharas.

You shouldn't see the assembly members as ordinary beings, thinking, "This person is a lay practitioner, and that person is a monastic member," or "this person's character is bad, and that person's look is hideous." You should regard their nature as that of the noble beings of the mind lineage of the Conquerors, such as Ratna-sambhava (Jewel-born), Akshobhya (Immovable One), Pandaravasini (Wisdom Queen), and Dhatvishvari (Lady of Space), or of the noble beings of the symbol lineage of the Vidyadharas, including Garab Dorje, Mañjushrimitra, Jñanasutra, Vimalamitra, and Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava, or of the deities.

Or, you can visualize the perfect place where you receive the Dharma teaching is the Lotus-Light Palace of the Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain¹⁰⁷, the teacher is Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava, and the perfect assembly consists of the Eight Vidyadharas, Guru Rinpoche's twenty-five disciples, dakas, and dakinis.

Or, you can think the perfect place where the Dharma is taught is the Eastern

interior lens of meditative and yogic practices.

¹⁰⁵ As it is said in tantras, the wisdom of vajra gurus who teach tantras is indivisible from that of the Buddha Samantabhadra, because the gurus' teachings and empowerments have been perfected.

¹⁰⁶ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang says:

"All in the assembly, whether they realize it or not, are pervaded by the Buddha-nature just as sesame seeds are pervaded by oil... So, all sentient beings are buddhas, their utterly pure nature is that of Buddhahood, their primordial essence is that of Buddhahood, and their spontaneously present qualities are those of Buddhahood... they are truly buddhas, visualized as dakas and dakinis of the appropriate family. If both teacher and retinue are buddhas, their Buddha-field is also pure and should be visualized as Akanistha or another pure land."

Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by Dipamkara and the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004, page 34.

¹⁰⁷ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche commented:

The first Dudjom Rinpoche, Dudjom Lingpa, and other tertons saw the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain in their pure visions. Many monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism have built 13-story replicas of the Lotus-Light Palace of the Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain.

Buddha-field—Manifest Joy, the perfect teacher is the Sambhogakaya Buddha Vajrasattva, and the perfect assembly is the male and female bodhisattvas and deities of the Vajra Family.

Or, you can perceive that the perfect place is the Western Buddha-field—the Blissful Pure Land, the perfect teacher is Buddha Amitabha, and the perfect assembly is the male and female bodhisattvas and deities of the Lotus family. Pure Land practitioners can visualize in this way. Therefore, one shouldn't think that the ultimate Buddha Amitabha resides somewhere else far away. In fact, what appears in front of us, such as people and places, is inseparable from Amitabha's Buddha-field.

Given your particular faith, you may choose to regard the perfect teacher as Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava, Bodhisattva Maitreya, or other deities. The *Lankavatara Sutra* says, "The mind of sentient beings is nirvana; its nature is eternal purity." If you listen to the Dharma while keeping the *five perfections* clearly in mind, the perfect blessings will certainly infuse your mindstream.¹⁰⁸

Whichever visualization of the *five perfections* you choose, the perfect teaching is that of Mahayana Buddhism, and the perfect time is the ever-revolving wheel of eternity.

¹⁰⁸ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche further commented:

Once a disciple asked Milarepa, "May I know of whom you are an incarnation?" Milarepa answered, "It doesn't matter whom I am an incarnation of. Even if I were a being from the lower realm, if you regard me as Vajradhara and pray to me, you will receive the blessings of Vajradhara." Later, when Karma Chagme Rinpoche was teaching Guru Yoga, he suggested, "Please do remember the words of Milarepa. Even if the teacher is a being reborn from the realm of hell or a hungry ghost, if you can regard him as Buddha Samantabhadra, Padmasambhava, or other noble beings, you will receive the blessings of the noble being.

Yesterday, some people asked, "My guru is from Jonang, or my master is from Chinese Buddhism; when I practice Guru Yoga, can I visualize him as Padmasambhava?"

Surely you can! According to the words of Milarepa and Karma Chagme Rinpoche, as long as you have faith, you may visualize your root guru, from whom you received the most kindness of Dharma, as any noble being and pray to him.

However, a few Dharma students still wonder, "If the teacher is a great realized master like the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, then the visualization makes sense. If the teacher is someone else, then the visualization is quite challenging. Especially if the teacher is the junior Dharma master in my class, to visualize him/her as Padmasambhava is impossible, since the gap is way too big!"

If your conceptual mind is this strong, then even if the real Padmasambhava appears in person, you may not be able to hold the pure perception.

“The ever-revolving wheel of eternity” is an uncommon term in tantras, which means that the passing of time never ceases. The *Lotus Sutra* has a verse that says:

For the purpose of saving living beings,
As an expedient method, I appear to have entered nirvana.
Yet in truth, I have never entered parinirvana.
I have always been here, preaching the Dharma.¹⁰⁹

The Tibetan version of the *Lotus Sutra* also has a verse that says:

The Buddha never enters parinirvana;
The Dharma never disappears.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche went on pilgrimage to Vulture Peak, he said at the foot of the mountain, “When the Sixth Dalai Lama visited here, he saw the mountain piled with volumes of scriptures. What I presently see is luminosity, a state of ‘The Buddha has never entered parinirvana, and the Dharma will never disappear,’ as is said in the sutras.”

According to Sutrayana teachings, Buddha Shakyamuni has already entered parinirvana, and the Dharma will disappear five thousand years later after it was first taught. But according to the teachings of Vajrayana, the Buddha has never entered parinirvana, the Dharma will never disappear, and the primordial existence of everything is eternal. This is the meaning of “the ever-revolving wheel of eternity.”

The explanation of such teachings can only be found in Vajrayana. I hope that when you listen to the Dharma, you will carefully contemplate and delve into the teachings. Listening to the teachings of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* offers you an opportunity to access tantric teachings without having to receive empowerment. You should feel very happy about this.

Actually, today’s teaching shouldn’t have gone this far and deep. But as I’ve learned quite a lot before, I leaked the secret a little bit here and there. Therefore, in today’s teaching, I have given you a pinch of tantric teaching, which, however, doesn’t involve the advanced tantric practices. Nonetheless, you should recognize the superiority of Vajrayana—this is very important.

¹⁰⁹ This verse is translated by Minerva T. Y. Lee.



Lesson 5

“These visualizations are to help us ... like nectar poured into a pot containing poison.” [page 9–11]

We have finished talking about the vast attitude of bodhicitta. Today, we will continue to talk about the vast skill in means of Vajrayana.

The visualizations¹¹⁰ we covered in the previous class are meant to help us understand how things are in reality. The reason we should hold pure perception toward outer worlds and sentient beings is that they are primordially pure: beings are actually no different from the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the outer worlds are no different from the Buddha-field of the Blissful Pure Land or the Manifest Joy. We are not forcing ourselves to perceive something impure as pure.

This is the quintessential view on the universe in Vajrayana. Does it also exist in Sutrayana? As mentioned in the previous lesson, this view is also found in the definitive teachings of sutras, including the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Lankavatara Sutra*, as well as the definitive teachings of shastras, including Nagarjuna’s *In Praise of Dharmadhatu*, and Arya Maitreya’s *The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*. However, in Sutrayana, the view is only introduced implicitly and not elaborated upon extensively as it is in Vajrayana.

In fact, any view in Vajrayana can also be found in Sutrayana. For this reason,

¹¹⁰ *gsal btob pa* means visualize, but also to bring to mind, to have clearly in one’s mind, to refresh one’s memory. As mentioned in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*: “Visualizing in this way does not mean telling oneself that a donkey is a horse or that a piece of coal is gold; it means having vividly in one’s mind what has always been so from the beginning, that appearances and beings spring from the primal ground, which is the state of Buddhahood.”

Longchenpa and Mipham Rinpoche each quoted abundant scriptural evidence from Sutrayana texts in their respective commentaries¹¹¹ on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* to establish the legitimacy of tantric views.

After studying tantras, we truly believe that without understanding Vajrayana teachings, it is hard to interpret the profound teachings in Sutrayana. Therefore, I hope Dharma practitioners will study both sutras and tantras. Otherwise, if someone only knows Buddhist teachings partially and starts to belittle tantric teachings out of context, or rebuke parts that do not align with their own points of view, this may bring harm to this person and others.

We must understand that Vajrayana's attitude of pure perception is the most supreme. We tantric practitioners say this not out of self-boasting or self-promotion. After sufficient listening, contemplating, and meditation, many people in the East and the West recognize that Vajrayana teachings are so extraordinary.

Therefore, when encountering something we do not understand, we should communicate and study with each other. If we instead carelessly criticize what we do not understand, we will regret it once we realize the truth. We should study the Dharma comprehensively, so we will be able to care for our own minds and the minds of others, refrain from wrongdoing, and accumulate merit and wisdom.

There is scriptural evidence in the tantras supporting the view of primordial purity. However, in today's teaching, I will choose not to quote tantras and instead use sutras to explain this view. For example, the *Lankavatara Sutra* says:

The insight of the wise, who move about in the realm of
characterlessness, is pure, is born of the triple emancipation,
and is released from birth and destruction.¹¹²

This means that noble beings see everything as pure, so they can enter the state of triple emancipation,¹¹³ be free from the cycle of birth and death in samsara, and dwell eternally in the ultimate nirvana of formless tranquility.

The view of primordial purity is the truth of all phenomena, which is

¹¹¹ Longchenpa's commentary is *Dispelling Darkness in the Ten Directions: Detailed Commentary on the Guhyagarbha Tantra*; Mipham's is *Luminous Essence: A Guide to the Guhyagarbha Tantra*.

¹¹² The translation of this verse is adapted from Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's translation of the sutra.

¹¹³ It refers to the state of no-form, emptiness, and effortlessness.

introduced in both sutras and tantras. However, some people's eyes of wisdom are veiled by ignorance, preventing them from realizing the primordial purity as it is.

We have learned that when listening to the Dharma, we should hold clearly in our minds the *five perfections*—the teacher is the Buddha, the place is the Buddha-field, the assembly is the retinue of the Buddha, the teaching is that of the Great Vehicle, and time is the ever-revolving wheel of eternity.

While the place, the teaching, and the time can also demonstrate the reality of primordial purity, the text here does not expand on these three perfections; it only uses the teacher and the assembly as examples to affirm the primordial purity of everything.

The teacher

The teacher embodies the essence of all buddhas of the past, present, and future. The Buddha also states in the sutras that the teacher is the emanation of all buddhas, and that his essence is inseparable from that of the buddhas. For example, when Buddha Shakyamuni was about to enter parinirvana, he told Ananda and other disciples:

Don't feel sad Ananda,
Don't lament Ananda,
In future times I will
Take the form of spiritual teachers,
To help you and others.¹¹⁴

This verse also explains that all qualified teachers are emanations of the Buddha, and their essence is inseparable from the Buddha's, just as waves are inseparable from the ocean.

Here are the further elaborations:

- 1) The teacher is the union of the Three Jewels
 - ♦ His body is the Sangha: The teacher's body upholds the pure precepts, guiding countless beings toward positive actions for now and the

¹¹⁴ The translation is taken from http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Sutra_of_the_Great_Drum

ultimate liberation eventually. This accords with the character of the Sangha.

- ♦ His speech is the Dharma: The teacher's speech imparts supreme teachings, including the Tripitaka and the twelve divisions of scriptures, which plant roots of merit in the minds of innumerable beings. This speech can eventually eliminate the obscurations of mental afflictions and the obscurations concerning the knowable. This corresponds to the purpose of the Dharma.
- ♦ His mind is the Buddha: In terms of the natural Buddha-nature,¹¹⁵ the very mind of each being, including that of the teacher, is inseparable from the mind of the Buddha. In terms of the developing Buddha-nature, the mind of the teacher is free from any conceptual fabrications, forever in the state of primordial luminosity beyond union and separation. This is the essence of the Buddha's wisdom that knows the nature of all phenomena and the wisdom that knows the multiplicity of phenomena.

Therefore, the teacher is the union of the Three Jewels. In Sutrayana, the teacher is seen as inseparable from the essence of the Three Jewels; or the Three Jewels bring liberation to all beings through the teacher. In Vajrayana, the teacher is regarded as the Fourth Jewel. As it is said in tantra, "The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are the Three Jewels; the teacher is the Fourth Jewel."

2) The teacher is the union of the Three Roots

- ♦ His body is the teacher: When the buddhas help and guide living beings, they manifest in the form of humans that are accessible to beings. The physical form is the teacher's body.
- ♦ His speech is the deity: If we follow the words in the teacher's speech and practice accordingly, we will attain realization. It is the same as meditating on a deity, such as Avalokiteshvara or Manjushri, and attaining realization.

¹¹⁵ There are two types of Buddha-nature: the natural Buddha-nature vs. the developing Buddha-nature. The natural Buddha-nature is the fundamental nature of the mind, which is with us always. The developing Buddha-nature is eventually revealed when we dispel the afflictive obscurations and the cognitive obscurations with wisdom, so this type of Buddha-nature can only be achieved through practice.

- ♦ His mind is the dakini: A dakini is a female Buddha who has fully realized great compassion and emptiness. As it is said, “In the space of emptiness, the energy of great compassion spontaneously pervades.” The teacher always remains in the state of great compassion and emptiness, so his secret mind is the dakini.

Generally speaking, the teacher is the root of blessing, the deity is the root of siddhi (accomplishment), and the dakini is the root of enlightened activity, so they should be practiced individually. Yet ultimately, the teacher is the union of the Three Roots.

It happened that an eminent master regarded the deity as separable from the teacher, so when he saw the deity, he chose to prostrate to the deity for siddhi instead of to his teacher. But it turned out that the mandala of the deity dissolved into the teacher, and due to this dependent arising, the master didn’t attain the fruition of Vajradhara in his life, and his realization and liberation was delayed.

There are many other such stories recorded in the biographies of the Indian eminent masters. Therefore, from a certain perspective, the teacher exceeds the deity. Venerable Longchenpa also says, in his *The Chariot of Excellence*, the self-commentary of *Finding Rest in Illusion*,

“One should indeed meditate on one’s teacher in their present form. For it is not taught that one will gain enlightenment through devotion to the deity—however excellent that may be—for in the latter case, one must still pass through the approach and accomplishment stages. When one’s devotion to one’s teacher is at its best, it is there and then that accomplishment is gained.”¹¹⁶

3) The teacher is the union of the Three Kayas

- ♦ The teacher’s body is the Nirmanakaya: In his childhood, even when the teacher’s body appears to play games with other kids, the play itself can plant the seeds of liberation for others. In his adulthood, through turning the Dharma wheel, he can bring liberation to innumerable beings. At his final nirvana upon death, his body reminds beings of the principle of impermanence. The teacher’s body is an illusory emanation—a Nirmanakaya—to benefit all sentient beings. The previously quoted verse says, “Take the form of spiritual teachers.” In line with other

¹¹⁶ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in Illusion, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 3, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017, page 150.

logical inferences, this statement supports the Buddha's teaching that the teacher is the Nirmanakaya, or the body of emanation, of the buddhas.

- ♦ His speech is the Sambhogakaya: Sambhogakaya, or the body of enjoyment, only appears to pure beings whose speech and energy are purified. The teacher's speech, which is pure, is the display of energy inseparable from the Sambhogakaya in front of sublime beings who have attained one of the ten stages of the bodhisattva path. This display of energy is the Sambhogakaya.
- ♦ His mind is the Dharmakaya: The teacher's mind is inseparable from the luminosity of Dharmadhatu.¹¹⁷ The luminous wisdom of Dharmadhatu is the Dharmakaya.

Therefore, the teacher is the union of the three kayas, which pervades Dharmadhatu. This is not a forced imagination fabricated by our conceptual thoughts. It is as it is. However, many people are unaware of this union; due to their impure minds, they fail to see the supreme qualities of the teacher. Instead, they only find fault with the teacher: the teacher has to experience birth, old age, sickness, and death; the teacher has desire, anger, and ignorance; the teacher conducts unwholesome actions, etc.

Thus, in a noble being's eyes, everyone is noble, whereas in an ordinary person's eyes, everyone is ordinary. Let me tell you a story, which also introduces the origination of Milarepa's (1040–1123) biography.

Once, Venerable Milarepa was going to give Mahayana teachings to Rechung Dorje Drakpa (1083/4–1161) and other disciples at a place called Yarlung. The night before the teaching, Rechung had a dream in which he went to the pure land of Oddiyana. Over there, Buddha Akshobhya (Immovable One) was introducing to the assembly the extraordinary life histories of the past buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as the inspiring stories of Tilopa (988–1069), Naropa (1016–1100), and Marpa (1012–1097).

Before the gathering was dismissed, Buddha Akshobhya said to everyone, "The most precious, the greatest, and the most inspiring of all biographies is that of Milarepa. Please come back tomorrow for Milarepa's."

¹¹⁷ Dharmadhatu literally means "the realm of phenomena," which refers to the suchness in which emptiness and dependently arisen mere appearances are inseparable.

Rechung overheard a few audience members asking, “Where is Venerable Milarepa?”

Some replied, “Venerable Milarepa is either at the Eastern Buddha-field of Manifest Joy or at the Realm of Eternal Rest and Light of Buddha Samantabhadra.”

Hearing this, Rechung thought, “Venerable Milarepa is currently in Tibet. Why do they say he is dwelling in a pure Buddha-field?”

At dawn, Rechung awakened from his dream. He thought, “It is completely due to my guru’s blessing that I went to the pure land of Oddiyana for the Dharma teaching. The assembly there said my guru is currently in the Realm of Eternal Rest and Light or the Eastern Buddha-field of Manifest Joy. But we think our guru Milarepa is in Tibet, living a human life just like all of us. We don’t realize that our guru has already attained Buddhahood and is inseparable from the buddhas of the ten directions; his Dharmakaya pervades everywhere, and the manifestations of his Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya are inconceivable! Due to our heavy karmic debts, we regard a noble being as an ordinary one. We are defaming a great enlightened being!”

As a second thought, Rechung reflected, “Last night’s dream is not an ordinary one. It implies that the dakinis are suggesting that I ask for teachings from my guru, so I must ask for his precious autobiography!”

Then Rechung supplicated, and Venerable Milarepa started to tell his life stories...

Mr. Chengji Zhang translated Milarepa’s autobiography. Many fortunate Han people have read it, and they are very touched. In the Tibetan regions, through the extraordinary blessing power of this autobiography, many practitioners also transformed their minds.

When I was still a middle school student, my left hand became severely infected, and the situation was life-threatening. A doctor of Tibetan medicine, who is also a senior practitioner, treated my infection with herbs.

During that period, a lama named Tenzin Gyatso would read us the *Autobiography of Milarepa* every night. The regulation of religion was still very strict back then, and we worried about being caught, so we locked the outdoor gate and front door and began listening to the autobiography very late at night.

When Lama Tenzin Gyatso was reading, he was so touched that very often

tears rose to his eyes. Back then, I was a young first grader in middle school, but through the supreme blessing of the autobiography, I still vividly remember Milarepa's inspiring stories and his vajra songs, or songs of realization.

The above story of Rechung's dream implies that, regardless of the form the teacher manifests before us, their essential nature is inseparable from the buddhas of the ten directions, and the teacher is helping innumerable sentient beings through various means. In this regard, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche met his guru Thubga Rinpoche¹¹⁸ in a luminous dream and received many pith instructions,¹¹⁹ of which many of you are aware.

Therefore, we should hold pure perceptions toward the teacher and know that the teacher is not an ordinary person; it is due to our ignorance and afflictions that we see purity as impurity. By examining through scriptural evidence and inference, we recognize that everything is pure, including the place, teacher, assembly, time, and teachings. This is the well-grounded reasoning of intrinsic nature. However, someone not versed in Buddhism might not be able to accept this view, no matter how much they have heard it expounded. Whether they accept it or not, they cannot change this unchangeable truth.

- 4) The teacher is the embodiment of all the past buddhas, the source of all the future buddhas, and the representative of all the present buddhas
- ◆ The teacher is the embodiment of all the past buddhas: Mipham Rinpoche says in his *Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way*, "The teacher who teaches the Dharma impeccably is the embodiment of the Buddha." The Buddha doesn't necessarily teach in his own form; he may appear as a human in front of people, an animal in front of beasts, and a hell being in front of hell beings. To help people, the Buddha appears as an ordinary Dharma teacher in front of humans.
 - ◆ The teacher is the source of all the future buddhas: After people listen to the teachings of the teacher, their mindstreams will eventually be brought to maturity. Without the teacher giving instructions and

¹¹⁸ Thubga Rinpoche (1886–1956) is also referred to as "Thubten Chöphel Rinpoche."

¹¹⁹ Please refer to *The Golden Garuda: The Extraordinary Life of Modern-Day Mahasiddha Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche* by Khenpo Sodargye, Shambhala, 2025.

persuading them to generate renunciation and bodhicitta, it is impossible that they will attain perfect enlightenment and appear as the buddhas of the future.

- ♦ The teacher is the representative of all the present buddhas: All buddhas of the ten directions dwell in pure Buddha-fields, and the teacher is their representative. Why is that so? Because the teacher who propagates the activities of the Buddha must be a buddha. A mere ordinary person cannot benefit that many sentient beings and engage in Buddhist activities on such a large scale. Some senior Dharma masters remarked, “The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche must be the representative of all the buddhas. If he were an ordinary person, he wouldn’t have propagated the Dharma so vastly and successfully in the current degenerate age!” Therefore, the teacher embodies the essence of all buddhas throughout the three times.

The teacher has accepted us, beings of the defiled world, as his disciples whom none of the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa could help. Please bear in mind that this doesn’t mean that all of the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa have already appeared in this world. What this means is that in the past, when buddhas, such as Buddha Kassapa and Buddha Shakyamuni, came to this world, we beings with heavy karmic obstruction were not tamed and liberated. Later, even if all the buddhas of the Good Kalpa had appeared, they might not have been able to tame us. It is only the teacher, through his compassionate teaching, who can truly tame us. Therefore, in terms of compassion and kindness, the teacher has surpassed all buddhas.

Some may say, “Vajrayana claims the teacher exceeds all buddhas. That is just outrageous!”

Actually, these people are just unlearned. This view of the superiority of the teacher exists not only in Vajrayana but also in Sutrayana. In *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*, Longchenpa cites a quotation from *The Immaculate Sky Sutra*. It says:

Ananda, all buddhas don’t appear to all beings in the form of a buddha; they take the form of spiritual teachers to teach the Dharma and plant the seeds of liberation in beings’ mindstream. Therefore, spiritual teachers exceed all buddhas.

This quotation clearly explains that the teacher exceeds all buddhas. This is because during the degenerate age, buddhas don't appear directly in front of all beings. But the teacher lives in the Saha world and builds a connection with beings through the means of "liberation upon seeing" and "liberation upon hearing," eventually bringing beings to liberation.

Therefore, having affinity with the teacher generates great merit. Longchenpa says in his *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*:

Such teachers are the glorious lords of Dharma.
No matter where they are, they are the peers of all buddhas.
Through seeing them or hearing them,
Remembering or touching them, samsara is undone.¹²⁰

The teacher with great qualities is the glorious lord of the Dharma in the three-thousand-fold universe. No matter where he is, he is inseparable from the buddhas of the ten directions. As long as sentient beings have established a connection with the teacher, be it positive or negative, the evil seeds of samsara in those beings' mindstream can be destroyed directly or indirectly through seeing the teacher, hearing him, remembering him, or touching him.

Before the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche passed into parinirvana, we often thought, "Those who see him, whose crown is touched by him, who hear him, and who remember him can attain immeasurable benefits."

Longchenpa also said:

To meditate upon a teacher for a single instant
Than to undertake the generation stage for an entire kalpa.¹²¹

Therefore, the merit of remembering and seeing the teacher is incredible.

During his trip to Canada, one day Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was sick, so he finished the evening teaching earlier. A Western listener who had great faith in Vajrayana said, "Although the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche didn't teach much, we are so delighted just to have seen and heard him."

It is great if the teacher can give teachings or chant mantras. But even if this

¹²⁰ The English translation of the verse is adopted from *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala Publications, 2020, chap. 5, v. 8.

¹²¹ Ibid., chap. 5, v. 42.

isn't possible, to a wise person, just hearing the teacher's laughter or coughing is enough to plant a virtuous seed of liberation and to cut off the root of samsara directly or indirectly.

Therefore, those who aspire to liberation must follow a qualified teacher. In *The Medium Prajnaparamita Sutra*, the Buddha tells Subhuti:

To realize the omniscient fruition of Buddhahood,
One shall rely on a qualified teacher.

After following the teacher, one must maintain pure perception. Otherwise, if one constantly finds fault with the teacher—the teacher's speech is not right, his thought is not right, his action is not right—the disciple's mindstream will be tainted by various wrongdoings.

People with wrong views can even find fault with the Buddha, who has attained perfect freedom and realization. For example, Bhikkhu Sunaksatra had followed Buddha Shakyamuni for over twenty years, yet he recognized no great qualities and instead found fault with the Buddha. Later, Sunaksatra was reborn in the lower realm. Holding pure perception is the most virtuous, whereas finding fault renders no benefit whatsoever.

In short, from the perspective of pure perception in Vajrayana, the essence of the teacher is inseparable from the buddhas. *The Guhyasamaja Tantra* says:

The teacher is the Buddha,
The teacher is the Dharma,
The teacher is also the Sangha.
The teacher is the one who accomplishes everything.
The teacher is Glorious Vajradhara.¹²²

The teacher is the Buddha, who is endowed with perfect qualities and excellent characteristics. The teacher is the Dharma of transmission and the Dharma of realization. The teacher is the Sangha, who guides innumerable beings onto the path to liberation. The teacher is the one who accomplishes everything. The teacher is Glorious Vajradhara.

While following a teacher, make sure you don't regard the teacher as an

¹²² The translation of this verse is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, p.10.

ordinary person. In *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang explained this with a quotation:

He who sees his teacher as a man will receive the dog accomplishment.¹²³

If you have faith in the guru and always remember the guru in your mind, then the guru's blessing and power will imperceptibly permeate your mind, and the seed of liberation will gradually sprout. In contrast, if your mindstream is filled with wrong views and mental taints, then the seeds in your "bodhicitta field" won't sprout into life.

Therefore, you should often examine your own mind. Whenever you see a fault with the teacher or have unwholesome thoughts, you should immediately confess by reciting prayers, practicing Vajrasattva, or engaging in other similar practices.

If you really cannot recognize the teacher's great qualities and cannot hold pure perception, you should think, "After all, the teacher is also a sentient being; all sentient beings have Buddha-nature. So given his Buddha-nature, I shall not find fault with the teacher." Well, I am joking, but why is nobody laughing? It seems my joke is not funny (*the audience laughs*).

The Assembly

The assembly may appear greedy, angry, or ignorant, yet each and every one of them has Buddha-nature. The Buddha says in *The King of Concentration Sutra*, "All sentient beings have Buddha-nature." Through three inferences, Arya Maitreya establishes the view that all sentient beings have Buddha-nature.¹²⁴ Concurrently, the assembly has the support of precious human life, the fortune of having a spiritual teacher, and the skillful method of following his advice; they are therefore equipped to become the buddhas of the future.

The essence of future buddhas is no different from the essence of the present Buddha. It is just a matter of time. It is from the perspective of the essence that we

¹²³ Dogs are generally thoroughly despised in the East, and the word is used here to indicate extreme inferiority (Source: notes in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*). This means one cannot attain any accomplishment.

¹²⁴ For further information, please refer to this verse in Arya Maitreya's *Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*: "The perfect buddhakaya is all-embracing, suchness cannot be differentiated, and all beings have the disposition; thus, they always have Buddha-nature." The text was translated by Rosemarie Fuchs to English.

say all beings have Buddha-nature. But since the relevant causes and conditions have not ripened, the stains that obscure our Buddha-nature have not been dispelled, so Buddhahood is not yet revealed. When all the stains are dispelled through practice, then the Buddha-nature within each one of us will be unveiled.

When I was a school student, my classmates and I once said to an adult in a superior role, “Don’t feel too good about your position! Although we are still students, we will become leaders like you in time!”

Likewise, although the assembly gathered to listen to the teachings is made up of ordinary persons, after some time each of them will become a buddha. From this perspective, we should regard the assembly as made up of buddhas and bodhisattvas, rather than finding fault with them.

As The Hevajra Tantra says:

All beings are buddhas,
But this is obscured by the temporary stains of afflictions.
When their stains are purified, their Buddhahood is revealed.

All beings are perfect buddhas. It is just that their Buddha-nature is concealed by ignorance and afflictions, like the sky being covered by clouds, so they appear ignorant, deluded, and full of suffering. Once they recognize the nature of the mind, all the great qualities of the Buddha will emerge swiftly.

That being said, you shouldn’t regard your Dharma peers as flawed people. Starting from today’s class, you should hold pure perception toward each other, seeing others as Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, Mahasthamaprabhata, Guru Rinpoche’s primary disciple Lotsawa Khye’u Chung, and other awakened ones.

In fact, how we see the external world is highly related to our mind. When our mind is unhappy, whoever walks by us seems to be a bad person. When our mind is happy, even if a person is a hooligan or a foe, we find them good-looking, with a nice personality, or well-dressed. Even if we are approached by beggars on the street, we remain happy.

If the mind is pure, beings to us are no different from buddhas and bodhisattvas. Therefore, we must adjust our mind and adopt the right attitude.

In summary, it is very important to set the right attitude before listening to the Dharma. If you regard the place for hearing the teachings as awful, the teacher

as vicious, or the assembly as woeful, then listening to the teacher's "bad" teaching among the "bad" assembly won't bring any benefit to your "bad" mind.

The proper attitude is very important when listening to the Dharma. So, when you are listening to the teacher, make sure you hold pure perception. It is not that you have to force yourself to see something impure as pure, but you must recognize that the teacher and the assembly are primordially pure. This view is supported by solid scriptural evidence and inference. Of course, if you have established the conviction of pure perceptions, it will be easy for you to see the place as a pure Buddha-field. There is abundant scriptural evidence supporting this view in Longchenpa's *Commentary on the Guhyagarbha Tantra*.

Therefore, when listening to the Dharma, if you can, you should set the right attitude of bodhicitta, or the vast skill in the means of Vajrayana. The power of pure perception is much stronger than that of the vast attitude of bodhicitta. If you can keep the *five perfections* clearly in mind, then the teacher's teaching will transform your mind swiftly. Due to their pure perception, some people can attain extraordinary accomplishments and blessings after merely a few lessons.

1.2. CONDUCT

The right conduct while listening to teachings is explained in terms of what to avoid and what to do.

1.2.1. WHAT TO AVOID

It includes the three defects of the pot, the six stains, and the five wrong ways of remembering.

1.2.1.1. The Three Defects of the Pot

Those who listen to the teachings are like "Dharma vessels" or "pots." There are three Defects of the Pot one should avoid while listening to teachings. We should carefully examine ourselves to see whether we have any of these defects. If so, we need to turn away from the defects right away. Otherwise, however supreme, and profound the Dharma teaching is, we won't receive any benefit.

1.2.1.1.1. The Upside-down Pot

When you are listening to the teachings, whether in front of a teacher or through teaching videos, you should listen attentively and not get distracted by anything else. If you cannot concentrate on the teaching—your mind wanders to the east when there is a noise on the eastern side, and your mind wanders to the west when there is a noise on the western side—then you can hardly receive any benefit, no matter how many teachings you listen to.

How you set your mind is important when listening to the Dharma. Your mind should completely focus on the teachings and pay attention to each word. I mentioned earlier the late Lama Gyacho, a former Larung Gar practitioner. Lama Gyacho had great faith in the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, and even in his sixties and seventies, when listening to Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's teachings, he would note down everything and not miss a single word.

Once, we were in a little cabin behind the Great Dharma Hall, listening to teachings together. During the class, even if Phuntsok Rinpoche just told a joke, Lama Gyacho would contemplate it for a while and say, "The guru just told a funny joke. It has a profound meaning!" Then he would carefully write down the joke in his notebook. I was very inspired by this. He had been following the guru like this for many years.

In contrast, some Dharma students may think that a joke from the teacher has nothing to do with them. When they receive an instruction from the teacher, they may find it of no use or only take the parts they think are relevant to themselves.

In fact, if you really see the teacher as the Buddha, you will receive indescribable benefits even from the teacher's jokes or seemingly irrelevant chats. When we disciples heard some of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's jokes or remarks in the past, we didn't feel they carried profound secret meanings. Now, when we read the transcripts of Phuntsok Rinpoche's teachings and carefully contemplate the same jokes and remarks, we start to realize how profound they are.

So don't be picky when listening to teachings, thinking, "I don't want this, or I don't take that." We should accept the teachings entirely and attentively.

If you are distracted while listening to teachings, you will be like an upside-down pot on which liquid is being poured. Even though you are physically present in a Dharma class, you do not hear a word of the teaching. Then the teacher is simply casting pearls before swine, and all the teachings to you simply go in one ear and out the other.

If you don't concentrate on the teachings, your two ears are of no use. The other day, I noticed a schoolteacher scolding her student. She pulled the student's ear and asked, "What's the ear for? What's this for?" The student remained silent, then the teacher pulled harder until he finally answered, "The ear is for listening to the teacher."

We should all touch our ears when listening to the Dharma and ask ourselves, "What's this for?" If nothing gets in your ear after listening to so many teachings, then the ear is simply a decoration—it doesn't function!

1.2.1.1.2. The Pot With a Hole in It

It is not enough just to listen attentively. It happens that Dharma students just listen without remembering anything that they hear. For example, they don't remember any story or understand any teaching they have heard, and their mind is still like a piece of blank paper after hearing the teaching. Then, such Dharma students will be like a pot with a hole in it. No matter how much liquid is poured into it, nothing can remain. No matter how many teachings they hear, they can never assimilate the teachings or put them into practice.

You should try to remember whatever the teacher teaches us. Even if you cannot remember everything, at least you should keep in mind issues most pertinent to us. Of course, people have different levels of faculties, so what works for someone cannot be generalized to apply to everyone.

One day, a distressed person gave me a long phone call, talking about her troubles. I tried to comfort her, but she said, "Oh, Khenpo, your words don't work for me! I'd better call a Tulku instead. His words work every time."

A worldly person knows she should find an effective way to solve a problem. Likewise, we Dharma practitioners should remember the instructions effective for us while listening to teachings. We should remember one instruction today and another one tomorrow. By so doing, listening to the Dharma won't go in vain.

In fact, three defects obstruct hearing, contemplating, and meditating, respectively. The first defect—the upside-down pot—obstructs the wisdom of hearing; if you don't listen attentively, you won't hear the teachings. The second defect—the pot with a hole in it—obstructs the wisdom of contemplating; if you remember nothing and leak everything, you won't contemplate the teachings

correctly. Now we will discuss the third defect, which obstructs the wisdom of meditating.

1.2.1.1.3. The Pot Containing Poison

If you listen to the teachings with the wrong attitude or motivation, such as the desire for popularity, fame, social status, or healing, or a mind full of the five poisons such as greed (listening to the teaching due to having a crush on someone), anger (getting furious at someone when listening), and ignorance (getting drowsy while listening), the Dharma will not only fail to help your mind but also be changed into something non-Dharma, like nectar poured into a pot filled with poison.

One Dharma teaching doesn't last long, so when you listen, you should appreciate it as if you have had only one meal in two days. After all, of the twenty-four hours in a day, many Dharma students only spend one hour hearing teachings and the other twenty-three hours on other things. This one hour of teaching can help uproot the afflictions in one's mind, so it has ineffable value. Therefore, you should fully devote time and energy while listening to the teaching and refrain from mixing any poison in it.

Do not commit wrongdoing with the Dharma. Especially when we listen to the teacher's teaching, make sure we don't see the teacher as the object of our greed, anger, or ignorance. There are so many people in the world, yet some insists on taking the teacher as the object of these three poisons—this is truly pathetic!

Listening to the Dharma is something very precious in our lives, so we must keep the mind pure. Otherwise, if the mind is mixed with greed, anger, and ignorance, our practice won't succeed.

Therefore, the third defect of mixing poison obstructs the wisdom of meditation. Many senior practitioners often say, "Whether one's practice is good or bad depends on whether one can counteract afflictions. If one can, this means one's practice is very good."

To sum up, a Dharma student should avoid the above-mentioned three defects when listening to teachings. We should constantly examine our minds. Once we notice the existence of the defects, we should eliminate them right away. Of course, an ordinary person's defects will definitely arise. But if we fail to correct these defects when listening to teachings, even if we do have the correct motivation, the teachings won't bring anything fruitful to us.



Lesson 6

“This is why the India sage, ... For all of these cause lower rebirths.” [page 11–12]

We have made a brief introduction on the three defects of the pot, the conduct to avoid while listening to teachings. Now, we will expand on the topic.

The Indian sage, Padampa Sangye,¹²⁵ said:

Listen to the teachings like a deer listening to the music;
 Contemplate them like a northern nomad shearing sheep;
 Meditate on them like a mute person savoring food;
 Practice them like a hungry yak eating grass;
 Reach their result, like the sun emerging from behind the
 clouds.¹²⁶

Through these five similes, Padampa Sangye vividly described the five stages of hearing, contemplating, meditation, action, and fruition, which are also referred to as view, meditation, action, and fruition in other teaching texts.

¹²⁵ Padampa Sangye was an 11th-century Indian yogi and spiritual master who traveled widely throughout his life and brought Indian Buddhist teachings to China and Tibet. Best known as Machig Labdron’s teacher, he is counted as a lineage guru by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. (Source: Shambhala Publications)

For a more detailed introduction, please visit: https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Padampa-Sanggye/TBRC_P1243

¹²⁶ The translation of the verse is taken from Patrul Rinpoche’s *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 11.

1) Listening to teachings

Due to hearing the Dharma, we can establish right views. When we were just toddlers, did we have right views in accordance with the Dharma? Absolutely not! Except for a few reincarnated spiritual children who can recall their past lives, ordinary people don't even know any worldly knowledge when they are born, let alone the Dharma. Ordinary people begin to generate right views in their mindstream only after listening to Dharma teachings from qualified teachers.

The world is full of various areas of study and knowledge, among which we are fortunate enough to have encountered the Dharma. This is surely due to good karma accumulated from our past lives. Each time I visit a bookstore and see piles of books from different disciplines, I feel so lucky to be a Buddhist. I think there must exist a supreme cause and condition; otherwise, how could I have encountered the great Dharma amid the vast ocean of knowledge?

I strongly believe Buddhism contains the most science-friendly, complete, and comprehensive knowledge in the world. It's worthwhile to dedicate all my time and effort to the Dharma. When you have the opportunity to listen to teachings, you should concentrate, like a deer listening to the music. This will be explained in greater detail later.

2) Contemplating the teachings

After listening to teachings from the teacher, you should reflect upon them word by word, phrase by phrase, and sentence by sentence. You should contemplate them like a northern Tibetan nomad shearing sheep.

"Northern" refers to the areas around Yushu in Qinghai Province, where there are many sheep. When spring arrives, the sheep start to shed their old wool and to grow new. A nomad will carefully shear off all the sheep's wool, never leaving a front leg or a hind leg untouched.

In the same way, you should meticulously contemplate the Dharma in its entirety, without making any arbitrary selections. For example, after hearing teachings on the preciousness of human life, you should reflect on each and every point and the analogy. Only by doing so, will you attain a good understanding of the teaching.

To use another metaphor, it's said that the Dharma is like a piece of honeycomb; every bit of it is sweet, whether the sides, the middle, or the four corners. You

should not be like those who think some parts of the Dharma can be accepted, some rejected, and the rest put on hold.

3) Meditating on the teachings

When you meditate on the teachings, it should be like a mute person savoring food. When a mute person tastes something sour, sweet, bitter, or spicy, they feel mouth sensations but cannot verbally describe the flavor. Similarly, when a mute tastes sugar, they cannot talk about the flavor.

Your meditation should be similar. For example, when you meditate on “the precious human life,” if you just sit on a cushion with your eyes closed and think of nothing, you will not gain much from that. You should instead contemplate again and again on how exactly the human life is precious so as to get a real feel for it. Only then can you say you have “tasted” the true flavor of the Dharma.

Therefore, practitioners should delve deep into their practice. Putting aside for a moment the profound states of Mahamudra or the Great Perfection, just steady and serious practice of the common preliminaries, such as “the precious human life” or “the principle of cause and effect,” will help you attain in-depth practical experience.

4) Actions according to the Dharma

When you practice the teachings, you should put them into action as you are taught, and you must do so with strong motivation. You should be like a hungry yak eating grass. Once such a yak finds a piece of lawn, it will devour all the grass without being picky, instead of sampling grass here and there. Similarly, when you practice the Dharma, you should apply each and every teaching to your actions, instead of only sampling part of the teachings.

5) Fruition—the end result

Here, “fruition” refers to the result of each meditation practice, not necessarily to the fruition of arhathood or Buddhahood. When the result of your practice is reached, you should not be in a vague or uncertain state. Instead, it should be like the sun emerging from behind the clouds; that is, you have truly obtained a sense of conviction, with no confusion remaining.

For example, when meditating on the “impermanence of human life,” once you have truly established the view of impermanence in your mindstream, you won’t be

distracted by any view of permanence whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or sleeping. All your misconceptions will be gone. This is like the sun emerging from behind the clouds and starting to shine. You no longer linger in the state of obscurity.

In contrast, if a practitioner doesn't progress in hearing, contemplating, meditation, and action as described, that person will consequently remain in the state of confusion. This indicates the practitioner hasn't yet reached fruition.

Through these five similes, Padampa Sangye describes the five stages of Dharma practice. In fact, there are always profound meanings embedded in each sentence and each simile in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. If you understand the teachings well and contemplate them back and forth, then your actions will definitely change.

This time I plan to explain the text in more detail. Despite the limits of my wisdom, when I studied the text, the teachings resonated strongly with me; I can say that each word and sentence in the text has merged with my mind. Given that Chinese is not my mother tongue, it might be hard for me to express myself thoroughly. But when we study the teachings together, I can probably help you open your mind to have a better understanding of the text.

Among the five similes, Patrul Rinpoche further elaborates on “attentively listening to the teachings,” and not on the other four similes.

What does it look like when a deer listens to a *vīṇa*? To capture the deer, one person plays the musical instrument to attract the animal's attention, while the other person takes the opportunity to shoot the poisoned arrow. The deer won't notice the arrow because it is so entranced by the sound. In the same manner, when you listen to Dharma teachings, be it in front of the guru or through a video, you should try your very best to listen with such concentration and have genuine and pure confidence in the Dharma.

Such faith is reflected in our actions and attitudes. When first encountering the teachings, some people cannot help but cry, putting palm to palm with pores tingling, as if they have received the nectar of immortality. From their eyes, sitting posture, and facial expression, one can infer their level of faith. You should be like them when listening to any teaching from a Dharma teacher.

In contrast, when listening to teachings, some people appear very reluctant, drowsy, or stare at the teacher with displeasure, or they hide in a corner beyond the view of the teacher. These actions are not appropriate.

When listening to teachings you should be lighthearted, listening with joy. As such, you are more likely to accept the teachings. In fact, a worldly student should be like this as well. If the student doesn't sit still and often fidgets or constantly looks out of the window or stares at the teacher with dissatisfaction, then the knowledge taught by the teacher will hardly penetrate the student's mind.

When listening to teachings, attentiveness is very important because the merit of hearing is beyond verbal description. When a Dharma teacher is teaching, not only humans but also non-humans will come to venerate the teacher and the teachings. *The Sutra of the Buddha Speaking of the Unprecedented Causes and Conditions (Adbhutadharmparyaya)* covers many types of merits pertinent to hearing. One of the verses says:

Hearing can end non-virtuous actions,
So one can reach the place of the deathless;
Sages venerate hearing the Dharma,
So do the god beings.

Hearing can end all our non-virtuous actions, so we can reach the place of the deathless—a place of liberation. Thus, sages and gods show great respect toward hearing the Dharma.

God beings normally are prideful, so ordinary merit and virtue cannot easily win them over. But if a teacher is teaching and people are listening, even the god beings will come to show veneration. Therefore, before teaching starts, many Dharma masters of Tibetan Buddhism chant this verse from *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's Aspiration to Excellent Conduct*:

In the language of the gods, nagas, and yakshas,
In the language of demons and of humans too,
In however many kinds of speech there may be—
I shall proclaim the dharma in the language of all!

Through this verse, Dharma masters persuade humans and non-humans to listen attentively.

In today's world, there are all sorts of "fans"—fans of singers, fans of internet sites, and so on. We practitioners should become "fans" of the Dharma. When listening to teachings, you should totally merge yourself in the teachings. By

following the teacher's lecturing, naturally, you are brought to the extraordinary world of the Dharma. By so doing, you can receive the benefits from the Dharma.

It says in Asanga's *The Bodhisattva Stages (Bodhisattvabhumi)*:

Concentrate with ears; venerate in mind; with a whole heart,
contemplate the teachings you hear.

When listening to the teachings, you should listen with respect and contemplate the teachings wholeheartedly. You should cut off distracted thoughts, concentrate one-pointedly during the one or two hours of teaching, and refrain from mind-wandering. Otherwise, even if you are physically present in a Dharma class and appear to be following the teaching, your mind is filled with scattered thoughts, constantly wandering from one thing to another. As Drakkar Lobzang Palden Rinpoche (1866–1928) said, it is no good mind-wandering everywhere while listening to the teachings and then remembering nothing after the class. However, some people with heavy karmic obstruction appear mindless in class. They are just as the sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (1683–1706)¹²⁷ described in his poem:

Always visualize the face of the Tulku,
Yet the facial image never shows up;
Never visualize the face of the lover,
Yet her facial image always reflects in the heart.

Tsangyang Gyatso also said:

When quiet, practice shamatha;
When in action, practice vipassana.
Visualize your lover vividly present in front of you;
If you are willing to put this mind to the path,
Then how hard can it possibly be to attain Buddhahood?
This piece of advice is really worth contemplating carefully.

¹²⁷ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche commented, "Tsangyang Gyatso lived a mysterious life. His love songs seem to match the mentality of ordinary people and directly express worldly emotional afflictions. So, in the eyes of those who are greedy and attached to romance, his songs resonate with their hearts. Yet, in the eyes of practitioners, his songs are full of pith-instructions of mind training."

When listening to teachings, you should refrain from talking casually. Some people are good at gossiping, but when it is time to explain the Dharma, they become speechless. These people chitter-chatter in class, interrupting others' hearing of the Dharma or receiving oral transmissions. This behavior destroys the virtuous root for themselves and for others. As a result, they will be reborn as parrots or other animals. Therefore, make sure your actions are impeccable during the Dharma class.

Many laypeople are improving their manners when listening to teachings. In the past, due to a lack of Buddhist education, some people considered a Dharma teaching just another town hall meeting, so they didn't know how to listen to teachings properly. Alas! It is not easy to change their conduct one by one.

Around 1991, I gave teachings at a site in Sichuan Province. About one hundred listened to my teaching, and all of them had the "defects of the pot," which was so disappointing.

In recent years, through our propagation of the Dharma, many people have become aware of the right conduct when listening to teachings in Tibetan Buddhism, which is also covered clearly in sutras and precepts. Now they start to behave properly when listening to teachings. From their external conduct, it seems that they may have generated bodhicitta or upheld the pure perception of Vajrayana.

When listening to teachings, you should refrain from chatting, standing up, quitting for no reason, walking around, eating, and other inappropriate behaviors. You should even stop reciting prayers, counting mantras, turning a prayer wheel, or engaging in any other meritorious activities so you can concentrate on the teaching.

Some Tibetan laypeople don't know this, so when listening to teachings, they still turn their prayer wheels, which is not appropriate conduct. Although the merit of turning a prayer wheel even just once is great, the merit of hearing the Dharma far exceeds it. Therefore, make sure you concentrate fully on the teachings. All the eminent masters have mentioned this. You should also put away your mala beads.

When listening to teachings, some people want to make the most of their time in class, so they recite mantras silently while listening or chant prayers at the same time. This just shows they are unwise and don't know the merit of hearing the Dharma. If they know that, they will understand that the merit of hearing the

Dharma far surpasses the meritorious activities they are doing at the same time. So, while listening to teachings, you don't need to do anything else.

When teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, a senior Khenpo mentioned that he had recited a few hundred million mantras in his life, but what would make him feel certain at the moment of death would not be the merit accumulated through the many mantras he has recited, but through the Dharma teachings he had heard throughout his life. In contrast, some people, including a few from Larung Gar, who have not received sufficient Buddhist education, are unclear about the levels of merit accumulated through various good actions. They consider reciting mantras or turning a prayer wheel very important, so they do so while listening to teachings. Such behaviors are not permitted during the teaching. Unless the Dharma master gives special permission while delivering oral transmission,¹²⁸ you must remain concentrated while listening to teachings.

When listening to teachings, some people may sit on a sofa, with the left hand holding a mala, the right hand turning a Dharma wheel, eyes staring at the teaching video, and ears listening to the teacher's voice. They wish for all six sense faculties to receive the Dharma. But I don't think they are doing the right thing. When listening to teachings, you should put aside whatever other meritorious activities you are doing and focus on the Dharma teachings one-pointedly.

You should listen while following a text. Some people just listen without checking the text at the same time, which is not appropriate either. While a teacher is explaining a text word by word and sentence by sentence, you should read the text at the same time, unless you already know the text by heart. But if you are not familiar with the text, you must read the scripture when listening.

Also, make sure the teachings don't go in one ear and out the other so that nothing is retained in your mind. After you have properly listened to a teaching in this way, it is then also important to keep the meanings of the teachings you have heard firmly in mind and consistently put them into practice. For, as Buddha Shakyamuni said:

I have taught you the methods that lead to liberation.

But you should know that achieving liberation depends on
yourself.

¹²⁸ When the teacher is giving the oral transmission, disciples are not usually required to concentrate on the verbal meaning of the text.

The best way for a teacher to train a disciple is through Dharma teaching. Very few teachers, such as Marpa of the Kagyu lineage, put their disciples into constant ascetic practice and later gave pith instructions through various skillful means so the disciples realized the nature of mind. Nevertheless, for most Dharma teachers, the teacher-disciple relationship should be established through teaching and hearing the Dharma. The teacher must teach, and the disciple must listen to the teaching and put it into practice. This is what is called “following the teacher.” Not only is this the proper and only way to follow an ordinary teacher; if you were to follow Buddha Shakyamuni—the protector of the three worlds—in person, there is no other way.

The essential way Buddha Shakyamuni benefits all sentient beings is through the three turnings of the Dharma wheel, not through manifesting clairvoyance or other magical powers. Buddha Shakyamuni told his disciples, “I have already taught you the methods that lead to liberation; but whether you can attain liberation or not depends on yourself. If you don’t put the methods into practice, even I, the Buddha with perfect qualities, cannot be of help to you.”

Nagarjuna also said, “Liberation depends upon yourself; others cannot be of help.”

Throughout our journeys in samsara, we come alone and go alone. Dharma Master Yuanzhao (1902–1993),¹²⁹ a renowned contemporary nun, said,

Come alone, go alone, and attain samadhi alone;
Practice alone, realize alone, and attain vajra state alone.

Liberation depends on oneself. It is not as some people think, “Now that I am following you as my teacher, everything, including my living expenses, my body, and my realization, fully relies on you!” Even a great master like Marpa didn’t make such promises to his student Milarepa.

A teacher takes on a disciple because the teacher aspires to help the disciple through the Dharma. It’s never because the teacher needs someone to carry their water bottle, take their backpack, or fetch something. Such a helper relationship is not a teacher-disciple relationship.

The responsibility of a Dharma teacher is to give teachings to disciples. This

¹²⁹ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche added, “Master Yuanzhao’s heart was left intact after cremation.”

is except for a very few teachers, such as a certain Mahasiddha¹³⁰ who assigned hard labor to their disciple every day, until one day the Mahasiddha slapped the disciple in the face with his shoe, and the disciple attained sudden realization.¹³¹ Other than such unusual instances, generally speaking, teachers guide disciples through teachings.

For example, the teacher teaches the disciple how to listen to teachings properly: Do not wear a hat, do not wear shoes, avoid three defects and six stains, and listen respectfully. Then the teacher teaches the disciple how to practice, for instance, beginning with preliminary practice instead of the main practice. Starting with preliminary practice is best because when a disciple hears that the main practice is supreme and perfect, due to a lack of knowledge, he will want to start from the main practice right away. The teacher must counter this by teaching him the sequence of practice.

The teacher should also teach the disciple how to give up negative actions and perform positive ones, how to get rid of the ten non-virtuous actions, and how to practice bodhicitta, among other subjects. The teacher should give these instructions one by one. Only in this way will following a teacher bring positive and effective results for the student.

Some disciples have followed their teacher for over twenty years. They carry the teacher's backpack and travel with the teacher everywhere. However, the teacher never gives them any teachings, not even a verse like "Avoid bad deeds, perform all good deeds." Instead, the teacher asks the disciples to fix a Dharma hall, build a stupa, or herd yaks, just like a landowner treats his slaves by laboring them day and night. This is irresponsible behavior on the part of the teacher.

If the teacher is a great Mahasiddha whose actions carry profound secret meanings, then we should not comment carelessly about that teacher's actions. Other than this, according to the legacy of Buddha Shakyamuni, it is through teaching the Dharma that a teacher takes a disciple.

I hope that in the future when some of you—the Dharma fellows at Larung Gar—start to propagate the Dharma and benefit beings in the world, you follow the right principles in taking a disciple.

¹³⁰ Mahasiddha (Skt. mahasiddha; Tib. རྒྱལ་ཆེན་, drupchen, Wyl. grub chen) — a yogi who has attained the supreme accomplishment, or siddhi. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

¹³¹ Patrul Rinpoche gave relevant examples in Chapter Six, "How to follow a spiritual teacher."

It shouldn't be like this: After conferring ordination on someone or giving the person a Dharma name, you announce, "I take you as my disciple, and you consider me your teacher. From now on, we are bonded with an unbreakable teacher-disciple relationship, so you must not offend me, or else you will break your vows!"

Alas! The teacher hasn't offered any teaching yet, so what vow is there to break? There are all kinds of strange phenomena in today's world. Therefore, when taking a disciple, the teacher must give teachings. It is only after giving teachings that a genuine teacher-disciple relationship is established.

The above section discusses the responsibilities of the teacher. Now we shall talk about how a disciple should listen to teachings properly.

As a disciple, the key is to remember the Sutrayana and Vajrayana teachings you receive from the teacher, to retain the meaning in your mind, and to put them into practice accordingly. Compared to this, other actions are not as important. In contrast, if you forget the teachings due to heavy afflictions, even if hearing the Dharma is beneficial by itself, this benefit is no different from that received by a puppy or a cat who stays in the Dharma hall when the teaching is ongoing. If you cannot comprehend the teaching's meaning, then the moment you leave the Dharma hall, you will have already forgotten everything, just like a piece of burning red metal turns black right after it's removed from the fire. In this way, listening to teachings won't bring any change to your mind.

Therefore, when a teacher is teaching, we should appreciate and remember every word and sentence with great attentiveness. Great masters such as Patrul Rinpoche, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, and some Dharma masters of Chinese Buddhism had great faith in their teachers during many years of following them. Each of them saw the teacher as the Buddha, so they considered the teachings given by the teacher extremely precious and tried their very best to remember all the teachings.

In your case, if you cannot remember everything, you should adopt other approaches to record the teachings. For example, some Dharma students at Larung Gar used to audiotape all the teachings, so they had accumulated bags of cassette tapes when it was time to leave the Academy. This shows how much they appreciated the teachings.

But some people are tired of listening to the Dharma. They consider the teacher an endless speaker, and they are always looking forward to the class ending. Such

people can hardly understand the meaning of the teaching, which is no different from not hearing the teaching at all.

You should understand that the fundamental reason to follow a teacher is to study the Dharma. As a comparison, consider the teacher-student relationship in a worldly context, such as in a university. It is never the case that the teacher says, “You are my student,” and the student receives benefits right away. Even if the student is following a teacher as outstanding as Albert Einstein, the teacher-student relationship is meaningless unless the student learns from the teacher.

It is the same thing when we follow a spiritual teacher. If a disciple has reduced their afflictions and increased wisdom through the Dharma learned from the teacher, then “following the teacher” carries true meaning. But if every day the student only runs errands for the teacher and obtains nothing from the wisdom mind of the teacher, then this teacher-disciple relationship is of little meaning.

Particularly in this degenerate age, a Dharma teacher must propagate the Dharma widely because so many people lack basic Buddhist education. Also, teaching the Dharma doesn’t necessarily require the title of “Dharma master” or “guru”; an ordinary layperson or monastic member can take up the responsibility as well. The Dharma is a wish-fulfilling jewel for everyone, so spreading the Dharma shouldn’t just be the unshirkable responsibility of a few Dharma masters but of everyone who aspires to protect and preserve the Dharma.

Therefore, when the causes and conditions ripen, you should do your best to help all sentient beings through the Dharma, even if you don’t have the title of “acharya,” the Sanskrit name for a teacher or a master. Even if, after giving a few pennies to a beggar, you ask them to recite once the name of Buddha Amitabha, this can be considered spreading the Dharma. Therefore, in our daily lives, we should all have the intention to protect and propagate the Dharma.

To summarize, when listening to the Dharma, you should first concentrate on the teachings, then retain the meaning in mind. In the meantime, you should not mix the teachings with your negative emotions. Otherwise, even if you keep the teachings you have heard in mind, you cannot truly get the pure Dharma.

The similes that go with the three defects related to listening to teachings are as follows: If you are distracted when listening to teachings, it is like pouring soup on an upside-down pot, so nothing, not even one single drop, will go into the pot. If you just listen without remembering, it is like pouring soup into a leaky pot, and

eventually, nothing remains. If you listen with the wrong attitude, it is like pouring soup into a pot containing poison, so however delicious the soup is, nobody dares to drink it.

You have to avoid these three defects. When listening to teachings, you should concentrate on the teachings, remember the meaning, and particularly, you should not mix the teachings with negative emotions and wrong motivations.

If you listen to the Dharma with the intention to make a fortune or to gain fame, then your mindstream is mixed with “poison.” Whoever listens to teachings with such a motivation is taking a risk. As Dagpo Rinpoche says:

Unless you practice the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma,
Dharma itself can become the cause of lower rebirths.

If you practice the Dharma accordingly, the Dharma itself becomes the cause of liberation. However, if due to a lack of wisdom or faith a person doesn’t practice in the right manner, and even worse, commits wrongdoings while applying the Dharma, then the Dharma itself becomes the cause of lower rebirths.

The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

If a cow is given water to drink, the water turns into milk;
If a snake is given water to drink, the water turns into venom.

So, when listening to teachings, we should avoid any wrong attitude. It may cause severe causal consequences if one holds onto wrong thoughts toward the teacher and harbors anger toward Dharma peers while listening to teachings.

Such instructions exist not only in Tibetan Buddhism but also in Chinese Buddhism. For example, Master Zhiyi (538–597) of the Tiantai tradition in Chinese Buddhism says:

Generating bodhicitta for the sake of wealth and fame is the
cause of rebirths in the three lower realms.

Master Ouyi Zhixu (1599–1655), a patriarch of the Chinese Pure Land School, also says,

The iota of error can lead to a difference as far apart as heaven
from earth.

If the mark of weight on the steelyard is mistaken,
The finest cream will turn into poison.

According to Master Ouyi Zhixu, the Dharma is pure and perfect, like nectar and the finest cream. However, some people don't practice the Dharma in the right way, and then it will become poison. I have repeatedly stressed that it is not easy for many lay practitioners in a city to gather together. Therefore, please avoid wrong attitudes when studying the Dharma together, including the intention of making money through the Dharma, or becoming greedy, angry, and jealous when listening to teachings.

When studying the Dharma, if you can first arouse bodhicitta, then carry out the action free of conceptualization, and in the end dedicate the merit, then listening to teachings will render real benefits. Even if you have not realized a state free of the three concepts, as Lala Chudzi Rinpoche says:

You can concentrate one-pointedly when listening to teachings,
abide by the right views when meditating, remain guided by
kindness when studying or practicing the Dharma, and refrain from
any discursive thoughts of greed, anger, and ignorance. This is also
considered a practice without conceptualization.

If you apply the three supreme methods when attending just one class of Dharma teaching, a class that lasts only one or two hours may help you accumulate great merit in this life.

Through the Dharma, we can accumulate enormous merit, but we can also commit extremely heavy negative karma. Some people hold grudges toward the Dharma teacher when listening to teachings, complaining, "Ah! What are you talking about? It is always the same story! I don't want to hear!" It is as if the teacher is teaching something unwholesome. However, when the student indeed encounters unwholesome situations, they are full of enthusiasm. When they see scenes evoking greed, anger, and ignorance on TV, they are very happy and enjoy them so much.

Such conduct is the consequence of their previous karma, and they are committing wrongdoing with the Dharma. As long as the teacher is teaching authentic Dharma, even if they appear as an ordinary person, the teacher is indivisible from all buddhas and bodhisattvas, and there is no need to treat them as a bad

person. The teacher is not coaching you on killing and arson, so you should not have wrong thoughts concerning the teacher.

Not only should you generate no wrong thoughts about the teacher, but you should also avoid criticizing or abusing our Dharma peers, thinking, “What do they know? I have a bad guy on my left side, another bad guy on my right side, a greedy person in front, and an angry guy in back. I am the only good person in the crowd, like a sandalwood tree among the plantain trees!”

Such negative discursive thoughts are the causes of evil rebirths, so make sure you get rid of them.

To sum up, before listening to teachings, one must first clean the dirt on one’s mind, like removing stains from a pot. When we remove the three defects of the pot, namely the defect of the overturned pot, the defect of the pot with a hole in it, and the defect of the pot containing poison, we will be able to fill the pot with the pure nectar of the Dharma.

Starting tomorrow, before you listen to teachings, you should first check whether you have cleaned the Dharma pot of yourself. If the answer is no, then you should try your very best to clean the “pot” with the “towel” of mindfulness and vigilance. Otherwise, listening to teachings with great effort may result in great negative karma due to wrong attitudes, which is not worthwhile at all! Please make sure to adopt the right conduct while listening to teachings.



Lesson 7

“In the *Well Explained Reasoning*, ... For all of these cause lower rebirths.” [page 12–13]

Regarding the right conduct while listening to teachings, we have learned to avoid actions leading to the three defects of the pot. Today we will continue on to the six stains.

If a bowl is not cleaned and is still full of greasy stains, we cannot use it for a meal because the stains could be detrimental to our health. Likewise, if we have the six stains that pollute our “Dharma vessel,” the teachings can barely permeate us even if we sit in the audience and pretend to listen.

We ordinary people have many defects yet few good qualities, so inevitably we have these stains. Thus, before listening to teachings, we should scrutinize our own minds.

1.2.1.2. The Six Stains

In the *Well Explained Reasoning*, it says:

Pride, lack of faith, and lack of effort,
Outward distraction, inward tension, and discouragement;
These are the six stains.¹³²

Briefly speaking, the six stains a Dharma student must avoid are:

¹³² The translation of the verse is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 12.

- 1) Pride: proudly believing yourself to be far superior to the Dharma teacher;
- 2) Lack of faith: not trusting, and worse yet, having wrong views toward the teacher and their teachings;
- 3) Lack of effort: not aspiring for the teaching, failing to apply yourself to the Dharma, and being indifferent to receiving teachings;
- 4) Outward distraction: getting distracted by external events such as sight, sound, smell, or taste;
- 5) Inward tension: focusing your five senses too intently inward, so you become drowsy;
- 6) Discouragement: being discouraged in situations like when a teaching is too long or when you are tired.

The above is the brief introduction to the six stains. We will study each of them in greater detail in the following sections.

Actually, the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, in both the Tibetan language and the Chinese translation, is easy to understand. When I translated the Tibetan version into Chinese, I tried to use plain language so a person with only an elementary school education could grasp its key points.

However, although the text is easy to understand, its meaning is extremely profound. Especially when you compare yourself against the content covered in the text, you will realize many of your actions are not in line with the teachings.

Thus, all of us should check which parts of the teachings we can act in alignment with and which we cannot. We should persist with actions aligned with the teachings while striving to stop inappropriate deeds. This is the direction each of us practitioners should aim for.

1.2.1.2.1. Pride

It says in *Treasury of Abhidharma* and *Upper Abhidharma of the Mahayana* that of all negative emotions, pride and jealousy are the most difficult to recognize.

When you are furious, others can tell you are very angry, and you also know you are in a very bad temper. When you are greedy, you notice you have the feeling that

“I have a great desire for someone,” or “I really desire to have something,” and others can guess your desire from your words and actions. When you are bewildered, you may become sleepy and drowsy, and others can spot your confusion.

In comparison, pride and jealousy are hard to recognize; others cannot pinpoint them, and you may not notice them, yet these negative emotions continue to arise.

Therefore, carefully scrutinize your mind. Due to ignorance, a person believes all their actions are righteous and sees themselves as superior to others, so they are full of pride, never noticing their own afflictions. An old Tibetan proverb says,

Never will the water of good qualities
Remain on the mountaintop of pride.

Or,

Never will the seed of good qualities
Sprout on the iron ball of pride.

As soon as you become proud, thinking you are superior to the teacher, you become disconnected from all good qualities that sprout thanks to the nectar of the Dharma. It's like as soon as you start wearing a raincoat, you can no longer come into contact with the rain.

Why does this happen? It is because once you are proud, you feel you already understand the teachings given by the teacher. Thus, your mind is shielded by the guard of pride, so whatever good quality arrives is stopped from entering the mind.

When a person becomes proud, even if the teacher teaches well, the person gets picky and finds faults. Recently, I noticed that a few intellectuals, who only know the Dharma partially, often read scriptures literally and judge the Dharma through the lens of worldly knowledge, claiming this Buddhist text is wrong and that is not right. Some remarks of the criticism are even quite laughable.

In fact, they simply don't understand the contents of the text. Because of their lack of in-depth study of Buddhism, as well as not knowing the reasoning methods in Buddhist logic, they assume every sentence spoken by the teacher should be free from the three logic defects—*being too narrow* (*ma khyab*), *too broad* (*khyab ches*),

or impossible (*mi srid*)¹³³—, which is an unrealistic assumption. Even a university professor cannot speak in this way.

When we were compiling the dictionary¹³⁴ in Chengdu, a university professor who had never studied Buddhist logic was struggling with the definition of each word. He commented, “If this word is defined in this way, then the definition is also applicable to another word.” Actually, defining a word doesn’t have to avoid the logic defects such as being too broad; as long as we can describe its essence, the definition is fine—this is mentioned in both Buddhist logic and Western logic.

However, many people judge and criticize with their scant knowledge. It is just as a half-empty vessel makes the most noise when shaken, whereas a full vessel is always noiseless. This action is very unwise.

When studying the Dharma, a proud person is the most unfortunate because, however great the teacher and the teachings are, a proud person sees only the faults of the teacher’s teachings and nothing else. Of course, if the teacher really fails to explain anything, that is a different case. But if the teacher is qualified, you should listen with great respect when the teaching is given.

Some people have attained no realization through practice and have not systematically studied sutras and shastras, yet they are very good at finding fault with the teacher. But if you ask them to explain the Dharma, they are unable to do so.

Such proud individuals are everywhere. So, we should scrutinize our own minds meticulously. If pride arises when we are listening to teachings, we must remedy this right away. Otherwise, however supreme the Dharma is, we can hardly receive any benefit.

Many great masters of the past and present are very humble. I’ve read the biographies of Venerable Longchenpa and Mipham Rinpoche and learned that when they followed their teachers, they never found fault with them. As we all know, Mipham Rinpoche is considered an emanation of the bodhisattva Manjushri, and his wisdom was unparalleled. Therefore, if Mipham Rinpoche had wanted to find fault with his teacher, he certainly could have. Yet he never did so.

¹³³ It will, in other words, exclude characteristics that are not possessed by the totality of the thing to be defined, those that belong to other things, and those that are impossible.

¹³⁴ The Tibetan-Chinese-English Dictionary

Due to his veneration for the Dharma and for the teachers, the teachings given by the teachers benefited him greatly.

Some time ago, a Dharma student at Larung Gar noticed that his teacher mispronounced a word, so he began to refute the teacher. Later, I scolded that student, telling him, “If you keep on doing such a thing, then you don’t have to stay at Larung Gar. Maybe the teacher mispronounced a few words, but this is not the point. It’s your attitude of arguing with the teacher that shows you don’t know how to listen to teachings properly. Therefore, the teachings given by the teacher cannot bring any benefit to you!”

Some people who have received higher education tend to look down on others. But when it is time for them to give a presentation, they go off-topic, or their words fail to convey the idea. It is truly pitiful. Therefore, each of us must subdue our pride.

At Larung Gar, when we promote someone to be a Dharma master (e.g., a Khenpo or Khenmo¹³⁵), the primary evaluation criterion is to check whether they are too proud. If the person is conceited, then once they are promoted to Dharma master, they may despise others. Therefore, even if they are very learned in both Buddhist and worldly knowledge, we dare not assign any task to them because a person who is blind to the good qualities of others has no altruistic mind to help others.

At Larung Gar, we always strive to promote those who are humble and honest. They may not be very learned, but they have good character and can uphold pure precepts, so they will bring benefits to others. These qualities are essential for one’s hearing, contemplation, and meditation, as well as for propagating the Dharma to others.

Having good character is also one of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s evaluation criteria when selecting someone for a task. When considering a candidate for a

¹³⁵ The term khenpo (Tib. མཁན་པོ་ mkhen po), or khenmo (in the feminine) is a degree for higher Buddhist studies given in Tibetan Buddhism. In the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya traditions, the title is awarded usually after a period of thirteen years of intensive study after secondary school. It may roughly translate to either a bachelor’s degree or, nowadays more likely, a terminal degree in Buddhist Studies equivalent to a Ph.D. or M.Phil. The degree is awarded to students who can publicly defend their erudition and mastery in at least five subjects of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, namely Prajnaparamita, Madhyamaka, Pramāṇa, Abhidharma, and Vinaya. After successfully passing their examination, they are entitled to serve as teachers of Buddhism. (Source: encyclopediaofbuddhism.org)

khenpo title, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche would often remark during the evaluation discussion, “This candidate is too proud; perhaps not this time.”

In general, the more learned a person is, the more respect and reverence they show toward others. Therefore, a person with wisdom doesn’t need to be proud, while a proud person without wisdom will disgrace themselves. As Mipham Rinpoche said:

Of what use is pride to great beings?
 When they lack pride, they are all the more beautiful.
 Of what benefit is pride to the lowly?
 When they have pride, they are all the more despised.¹³⁶

Thus, we should follow Shantideva’s advice:

Today I shall eliminate my pride,
 And be willing to become the servant of all beings.

If, due to certain merits obtained from a worldly perspective, such as a university education, exceptional talent, or material wealth, or from a spiritual perspective, such as having engaged in extensive listening, contemplating, and meditating practices, or having received Vajrayana teachings at Larung Gar, you start to feel, “I am superior! I am different from others!” it is at that point that you fail to recognize your own faults and become blind to the virtues of others. Consequently, no positive qualities can permeate your being.

Therefore, you should examine your mind to see if pride exists within you. Sometimes, it is challenging to recognize our own pride. If you observe it in the attitude of a fellow practitioner, it is better to kindly remind them by saying, “You may think highly of yourself, but others perceive you as overly proud. You should pay attention to your speech and behavior.” Without someone pointing it out, some individuals are unable to see their own pride.

In my home monastery, there is a monk who is said to be filled with pride. I cannot personally determine if he is truly proud or not, but I did notice that whenever he joined a Dharma gathering, he would put on an elaborate monk robe and sit among the sangha with an air of arrogance. Many people are not fond of his demeanor, yet he remains oblivious to this. Hence, identifying pride within

¹³⁶ Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, translated by Jose Ignacio Cabezon, Snow Lion, 2017.

oneself can be extremely difficult. The feeling of standing out as the most attractive individual in a crowd when dressing up nicely is a manifestation of pride.

The Chinese expression often pairs “pride” and “arrogance” together in a phrase. As explained in Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*,¹³⁷ there is a difference between “pride” and “arrogance,” which, however, is not explained by Patrul Rinpoche in this text.

Especially when listening to teachings, make sure not to generate pride in front of any Dharma teacher. Otherwise, no matter how many teachings the teacher offers you, your mind won’t be changed.

You may think about this: Many eminent masters, including Lama Tsongkhapa and Mipham Rinpoche, as well as great masters of Chinese Buddhism, listened to teachings from teachers who might appear to have blemishes. But these eminent masters were still very respectful to their teachers. It was because of this respectful attitude and conduct toward their teachers that these great masters received great benefits from the teachings.

I myself have followed a few teachers. Some teachers are marvelous, eloquent, and full of wisdom, while others appear otherwise. Once I listened to a teaching given by Khenpo Gekpa, who studied at the Buddhist Institute at Sershul along with Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

When Khenpo Gekpa taught us Ngari Panchen’s (1487–1542) *Ascertaining the Three Vows*, he put the root text on the table and the commentary beneath it. He just read the verse and then the corresponding commentary. At first, I felt I could give the teaching after studying it once and that I wouldn’t simply read the text.

But after further consideration, I said to myself, “How can I be so disrespectful to the teacher! Khenpo has been studying the Dharma for many years. That he is

¹³⁷ The verse is:

Stinginess and cunning, greed and sloth
And arrogance, attachment, hate, and pride
 (“I’ve breeding, good looks, learning, youth, and power”)
Such traits are seen as enemies of good.

Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*, with commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

According to Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, *arrogance* refers to thinking one has qualities that one does not have, whereas *pride* is being proud of one’s breeding (“I am superior,” one thinks), proud of one’s physique, proud of one’s learning, proud of one’s youthfulness (“I’ve lost none of my youthfulness, I’m still in top form.”), and proud of one’s power (“How immensely powerful I am!”).

teaching us in such a way must carry his hidden meaning or intention.” Then I started to listen with faith and veneration, which dispelled my pride.

In addition to this teaching, I later also listened to many other teachings from Khenpo Gekpa. Some people may think I am full of pride, but I think I have respected all my Dharma teachers from whom I have received teachings. Even if some teachers’ explanations of the Dharma in class may not exceed my own understanding, I still show great respect to them. The reason I respect all my Dharma teachers is that receiving transmissions and listening to teachings has inconceivable powers of blessing.

Unlike some other people who, after attending a Dharma class only once, felt the teacher was no better than themselves in presenting the Dharma, they simply stopped listening to the teachings.

When I followed my Dharma teachers, no matter which one, maybe due to the favorable connection established by my genuine respect for any teacher since the beginning, I always had immeasurable veneration for that teacher.

The Dharma is very precious to us, so all teachers who, out of compassion, give us the teachings, deserve our respect. Otherwise, in a few years, the teachers will get old and appear less lucid in their thinking and talking, and if you don’t respect them, you will then try to find fault with them, offend, or criticize them. Such attitudes and conduct are definitely not right.

We should have long-term veneration and respect for the teachings and the teachers. We should try our very best to remove pride from our minds. Only in this way will we naturally attain the benefit of the Dharma.

1.2.1.2.2. Lack of Faith

If you have no faith, the entrance to the Dharma is blocked. Thus, you must have faith toward the Dharma and the teachers when pursuing the Dharma. There are four types of faith: vivid faith, eager faith, confident faith, and irreversible faith.

Vivid faith: When you occasionally step into a temple or hear someone chanting the names of the buddhas, for some unknown reason, you just feel very happy. This is vivid faith. When one lay practitioner came to Larung Gar and heard the chanting of the prayer *Wang Dü: The Great Cloud of Blessings* or the name of Amitabha, he couldn’t help but cry. He didn’t know why he was crying. Actually, it was because he was generating vivid faith.

But vivid faith is very easy to reverse. Later, if you hear someone say that this is not good or not appropriate, you may immediately change your mind. Therefore, vivid faith is not very stable.

Eager faith: This is the faith you generate toward the Three Jewels when you understand the benefit or harm of your actions, the suffering of lower realms, and the happiness of higher realms after hearing teachings or reading Buddhist books. Thus, you are eager to engage in positive actions and avoid negative actions so that you can be free of the sufferings of lower realms and enjoy the happiness of higher realms.

Eager faith is more stable than vivid faith, but it can regress as well.

Confident faith: This is the fervent faith in the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, the law of karma, and more, which arises from the depth of your heart after studying the Dharma over time. Such faith is, in fact, a sort of aspiration. It says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Aspiration, so the Sage asserted,
Is the root of every kind of virtue.¹³⁸

But confident faith may regress as well.

Irreversible faith: This is the best type of faith. For example, after studying the Dharma for dozens of years, you generate unyielding and immovable faith in the Buddha Shakyamuni.

Such faith is not developed simply because you blindly follow others' positive word-of-mouth on Buddhism. For instance, when someone says a teacher is good, you might say, "Great! I will listen to his teachings for a few days!" Or if someone praises a teacher, you might immediately embrace his opinion and promote the teacher everywhere. Such faith is not reliable.

Instead, if you have studied the Dharma for over twenty years and have repeatedly examined the Buddha and the teacher, then you can become fully convinced that they are worthy objects of your refuge, and that their great qualities are inconceivable, regardless of others' opinions. Such faith that never regresses is considered irreversible faith.

The Praise of the Sage Who Surpasses Gods, which I recently taught, says that

¹³⁸ Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala Publications, 2011.

it is very important to have irreversible faith in the Buddha. This afternoon, I had a chat with Khenpo Norbu, a lama who came to Larung Gar at roughly the same time as I did.

We reflected on our faith, agreeing that although neither of us dares to suggest we've attained realization, our faith in the Dharma and the Buddha is indeed irreversible. As we age, we feel more and more that the only refuge is the Buddha and the Dharma, and that everything else is unreliable, transient, dream-like, and illusory. Worldly achievements, including wealth, fame, status, and relationships may look nice, yet they are not really meaningful after being carefully scrutinized.

We also agreed that the only purpose we should uphold is to protect and propagate the Dharma in the world. Our faith in the Dharma is definitely irreversible within this life. Whenever we can, we like listening to teachings, which, to us, is the most supreme and extraordinary thing to do in this life.

I hope all of you can also generate extraordinary faith, especially irreversible faith, in the Dharma. Then, whatever difficulties you encounter, your mind won't change.

Without such irreversible faith, your other types of faith may easily regress. For example, you may have faith in Buddhism today; however, after a while, when a believer of another religion tells you, "Buddhism is not good; my religion is better," you may immediately abandon Buddhism, throw away all your Dharma books, and convert to a new religion. This shows that your faith in Buddhism is not stable.

When you first entered Buddhism, you cried in ecstasy for quite a while, whereas when you now switch to a non-Buddhist religion, you still cry in the same way. Such behavior is truly sad.

I always believe that our faith has to be stable and steady, which is of the utmost importance. Someone's faith is reflected in their facial expression. For example, when listening to teachings, their eyes are full of devotion to the Dharma and the teacher, and they constantly appear blissful. Through this, one can easily tell that they are faithful.

In comparison, some others simply dawdle when listening to teachings and always look forward to the end of the class; the only goal they have is to have a good meal after class, and nothing else. This reflects their lack of faith.

1.2.1.2.3. Lack of Effort

Your effort in the Dharma—a strong interest in pursuing the Dharma—is the basis of all your achievements. If your degree of interest is superior, you will become a superior practitioner; if your degree of interest is middling, you will become a middling practitioner; if your degree of interest is inferior, you will become an inferior practitioner; if you have no interest in the Dharma and feel indifferent about receiving teachings, you will achieve nothing and cannot even become a practitioner.

This also applies to worldly people. If a person wants to succeed in their career, they must be interested in their occupation. If they have no interest, there is no reason they will be successful. Therefore, interest is crucial for both worldly and spiritual practices.

If one has no interest at all in the Dharma, then there will be no achievement in the practice. Monastics should particularly have a strong interest in the Dharma. The responsibility of propagating the Dharma during the degenerate age should be on the shoulders of monastics. However, given the diminishing faith of some monastics, it is hard to say whether they can carry on the activities of the tathagata.¹³⁹

In *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, Longchenpa cited scriptural evidence from the *Vinaya*:

Monastic members who don't renounce the mundane world and aspire for liberation are not really monastics, even though they've shaved off their hair during the ordination ceremony. Since they have no interest in a career and family, they are not really householders. Therefore, such people are nondescript—they are neither monastics nor householders.

In today's world, very few monastics, to say it harshly, decide to receive ordination because life drives them into a corner. Such people are not real practitioners. This situation also applies to householders.

When you study the Dharma, you need to make sure you have a great longing

¹³⁹ Tathagata (Sanskrit: [tə'tʰa:ɡətə]) is a Pali and Sanskrit word; Buddha Shakyamuni uses it when referring to himself in the Pali Canon. The term is often thought to mean either "one who has thus gone" (tatha-gata), "one who has thus come" (tatha-agata), or sometimes "one who has thus not gone" (tatha-agata).

for it. In this way, you will have the opportunity to succeed in your Dharma practice. As the proverb says:

The Dharma is nobody's possession,
It belongs to those who make the most effort.

The Dharma is not the property of anyone; it belongs to whoever studies and practices it diligently. Take, for example, two Dharma students at a Buddhist institute: One is very diligent, studying and practicing the Dharma day and night with great interest, even forgetting food and sleep, and eventually attains a high level of realization. The other is lazy and idle, just wasting time doing nothing meaningful, and a few years later has achieved nothing in his Dharma practice.

The Dharma is nobody's property. Depending on how diligent practitioners are, the result one gets is very different from one another.

The same is true for worldly knowledge. For example, the title of PhD has no assigned holders. As long as you have wisdom, diligence, and aspiration, you can earn the title through hard work. However, if you are lazy and unmotivated and waste time on idle pursuits, then you may not even get a college-level diploma, let alone a PhD degree.

Probably due to a lack of merit, some people seem to be “at their last gasp” when listening to Dharma teachings, and they appear uninterested all the time. But when they have the chance to watch TV, play mahjong, or visit unwholesome places, they immediately appear super healthy and energetic.

Or, if you ask them to practice prostrations, they may appear very tired: their feet are numb, and they cannot stand up. However, when they dance in a ballroom, they are as fit as a fiddle; they can dance two or three hours continuously without feeling tired, and the next day they can dance again in high spirits.

As practitioners, we should have interest and active engagement in the authentic Dharma instead of wrong dharmas. We should assimilate the endeavors of Buddha Shakyamuni in his previous lives, which can be summarized as:

Even in the face of blazing infernos or razor-sharp blades,
He would search for the true Dharma, even if it costs him his
life.

There are many such stories in the Buddha's biographies, especially in the

chapter on seeking the Dharma, in Mipham Rinpoche's *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*.

For example, a long, long time ago, when the Buddha was a king named Kancanasara,¹⁴⁰ he was seeking everywhere for the authentic Dharma in order to benefit all beings. One day, a brahmin said to the king that he knew a single four-line verse of the Buddha. The brahmin said that he would give the verse to the king if the king would gouge holes in his own flesh to serve as offering lamps and fill the holes with oil and plant in them thousands of burning wicks. The king agreed to do so, and then the brahmin gave him this stanza:

What has been gathered will be dispersed,
What has been high will be brought low,
What has been accumulated will be exhausted,
What is born will die.

In one of his previous lives, the Buddha underwent unimaginable asceticism just for a single four-line verse on impermanence. As for us, we cannot endure digging one hole in the body for a complete Dharma teaching, let alone gouging one thousand holes just for a verse.

In another of his previous lives, when the Buddha was a king named Bhilanjili,¹⁴¹ he endured a thousand iron nails being pushed into his body to receive another four-line verse from a brahmin:

All conditioned things are impermanent.
All tainted things are suffering.
All phenomena are empty and devoid of self.
Nirvana is beyond extremes.

In addition, when the Buddha was a Brahma king, while on the throne, he yearned for the Dharma. He had been seeking the Dharma every day and everywhere, but he couldn't succeed, so he was very unhappy. To test his aspiration, Indra turned into a brahmin and came to the palace, telling the king, "I have the Dharma. If you really wish, I can give it to you, but with one condition: you have

¹⁴⁰ The translation of the king's name is based on: <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/BSR/article/viewFile/15256/pdf>

¹⁴¹ The translation of the king's name is based on *Didactic Narration: Jataka Iconography in Dunhuang with a Catalogue of Jataka Representations in China*.

to dig a ten-foot pit and put a flaming fire in it. If you jump into the pit, I will give you the teachings.”

Without hesitation, the king agreed and started to prepare the pit. Once everything was set, he stood by the pit and asked the brahmin, “May you first give me the teachings? Otherwise, if I die in the fire, I won’t have the opportunity to hear the Dharma.” The brahmin taught a few verses, one of which is:

Practice loving-kindness, eliminate anger;
Protect all beings with great compassion,
Nourish all beings with tears of compassion.

This means one has to practice loving-kindness and compassion in the long run and rid oneself of anger. One should protect all beings with great compassion and nourish their minds with the tears of great compassion.

Upon hearing this, the king immediately attained realization and jumped into the pit with great joy. However, since he had already attained the level of a bodhisattva, the flaming pit turned into a lotus lake right away.

There are many such stories about the Buddha. Master Hong Yi (1880–1942)¹⁴² told two stories at the Quanzhou Children’s Welfare Institute to illustrate the Buddha’s dedication to the Dharma.

The first story: As stated in *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, back to innumerable kalpas ago when the Buddha was a poor man, he sold his flesh for five golden coins and offered the money to a buddha for Dharma teachings.

The second story: As stated in the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, in one of his previous lives when the Buddha was a king, in order to receive teachings from a brahmin, he gouged a thousand holes in his body and lit a thousand lamps in those holes as offerings.

When sharing these stories, Master Hong Yi said, “Compared to earlier times when hearing the Dharma required great effort, it is now so much easier to access the teachings. How lucky are we! From now on, we should aspire greatly and practice diligently!”

¹⁴² Hong Yi (23 October 1880 – 13 October 1942, or Hung Yit, born Li Shutong) was a Chinese Buddhist monk, artist and art teacher. He also went by the names Wen Tao, Guang Hou, and Shu Tong but was most commonly known by his Buddhist name, Hong Yi. He was a master painter, musician, dramatist, calligrapher, seal cutter, poet, and Buddhist monk.

Just for a four-line verse, the Buddha in his previous lives was willing to sacrifice everything and endure great hardships. Nowadays, we barely have to give up anything for the Dharma; we can simply hear the extraordinary teachings in comfort and joy. Therefore, we should appreciate the teachings as much as possible.

In fact, the comfort we enjoy has its downsides. Without experiencing hardships, many people lack appreciation for the Dharma. They don't see the teachings as rare to find; instead, they feel that it is very easy to access the teachings on a daily basis. The motivation and aspiration of some people at Larung Gar or in the cities are significantly weaker compared to those of eminent masters of the past.

I read the biography of Master Nenghai (1886–1967),¹⁴³ which describes how challenging it was for him to receive the teachings. Master Nenghai and his companions visited the Tibetan Plateau twice. On their first trip, they traveled from Dartsedo¹⁴⁴ through Chamdo¹⁴⁵ and finally arrived in Lhasa. During the journey, they had to carry their own provisions and tents all while hiding from soldiers along the borders. If they were caught, they would be sent back to the Han area of China.

As a result of traveling on foot day and night, the front and bottom parts of their soles had worn off, and only the middle parts of the boots were left. They walked in the snow, and thorns poked into their feet, but they didn't feel anything because their feet were completely numb with cold. It was not until early afternoon, when the temperature got warmer that they started to feel thorns in their feet.

When they encountered a high mountain and couldn't climb over it in one day, they had to spend the night on the mountain. As you may know, mountains in the Tibetan regions, such as Rongme Ngatra¹⁴⁶ and Mount Erlang,¹⁴⁷ are very

¹⁴³ Nenghai (1886 – 1967) was a Vajrayana Buddhist monk of the Gelug school and a religious leader in modern China. He is considered one of the key figures of the “Movement of Tantric Rebirth,” which sought to revitalize Chinese Esoteric Buddhism.

¹⁴⁴ Dartsedo, or Kangding, is a county-level city and the seat of Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province of Southwest China. Kangding's urban center is called Lucheng, which has around 134,000 inhabitants.

¹⁴⁵ Chamdo is a prefecture-level city in the eastern part of the Tibet Autonomous Region, China. Its seat is the town of Chengguan in Karuo District. Chamdo is Tibet's third-largest city after Lhasa and Shigatse.

¹⁴⁶ Rongme Ngatra is the highest peak of the Chola Mountains in the Kham region of western Sichuan, China. The peak's name in Mandarin Chinese is Que Er Shan, also the same name as the entire range, which has led to some translations of the mountain peak as Chola Mountain.

¹⁴⁷ Mount Erlang is a mountain in Sichuan province, China.

high. It normally takes several hours to climb over the mountains by car, so it takes much longer to climb on foot.

It snowed heavily during the night, and Master Nenghai and his companions found themselves buried in the collapsed tents when they woke up in the morning. They had to struggle out of the tents and sweep the snow away before moving on.

When sleeping at night, they simply put a blanket under themselves, with a worn boot as a pillow, ragged clothes as a quilt, and nothing else. Because it was freezing cold in the mountain, they had to squeeze together for a little warmth. Often, wild animals appeared on the mountain, and the travelers heard repeated howling at night, knowing they might be killed at any time.

They had to cross a river when traveling during the day. The river was frozen, and the local cattle and horses dared not cross it, so Master Nenghai and his companions had to cross the river themselves. They had to wade barefoot; otherwise, their boots would get wet and then freeze into ice blocks, which would prevent them from walking any further.

When they came ashore, the bottoms of their feet were covered with mud, gravel, and ice. Since their feet were numb, they didn't feel any pain. They sat down briefly to wipe their feet clean, put on their boots, and kept walking.

In this way, they walked to Lhasa step by step. When they finally arrived, they felt so relieved and happy. Now it only takes us seven days to get to Lhasa by bus, yet people still complain that the trip is very exhausting. This shows the vast difference between interest in the Dharma among people in the past and among people today.

Twenty years ago, when we just came to Larung Gar, there was neither electricity nor paved roads. Although this was nothing compared to the austerity our predecessors had experienced, it was still quite challenging relative to the conditions of today. For example, several newly arrived Han Chinese monks did not see a single green leaf of vegetables during the three or four months of winter weather. I often went to their cabins and noticed that they just ate rice with chili sauce.

Regardless of the hardships, everyone studied diligently day and night, memorizing texts, reading books, and practicing the Dharma.

Now, our living conditions are getting better and better, yet people's practice is getting worse and worse. Many people are picky about everything. For example, they complain, "This meal only has two or three dishes. That is not enough. Please

prepare one more dish for me!” Eminent masters of the past were not like this. Their hearts only desired the Dharma. They could get along in any situation regarding their health and living conditions.

Today’s people, especially urban dwellers, have high materialistic demands. They insist on living in luxurious residences with high-end decorations, so every day they busily pursue such lives.

But such a pursuit brings no meaning to our present life and future lives. When we leave this world, we cannot take the house with us. Only by practicing the Dharma can we really benefit ourselves. It says in the *Sutra of Instructions to the King*:

For a dying person only the Dharma is their residence, reliance,
and comfort.

Practicing the Dharma can bring great benefit for this life and for many lives to come. We cannot take anything in this world when we die. Even if we own the wealth of a whole country, we cannot bring even a needle and thread with us.

Therefore, you should learn from the resolve of past eminent masters in seeking the Dharma and be like King Lama Yeshe Ö (c.959–1040),¹⁴⁸ who was willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of the Dharma. Even if you cannot emulate them now, at least you should feel the preciousness of the Dharma and be grateful to the teacher who taught you even just one verse of the Dharma. After all, the value of the Dharma exceeds any worldly wealth.

If you have a desire for the Dharma, you will not find it difficult to listen to or practice the Dharma. Otherwise, one might be like a lay practitioner I know who lives only three kilometers away from the Dharma center but refuses to drive a few minutes to the place for teachings. This lay practitioner thinks the drive would cost him some fuel, and the teaching is not worthwhile. Some people are concerned with spending a few cents to send a text about their group Dharma study

¹⁴⁸ After Buddhism was destroyed during Langdarma’s reign, King Yeshe Ö from Ngari in western Tibet aspired to revive Buddhism, and he sent people to India several times to invite venerable Atisha to Tibet. During this process, King Yeshe Ö was captured by a hostile non-Buddhist king, who requested as much gold as the weight of King Yeshe Ö’s body for his release. Jangchub Ö, the king’s nephew, managed to gather gold equal in weight to his uncle’s body, less the weight of his head. King Yeshe Ö asked Jangchub Ö to use the gold for inviting venerable Atisha to propagate the Dharma in Tibet, instead of wasting it on his release. Later, King Yeshe Ö died in prison. Venerable Atisha was deeply touched by the king’s acts and agreed to spread the Dharma in Tibet.

or using up a little fuel to drive two or three kilometers. Alas! Eminent masters of the past would never think in such a way. The value of the Dharma far exceeds those monetary costs.

Some worldly people are truly pitiable. When pursuing something meaningless to their liberation from samsara, such as buying a piece of land to make a lucrative business that may greatly benefit descendants, they are willing to travel not only three kilometers, but even three thousand kilometers, with great joy. They fly to the destination as fast as possible and don't care how much they have to spend on transportation. However, when it is for the Dharma that can bring liberation from samsara, they are not willing to spend even a tiny amount of money and energy. How very sad!

When you have time, you should read the biographies of the Buddha and the eminent masters again and again. They used to be ordinary people as well and were no different from us. Then, they attained enlightenment through studying and practicing the Dharma.

You should also have such an interest in the Dharma. By doing so, you will surely gain the corresponding achievements. As later followers of the Buddha, you should listen to the teachings with great effort, disregarding heat, cold, and all other challenges.

Compared with big cities, Larung Gar is quite cold. I have heard that some Dharma students couldn't stand the cold anymore, so they planned to return to the mainland area of China in winter and stay there for three months, and then come back to Larung Gar when it gets warmer in summer. Such comings and goings will definitely hinder your practice, so it's better not to do this.

Some people choose to live in one place for a long time. They are fully devoted to hearing, contemplating, and meditating, and have no interest in visiting elsewhere. In the end, their practice attains perfect success.

Others take a trip somewhere, and when they return to Larung Gar, their minds start to wander. Two or three days after a second trip, they want to leave again. After a third trip, they will stay at Larung Gar for one day at most; and after a fourth trip, they disappear and never come back. By then, they are not used to life at Larung Gar anymore.

Ordinary people are like kids who become more and more reluctant to see the teacher after playing truant.

In fact, there is nothing worth desiring in the outside colorful world. Some sangha members feel very happy when they start to immerse themselves in the outside world, saying, “It is too challenging for me to return to my Dharma classes now, so I might as well get rid of the constraint of attending the teachings. This is liberation, or a sort of freedom!”

Unfortunately, they mistake the true constraints of the outside world for freedom. It is such a great opportunity for us to listen to the Dharma now, and such an opportunity won’t last forever. So, when we are blessed with the opportunity, we should cherish it.



Lesson 8

“The tendency of consciousness to ... Be mindful and listen with attention and care.” [page 13–14]

Today we will continue to study the six stains when listening to teachings. Yesterday we studied the stains of “pride,” “lack of faith,” and “lack of effort.” Today, we move to the fourth stain.

1.2.1.2.4. Outward Distraction

The mind being distracted by the objects of the six senses is the cause of our cyclic existence in samsara. Since beginningless time, all sentient beings have been trapped in samsara and cannot get liberated. The primary reason is that they are captivated by the five objects of desire, and their consciousness is not at ease. Such attachment drives them to commit wrongdoings, and as a result, they are deeply imprisoned in samsara and cannot set themselves free.

Since attachment caused by outward distraction is the root of all delusions and the source of all suffering, we must concentrate our minds in any way we can when listening to and practicing the Dharma.

As said in Padmasambhava’s teachings on *Bardo Thödol*:

At the very beginning of their practice, ordinary people find it hard to control their minds; the mind cannot abide for even a split second, so they become bored with themselves.

This is very common for beginners. After all, beginners never examined the mind in the past, so when examination starts, they begin to notice the mind’s

unceasing restlessness. However, beginners don't have to feel frustrated. Instead, they should continuously deal with distracting thoughts and attachments.

Whichever teachings you are studying or practicing, make sure to concentrate your mind and avoid outward distraction. If your mind is distracted by external factors, for example, if you are listening to the Dharma while doing housework, it will be very hard for you to absorb the teachings while multitasking. Ordinary people have limited cognitive resources, so we are more likely to fully receive the teachings if we wholeheartedly dedicate ourselves to them.

Therefore, when listening to teachings, make sure you have first finished all your chores or put them aside, and then listen attentively. If you are absent-minded or distracted by a sound or an object, then the Dharma cannot permeate you.

We don't have the great capacity to multitask. Some of you may think, "I can do something else simultaneously while listening to the Dharma. This is my strength, my skill." This is not realistic unless you have two sets of consciousness.

According to Buddhist logic, an ordinary person can have multiple undiscerning consciousnesses at the same time (e.g., the consciousness of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body), yet only one discerning consciousness (e.g., mind consciousness) at one time. A person can only have one mind (Tib. *sem*), so if the mind is focusing on forms, sounds, or flavors, it cannot, at the same time, concentrate on the Dharma.

Of course, it is relatively easy to concentrate when listening to teachings. After all, the teacher is explaining the Dharma to you. Most people can concentrate on the meaning of the teachings most of the time, except for a few moments when the mind is wandering. But when it is time to practice shamatha (calm-abiding) or vipassana (insight) meditation, the mind can easily fall into outward distractions, thinking about the past or future. Therefore, when you practice, you should guide your mind with mindfulness and vigilance.

When listening to teachings, you should gather the six senses and concentrate one-pointedly. Some people listen to the teachings on MP3 audio, yet their eyes are watching a TV program. Listening in this way, they cannot fully absorb the teaching.

Therefore, I highly recommend that you finish chores before Dharma class and set aside time just for attentively listening to the teachings. Best of all, you should

try to avoid any distractions and disturbances. Only by practicing in this way can you perfectly receive transmissions and understand the teachings.

In the next part, we will study the analogies that further explain the faults of outward distractions. Here, Patrul Rinpoche primarily discusses the five sense consciousnesses when engrossed in external stimuli. Strictly speaking, this explanation requires further elaboration because, according to Buddhist logic, the five sense consciousnesses of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body are undiscerning, but through them arises the discerning mind consciousness. However, here, Patrul Rinpoche didn't strictly distinguish discerning consciousness from undiscerning consciousness. Instead, he simply chose to apply worldly expressions, such as "My eyes are obsessed with beautiful scenes" or "My ears really like the melody" to loosely illustrate the fault of the five senses being distracted by external objects.

1) Eye consciousness attracted by forms

When the eyes see beautiful forms, greed arises due to indulgence, and greed leads to wrongdoings that trap the beholder in samsara without being liberated. Such a person won't be reborn in a higher realm. Instead, he may be a moth in the next life, a being who, due to past habitual tendencies, will fly to the lamp flame and die in it, because the moth's visual consciousness is attracted to bright lights.

Why are moths so attracted to light? Here is the primary scientific explanation: When moths fly at night, they navigate by the glimmer of the moon, a method called transverse orientation, which is somewhat similar to celestial navigation. Thus, when moths see the light of a lamp, they mistake it for moonlight, and, following their instincts, they keep their body in a certain position in relation to the lamp to guide them. As a result, the moths fly around the lamp until they die from exhaustion.

Another explanation is that moths display positive phototaxis, which is an organism's automatic response to light. This phenomenon reflects the habitual tendency of a moth flying toward the light.

However, the above scientific explanations do not acknowledge habitual tendencies from previous lives. In fact, those who are drawn to beautiful forms or who are obsessed with dressing up in this life will be reborn as moths in a future life.

Once, a Khenpo gave teachings in a city, telling people not to be preoccupied

with dressing up, or they would be reborn as moths. It is said that after the teaching, many pretty girls dared not dress up anymore.

2) Ear consciousness attracted by sound

The attraction of ear consciousness to melodious sound can also lead to disaster. This is how a stag is killed by a hunter's poisoned arrow or gun because the stag's hearing draws it to the sounds of a *vīṇā*.

In fact, melodious sounds, besides stimulating our ear consciousness, have no other meaningful function. But some beings get very engrossed with sound. If a person has a very strong habitual tendency toward sound, and if they are not reborn as humans in the next life, they may be reborn as animals drawn to musical instruments. Sometimes, cockroaches or mice that stay close to a musical instrument might be very famous singers in a previous life.

I told you this story in the past: Jamyang Sherab, a renowned lama from Kumbum Monastery, was once invited to give *phowa*¹⁴⁹ to a deceased person who was a popular singer.

During the puja, Jamyang Sherab recited the prayer of transference. After praying for a long time, his expression revealed something was not quite right. In the afternoon, the lama suddenly broke into a love song, and then he resumed the prayer of transference. In the end, he dedicated the merit. People in attendance were puzzled by his actions.

When Jamyang Sherab returned to the monastery, one of his disciples asked why he had sung a love song during the puja. The lama responded, "How pitiful! Today I checked with my psychic power and found that the deceased, in her bardo state, was attracted by singing from elsewhere. No matter how hard I tried to bring her back, she was very reluctant to return. Thus, I had to attract her with my singing. Because my voice was pleasant, she started to show interest in me. Then, I immediately visualized her mind being indivisible from my own mind and recited the prayer. Thus, I was able to transfer her consciousness."

Many people, including our Dharma peers, are fond of listening to music. There once lived a monk in my neighborhood who listened to awful songs every day with a shabby radio while cooking lunch. (He has since stopped.) Maybe he had unique ears because those songs were not at all pleasant to listen to. But he

¹⁴⁹ The practice of directly transferring the consciousness of the deceased.

seemed to like them so much that he would “season” his lunch with those songs and think this was good for health.

Some people argue that playing soft background music, such as *guzheng*,¹⁵⁰ while listening to teachings is better. They claim that if the music is not too loud, it can be very relaxing. However, if we are truly attracted to the Dharma, is there really a need for such worldly music? While it is true that beings have different preferences, when it is time to listen to teachings or practice the Dharma, the mind should be fully focused on the Dharma. There is no need to be distracted by other sounds.

3) Nose consciousness attracted by smell

The nose seduced by fragrance can also pose problems. These days, many people enjoy pleasant scents and often apply various perfumes. When these people walk by, you will catch a whiff of a sweet fragrance, prompting you to stop and identify the source.

Yesterday, a Dharma student from abroad visited me and apologized, saying, “Dear guru, I am so sorry. I sprayed perfume on my clothes.” I replied, “No need to apologize for your perfume. I thank you for the fragrance.”

However, if you apply perfume daily to your body or clothes, some people around you might appreciate the smell, while others may not.

If you become obsessed with fragrance, you may end up like bees lured in by carnivorous plants with seductive scents. Do you recall the golden bee named “Airy Lotus Petal” and the turquoise bee named “Delightful Lotus Speech” in Patrul Rinpoche’s *Lotus Garden’s Play*? The turquoise bee met her demise due to her greed for fragrance, being strangled by a flower. Through the love story of these two bees, Patrul Rinpoche explained the sequence of practicing the profound Dharma. The instructions in *Lotus Garden’s Play* are similar to those in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Even Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught the preliminary practices mentioned in *Lotus Garden’s Play*.

It was the sixteenth day of the fourth month of 2001 in the Tibetan calendar when Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had just finished teaching the *Lama Yangtik* (*The*

¹⁵⁰ Guzheng, also known as the Chinese zither, is a Chinese plucked string instrument with a history of more than two thousand five hundred years.

Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru). He told us disciples, who were still immersed in the immense Dharma bliss, saying,

“A few days ago, I saw Mipham Rinpoche in my lucid dream. Mipham Rinpoche advised me to teach *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* after the *Lama Yangtik*.”

“In my mind, I thought, ‘The current situation is not good, and my health is deteriorating day by day. It might be challenging for me to complete the teaching of such a lengthy text.’”

“Therefore, I asked Mipham Rinpoche, ‘Can I teach the preliminary practice in *Illuminating the Path to Liberation* or *Lotus Garden’s Play* instead?’ Mipham Rinpoche agreed. With that, I made a vow to teach the preliminaries in *Lotus Garden’s Play* one hundred thousand times.”

“In my short life, I may not be able to teach it one hundred thousand times, so I relay this mission to all of you. Each of you should impart the teaching. As long as one hundred thousand people listen to the teaching, my vow will be perfectly fulfilled.”

I gave the teaching once, and my commentary was transcribed and compiled into one of the volumes of the *Treasure of the Great Dharma*.¹⁵¹

Nonetheless, before his parinirvana, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche still managed to finish teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

I often think in this way: Mipham Rinpoche guided Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche with his illusory body of wisdom, asking him to teach *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* after the *Lama Yangtik*, which shows that *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is an extremely profound teaching bestowed by lineage masters. When checking the dependent origination from various perspectives, we can see that later generations have indeed received great benefits from the text.

In 1997, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche made a four-year teaching plan for himself. In the first year, he would teach *The Sutra of a Hundred Actions*; the second year, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*; the third year, Mipham Rinpoche’s commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* titled *Luminous Essence*; the fourth year, the *Lama Yangtik*.

¹⁵¹ *Treasure of the Great Dharma* compiles Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche’s commentaries on several shastras, book manuscripts, and a Dharma textbook for children.

When this four-year plan was completed, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche continued to teach the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. When I was alone in my room, I would often contemplate the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's life, especially his instructions in his late years. The fact that Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's last complete teaching was on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* renders a great dependent origination for us. I hope each of you will study the text seriously this time.

I have vowed to teach the text one thousand to ten thousand times, so this time I should be able to achieve the goal. Although I have not literally taught the text these many times, if each of you has heard it once, given the number of people in the audience and their ears, it is possible to say that the teaching is heard by many ears. Therefore, my teaching has definitely reached people over one thousand or ten thousand times.

4) Tongue consciousness attracted by taste

If tongue consciousness is lured by the taste of a delicacy, the diner will be like a fish that is caught with bait because its sense of taste is lured by the bait's flavor.

Some lay people are very particular about food delicacies. Many of you like to talk about which restaurant is good, which dish is yummy, and whenever you see an animal, be it from the land or the water, you immediately wonder how delicious or fresh it will taste. By doing this, you have committed horrible karma. In the next life, you may be reborn as animals, and the animals you have eaten in this life may be reborn as humans, so you will become their delicious food on the plate.

5) Body consciousness attracted by touch

It is very hot in India, so herds of elephants bathe in the lakes at noon just to cool off. But some elephants drown in swamps because they enjoy the sensation of mud on their bodies. Similarly, if you are obsessed with the comfort of touch, you will be like those elephants that die in the swamp of desire.

Many people constantly apply their minds to details like, "How soft is this piece of cloth?" or "Where do I get the best massage?" Some people take a black mud bath to have fair skin. Such a bath is advertised on buses in Sichuan Province. As long as the advertisements deliver appealing messages, people will be attracted because they pay special attention to the sensation of touch.

Sentient beings are sometimes very pitiful. If no negative karma is involved, then it is totally fine if one wants to have fair skin or a good figure. But if pursuing a pretty look is for the purpose of attracting the opposite sex, it is totally unnecessary because it may lead to terrible karmic consequences related to lust and desire.

Besides the outward distractions of the five sense consciousnesses, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions* also discusses the distractions of mind consciousness:

Concepts seduce the mind, the way the death of a calf causes a camel to grieve.¹⁵²

If the mind is obsessed with various phenomena such as romantic relationships and possessions, then it will definitely be seduced by those things, in the same way the death of its calf causes a camel to grieve and to eventually die from the pain of her loss.

Therefore, you shouldn't get engrossed in the objects of the six senses. Once you are attracted, you must immediately realize that such grasping is the cause of lower rebirth, and you should deal with the attraction with mindfulness and vigilance.

A professor once said Chinese Buddhist monks wear sandals exposing the five toes in the front and the heel at the back to symbolize that they need to forgo the six sensory attractions. I don't know whether there is such a reference in the sutras, as I am not familiar with every single scripture in Chinese Buddhism. Nevertheless, monastics must cut off attraction to the objects of the six senses.

Of course, it is impossible for us, as beings of the desire realm, to completely forgo objects. Before we attain the fruition of a sublime state, it is very difficult to forgo eating, sleeping, and other objects of the senses. But at least when practicing or listening to teachings, don't indulge in five desires and six senses while pursuing the Dharma. It is only through wholehearted attention to the teaching and practice that you can achieve expected results.

Most importantly, whenever you are listening to the Dharma, giving a teaching, meditating, or practicing, you should abandon thoughts about the past, present, and future. Specifically, do not dwell on thoughts about your past

¹⁵² Longchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron (Lama Chokyi Nyima), Padma Publishing, 2006.

experiences, do not disturb your mind with the present, and do not continuously fantasize about the future.

Of course, when giving teachings, it is easier to leave those thoughts behind, unless the teacher has to tell their own stories about past happenings. Otherwise, if the teacher's mind is not concentrated on the content but on the past or the future, the teacher may not be able to properly deliver the teaching.

In comparison, you need to be more mindful of your thoughts when listening to teachings. Otherwise, your body remains in the Dharma hall, yet your mind has already gone to the city for the non-Dharma. This is just like a Tibetan saying: "The body is in the Monastery, yet the mind is in the city." This is a satire on charlatan monks.

In addition, when listening to teachings, you should not simultaneously plan for the future. This will distract your hearing of the Dharma.

Every time after we finish a lesson on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, we have a few minutes to meditate together. Inexperienced meditators can hardly calm their minds during this short period, as discursive thoughts constantly arise, which is very frustrating. Meanwhile, experienced meditators find the meditation practice quite easy.

The meditation we are doing together is not completely a calm-abiding meditation, which requires abandoning even the subtle discursive thoughts. Ours is an analytical meditation. For example, when we follow the meditation guide on "the precious human life," we just focus our minds on its content. If other discursive thoughts surface, we can bring our minds back with mindfulness and vigilance, which is not very difficult.

A newbie meditator's mind is like a wild child who has not yet attended school and who wanders everywhere out of control. If the child is enrolled in a school, then whenever they get a bit naughty, the teacher will discipline them, so they become obedient. It is the same with our mind. We need to train our mind again and again through meditation and sustained practices. Otherwise, our discursive thoughts won't stop for even a few minutes, let alone for months or years.

Some people complain that it is hard to meditate because the mind is still restless after a whole month of practice. Indeed, it is not so easy to calm and abide our mind. Our mind has been like an untamed wild elephant since beginningless

time, so it is not realistic to calm it within a few days. Therefore, the best way is to train the mind through more meditation and practice.

Regarding how to abandon discursive thoughts, Gyalse Tokme Zangpo Rinpoche (1295–1369) offers us the following great pith instructions:

1) Do not dwell on thoughts about the past

Past joys and sorrows are like ripples on the water:
They have disappeared without a trace. Don't dwell on them.
If they were to surface in your thoughts, reflect on how success
and failure come and go.
Apart from Dharma, what else can you rely on, people of
Maniwa?¹⁵³

Some monastics always linger on the past, thinking, “How I used to love; how I used to fight, etc.” Some lay practitioners also like to boast about the past, saying, “How I used to be this or that.”

When they talk about the past, they shed tears at one moment and become ecstatic at another, like a crazy person. Longchenpa said, “Yesterday's event is gone, so there is no need to think about it.”

If you really want to reflect on the past, then you should think about how success and failure come and go. For example, what used to be a bustling place has now become ruins; a once-rich person is now a pathetic beggar; a once-vagabond is now a millionaire; a once-happy family is now broken.

Contemplating the principle of impermanence is of great help to our Dharma practice because you will be convinced that nothing can be trusted other than the Dharma. As *The Sutra of Instructions to the King* says, for a dying person, the only refuge and protection is the Dharma, and nothing else.

Therefore, when listening to or practicing the Dharma, there is no need to linger on the past. You'd better not talk about the past because this generates

¹⁵³ According to Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, Maniwa is the village where Gyalse Tokme Zangpo Rinpoche stayed before taking his ordination. Thus, Gyalse Rinpoche was giving advice to the locals from this village. However, the Padmakara Translation Group translated it as “mani-reciter,” referring to ordinary Tibetans who characteristically have faith in the Dharma and recite the mani mantra (*Om Mani Padme Hum*), but who may not have any detailed knowledge of Buddhist teachings.

nothing useful. If the past comes to your mind, you should take it as a reminder of impermanence, which can be of help to your practice. Then, you will feel that nothing is reliable except the Dharma.

2) Do not continuously fantasize about the future

Future plans are like nets cast on dry land:

They will never bring what you expect. Do not fantasize about them.

If they were to surface in your thoughts, reflect on how uncertain it is when you will die.

Apart from Dharma, what else do you have time for, people of Maniwa?

A Tibetan proverb says, “Hope is always surrounded by despair.” Some people speculated in the stock market or invested in real estate last year, thinking that they would surely make a fortune this year. They even started to make plans for further investment. However, contrary to their plans, the global financial crisis swept away their wealth and shattered their dreams. Such cases are so numerous that we should forgo planning for the future.

But if the future comes to your mind, you should contemplate how uncertain when your life will end. It is certain that every one of us will die, yet it is uncertain when we shall die. Thus, whenever you contemplate impermanence, you will have a strong sense of urgency, and then you will diligently accumulate merits and purify obscurations, leaving you no time for non-Dharma, including idling around mindlessly.

3) Do not disturb your mind with the present

Present matters are like a job in a dream:

They don’t deserve your diligent pursuit. Do not disturb your mind with them.

If they are to be done, do it appropriately without any attachment.

All present activities are devoid of meaning, people of Maniwa!

Don’t get too attached to your present work. You should consider it a dream

or an illusion, which appears but lacks essence. No matter how much effort you devote to work, it is pointless, so you should give up any attachment.

But if the present comes to your mind, then whatever you are doing, be it eating, walking, talking, or sleeping, you shouldn't be too attached. Otherwise, afflictions will arise. Many people don't know that all phenomena are illusory and dream-like, and instead, they perceive everything as truly existing. Because of such attachment, they commit various wrongdoings.

When guided by the views of no attachment, no grasping, emptiness, and dream-like existence, we know that worldly activities are without essence; the only meaningful thing is practicing the Dharma, and we should abandon wrongdoing that brings harm to our future rebirths.

4) Summary of the instructions

Between your meditation sessions, take control of your thoughts
that arise from the three poisons;

Until all thoughts and appearances arise as Dharmakaya,

During indispensable moments of contemplation, do reflect in
this way.

Do not indulge in deluded thoughts, people of Maniwa!

In this context, “three poisons” should be interpreted as “three times.” Lama Yuktok Choying Rangdrol also mentioned “three times” in his commentary on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. This interpretation makes the verse easier to understand, since the previous verses are about the past, the future, and the present, and this verse is the summary. In the Tibetan language, “three poisons” (Tib. duk sum) and “three times” (Tib. dü sum) differ by only one syllable.

To summarize, between meditation sessions, you should learn to control all thoughts about the past, the present, and the future. When listening to or practicing the Dharma, it is important not to linger on the past, as such thoughts are of no use. You should not fixate on the present or get distracted by anything around you, and you should not fantasize about the future or daydream about something illusory.

We ordinary people have few plans about the Dharma, yet innumerable plans

about the non-Dharma. When attaining the *bhumi*¹⁵⁴ of bodhisattvas, all thoughts and external appearances are the displays of Dharmakaya. However, before you reach such a state, you'd better not chase after thoughts about the past, present, and future. If such thoughts come to mind, you may transform them into the Dharma path with mindfulness and vigilance. Make sure you have the means to control the thoughts instead of being carried away by them. Otherwise, you cannot succeed in listening to teachings and in practicing the Dharma.

Gyalse Tokme Zangpo Rinpoche also said,

Don't fantasize about the future.

If you do, you're like the father of Famous Moon!

This refers to a well-known Tibetan folk tale with a moral about fantasizing about the future.

There was once a poor man who received a large pile of barley. He carefully placed it into a big sack, secured it to a rafter, and then settled down beneath it, lost in his thoughts.

"This barley will surely bring me great wealth," he pondered. "Once I am wealthy, I will find myself a wife... and we will surely have a son. What should I name him?"

Just as he contemplated this, the moon emerged, and he resolved to name his future son Famous Moon. Unbeknownst to him, a rat had been continuously nibbling at the rope that supported the sack. Without warning, the rope broke, causing the sack to crash down upon the man, ultimately resulting in his demise.

This folk tale has a different version:

Once, a poor man came across a large pile of barley. Since he had no house to store it, he carried the sack with him when crossing mountains. One night, he had to spend the night on the top of a steep hill, and at the bottom of the slope was a big lake.

At bedtime, he started to daydream (the plot is basically the same as the above one), "Now that I have this big sack of barley, I will be rich. Once I am rich, I will

¹⁵⁴ Bhumi (Skt. *bhumi*; Tib. སྒ, *sa*, Wyl. *sa*), stage or level — the word *bhumi* literally means 'ground.' Just as the ground is the support for everything, both animate and inanimate, the *bhumis* are said to be 'supports' for enlightened qualities. So, this term is used when referring to the stages a practitioner traverses on the path to enlightenment. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

have a wife who will have a boy. What shall I call my son?" Just then, the moon appeared, so he decided to call him Famous Moon.

At that moment, the moon rose from the eastern mountain, and the moonlight shone upon him. This made him very happy, thinking, "I am thinking about 'Famous Moon,' and the moonlight is on me. Everything will be fine from now on." Feeling excited, he stretched his legs and accidentally kicked away the sack, which fell into the lake. He was so sad that he threw himself into the lake as well. Therefore, before Famous Moon was born, the father had already left the world.

Similar stories are present in the Han area as well. There was once a beggar from the south of the Yangtze River who bought a lottery ticket with a few pennies he had just received. His clothes were in rags, so there was no place to put the lottery ticket. Just then, he noticed the bamboo stick that he carried with him had been split by fighting with dogs, so the niche on the stick was the best place to hide the ticket.

Once the lottery ticket was well placed, he started to fantasize, "If I win a big lottery, I will no longer be a beggar. I am going to wear a pair of gold-rimmed glasses and live in a five-star hotel..."

A few days later, his ticket indeed won a big lottery. Feeling ecstatic that finally his dream had come true, the beggar stood on a bridge and raised his arms in victory, exclaiming, "I am no longer a beggar." He threw the bamboo stick into the river. Seeing the stick disappear, he suddenly remembered that the lottery ticket was still in the stick. The beggar was in great despair, so he jumped into the river.

There are many other similar stories, so we shouldn't fantasize too much about the future. As I just said, "Hope is always surrounded by despair," and plans never run as fast as changes. Our beautiful dreams are fragile and easily shattered. Many people often think, "How can I make money now? How can I buy a house or a car after I make money? Then, how can I?" People even start quarreling with family over something that hasn't happened. This happens in the Tibetan regions too. Here is a story.

A family had a cute little boy who was quite naughty. The father liked to daydream. One day, he thought, "Although we are poor, I will make some money, and then I can buy a mare, which will surely have a foal." Then the father told the son, "If we have a foal, make sure you don't harm the newborn horse since you are so naughty." The boy protested, "No! I want to ride the foal." The father was angry,

saying, “Have I not told you not to harm it?” He beat the boy with a stick, which killed the boy on the spot.

Therefore, you should have fewer unrealistic thoughts about the future. Grasp the present moment and practice the Dharma impeccably. Only in this way can you succeed in Dharma practice. Otherwise, you will be like a monk in the past, who often daydreamed, “In the future, I will become a great Dharma master and build a majestic temple. This temple will be built in a good place, far away from the east. The Mahavira Hall will be in this design, and the glazed tile should be at that price range.” This daydream sounds laughable, but he was infatuated with it.

Not only should you stop thinking about the future, but also about experiences in the past, especially non-Dharma things. There is no need to tell others about such thoughts or immerse yourself in them. Such thoughts should be cut off at the moment you notice them. When listening to teachings or meditating, your mind should turn to the Dharma. As past eminent masters said, you should observe your minds all the time. When a discursive thought is arising, you should control it with mindfulness and vigilance so your meditation and hearing will be successful.

Of course, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche also said that a practitioner could make plans related to the Dharma. For example, after this teaching, what will be next; after preliminaries, what to study next? Such Dharma planning is necessary, whereas other pointless planning can be dropped if possible.

Sometimes I really wanted to stay at home, but it turned out that I couldn’t. Suddenly, certain causes and conditions arose, and I was blown elsewhere by the karmic wind. Other times I planned to visit somewhere to do something, and everything was all set, but it turned out I had to stay at home.

Things in the future do not necessarily follow your wishes, so you don’t need to think too much. It is better to take it as it comes. You can’t control things happening a few months later, let alone a few years later.

Once, a lay practitioner told me, “Ten years from now, I will take my ordination from you.” Alas! Let alone ten years later, we cannot even control things happening ten months later. However, some people just don’t understand this. Speaking of the lay practitioner’s ordination, ten years later, perhaps he may have already turned to bone ashes, and so may I.

Therefore, scattered thoughts about the past and future can never be trusted; they only serve as distractions to our study and practice of the Dharma. Some

people start to think now about next year's events, and they cannot sleep all night. Such thoughts only bring distractions, so you should give them up altogether.

When the mind is distracted, you must bring it back to the Dharma through mindfulness, vigilance, and perseverance. This is a very profound pith instruction. If you don't know this, even if you listen to the teachings, you can barely receive any meaning of the Dharma. If you know this, then whichever teaching you are studying, the Dharma will permeate you, just like you are able to properly use an electronic device after knowing the details in its manual. So, please pay attention to this instruction!



Lesson 9

“Do not focus too intently, ... in order to receive these teachings.” [page 14–15]

Yesterday, we covered outward distractions, saying that our sensory faculties shouldn’t become engrossed in external objects, as doing so prevents us from absorbing the meaning of the Dharma. Ordinary people tend to get distracted by external changes, but Mahayanists, especially those who have learned the right conduct while listening to teachings, should discipline their minds with mindfulness and vigilance when attending a Dharma class or engaging in practices. This is essential.

Now let’s move to the fifth of the six stains:

1.2.1.2.5. Inward Tension

When listening to and practicing the Dharma, make sure you do not focus too intently. Some people over-focus: they hold onto one specific teaching and insist on grasping it or succeeding in its corresponding practice. For example, when practicing techniques that work with channels, energies, and essences, some practitioners focus so intensely that the body becomes unwell and the mind uneasy, which eventually leads to various obstacles in their practice.

When listening to teachings, if you focus only on individual words and phrases, you may only remember one detail instead of the whole. This is like the *dremo* bear that Patrul Rinpoche mentioned in the text.

The *dremo* bear appears often in Tibetan folk stories. It likes to dig holes in the ground and sleep in them. It often fights with or even kills its foes. Especially

in winter, when digging holes, the bear sometimes digs out a hibernating marmot. The bear is irritated at seeing the marmot and its family sleeping. So, the bear digs out one marmot, punches it, and puts the marmot under its butt. Then the bear digs out another marmot and repeats the procedure.

Meanwhile, the first marmot has awakened, so when the bear goes for the next marmot, the first one runs away. As a result, no matter how many marmots the bear digs out, he ends up having only one with him.

There is a similar Chinese story of “the black bear picking ears of corn.” In this case, a black bear picks one ear of corn and puts it under its arm; when the bear reaches out for another ear of corn, the first one drops to the ground. Thus, after working hard for a long time, in the end, the black bear only has one ear of corn in its paw. This is very similar to the story of the dremo bear.

This is quite foolish. When some people practice, they only focus on one point, leaving other aspects aside. As a result, they fail to grasp the bigger picture. Similarly, when listening to Dharma teachings, some only focus on one item instead of the whole. For example, when a Buddhist story is brought up in the teaching, they remember the story but forget it as soon as a new point is introduced. When the class is eventually over, all they recall is the last part of the teachings, while the earlier lessons are forgotten.

It is crucial to properly adjust the state of our minds. If you are unable to grasp the basic Dharma teachings, you should devote more time to learning the right conduct while listening to teachings. For example, you need to understand the following aspects: how to take notes on the master’s teachings, how to read the text, and after reading the text, how to integrate your own understanding with the meaning of the text and the master’s teachings, etc.

When attending a Dharma class, some people just listen without referring to any text, so they don’t even know what the teaching is about. Others neither read the text nor focus on the teaching; instead, they just sit in class mindlessly. Even worse, some remain in the seven-point posture and start to practice *tummo*—a tantric practice of yogic heat—when they are supposed to be listening to teachings.

These are quite inappropriate behaviors in a Dharma class. All these arise because Dharma students don’t know the right attitude and conduct for listening to teachings. The appropriate behavior is to follow the text and reflect on the content at the same time.

Khenpo Kyiwang once taught us, “You should train yourself on the methods for a while; otherwise, you don’t even know how to listen to teachings properly.” Indeed, some novice monastics and lay practitioners think Dharma teachings are just like worldly teachings; they don’t know that the two teachings differ significantly in style and format. It takes time for them to adapt to Dharma teachings.

Many lay practitioners are motivated in attending Dharma teachings, yet you should also pay attention to the right conduct while listening to teachings. For example, how can you avoid the three defects of the pot? How can you get rid of the six stains? You should think carefully about these issues. If listened to correctly, the teachings will naturally merge with your minds.

When listening to teachings, if you focus too intensely, then each time you grasp one point, you forget the one before and never understand the whole. Meanwhile, too much concentration also makes you sleepy. As said in Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*:

Wildness and remorse, and hateful thoughts,
And dullness-somnolence, and yearning lust,
And doubt are hindrances—please know these five
Are thieves that steal the gem of virtuous deeds.¹⁵⁵

Feeling sleepy, or dullness-somnolence, is a thief that steals the gem of virtuous deeds. Therefore, inward tension, like outward distraction, is a big hindrance in our practice.

After years of study and practice, many eminent masters know what the hindrances in their practice are, so they can maintain a balance between being too strict and too loose. In comparison, some practitioners are excessively diligent at the outset. They neglect sleep and food, practicing day and night, sleeping only three to four hours a day, and disregarding those who try to persuade them that such a lifestyle could harm their health. However, after a while, these same practitioners become too relaxed and slack: they are awake for only three or four hours a day and spend the rest of the time sleeping. They oscillate between two opposite extremes, which is not beneficial.

A few days ago, when I taught the *Longchen Nyingtik meditation instructions*,¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion, 2013.

¹⁵⁶ You may find Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche’s teachings here: <https://khenposodargye.org/>

I mentioned that Dharma practice is a lifelong endeavor, not a temporary passion lasting only a few days or months. Some practitioners are too hasty, thinking, “I have not encountered the Dharma in all these years. Now that I am fortunate enough to finally encounter it, I must gain experience or, better yet, achieve realization as soon as possible!”

Well, that is unrealistic. Dharma practice is a long-term “project.” It is impossible to earn a worldly college degree in just two or three days, let alone attain transcendental liberation. So please, make sure you understand this very well. When you are too loose, discipline yourself to stop slacking off and dedicate all available time slots to practice; when you practice tightly, stop focusing too intently, stay relaxed, and avoid being hasty, as this might lead your practice astray.

There are many stories in the sutras about how to balance being too tight and too loose. For example, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (The Samyukta Agama)* and *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* include the following story about Srona:

Srona received ordination from Katyayana. A year later, Srona visited the Buddha and requested permission to receive Upasampada¹⁵⁷ in the presence of just five bhikkhus, instead of the ten bhikkhus that Katyayana would gather in three years.

After meeting the Buddha, Srona started to practice *kinhin*, or walking meditation, whenever possible. Srona had delicate hair and tender skin on the soles of his feet, which caused him to bleed often while walking.

Because of the bleeding, the Buddha granted special permission for Srona to wear shoes with a one-layer sole. However, Srona declined, saying, “I left behind eighty chariots made of gold and seven elephant carriages filled with servants when I renounced my life as a householder to become a monastic. How can I now become attached to shoes?”

Srona continued to practice diligently with the Buddha, yet he still couldn’t attain realization, and his devotion to the Dharma began to waver. Srona thought, “I come from a wealthy family; I can always give up my bhikkhu precepts, disrobe, and return home as a householder. Then I can enjoy my wealth, make frequent offerings, and support the sangha—this will also be considered practice.”

meditations/introduction-longchen-nyingtik-ngondro/

¹⁵⁷ Buddhist rite of higher ordination, by which a novice becomes a monk, or bhikkhu (Pali: bhikkhu; Sanskrit: bhikṣu).

Knowing that Srona had become too tight in his pursuit of realization, the Buddha sent someone to bring Srona over when he began to waver.

The Buddha asked, “When you were a householder, were you good at playing *vīṇa*?”

Srona answered, “Yes, I played very well.”

“Did your *vīṇa* sound best when the strings were very tight?”

“No, it didn’t.”

“Did your *vīṇa* sound best when the strings were very loose?”

“No, it didn’t.”

The Buddha then asked, “Did it sound best when the strings were neither too tight nor too loose?”

Srona answered, “Yes.”

The Buddha told him, “It is the same with your practice. When too tight, your practice can lead to restlessness and regret; when it is too loose, it becomes ineffective and lax. Thus, you should aim for a balance between tight and loose, avoiding both inward tension and outward distraction.”

Upon hearing the Buddha’s advice, Srona prostrated with great bliss and left. By practicing properly, soon Srona attained arhathood.

The Srona story in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is very similar to the one described above. Once, Ananda was teaching Srona how to meditate, but Srona encountered great difficulty in mastering it. Sometimes he was too tense, while other times he was too relaxed, which prevented him from achieving a meditative state. Srona discussed this with the Buddha, who used the analogy of playing the *vīṇa*, as described above, to illustrate the point.

In the end, the Buddha said, “It is the same for training your mind.”

Being neither too tight nor too loose is very important. Beginning Buddhists tend to be too tight, myself included. I was very young when I first studied the Dharma, so I didn’t have inward tension. But when I first became a monk, I was quite judgmental. For example, when I saw that some old lamas’ behaviors didn’t strictly follow the precepts, I thought, “What kind of monks are they! Now that I am a monk myself, I must follow the precepts one hundred percent and behave

appropriately! Those monks received their ordinations so many years ago; how can they still talk and act in this way?”

I had many such judgmental thoughts at that time. I paid a lot of attention to my manners and took pride in my image, which, in retrospect, I now see was actually quite superficial.

Some householders are like this as well. After studying the Dharma for a short time, they start to judge this or criticize that. They even scold the guru, saying, “You should do this or that! Buddhists should be like this or that.” They are quite self-righteous. Such people tend to be very diligent and devoted at the beginning, but then gradually they regress. In the end, they don’t even bother to read Dharma texts, and much of their conduct becomes inappropriate.

Therefore, every one of us should pay attention to this issue.

Srona followed the Buddha’s advice and steadily practiced with a balance between tight and loose for years, eventually attaining fruition. (Those who have reached higher levels of realization tend to practice in this manner. They continue to practice this way for ten or twenty years. Significant progress can only be made after long-term steady practice, rarely after only a short period of time.)

You can also find the story in *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*. The storyline is very similar. In the end, the Buddha said:

It is the same when a shramana (ascetic) is practicing the Way. If his mind is properly tuned, he will attain the Way. If he pursues the Way too impetuously, his body will be weary. If his body is weary, his mind will be vexed. If vexations arise, his practice will regress. If his practice regresses, his faults will increase. However, if he remains pure, serene, and joyful, he will not lose the Way.¹⁵⁸

Therefore, this Sutra well elaborates the importance of the balance between tight and loose. If possible, you should check texts such as *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* and *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* for instructions on adjusting the mind and carefully contemplate those instructions.

¹⁵⁸ *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, translated from Chinese by the Chung Tai Translation Committee, 2009. <http://sunnyvale.ctzen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/sutra-of-42-chapters-sutra-v1.3.12-20131216.pdf>

Worldly people also promote the balance between tight and loose and support an equilibrium between hard work and relaxation. It says in the *Book of Rites*:¹⁵⁹

The principle of kings Wen and Wu was to alternate tension
with relaxation.

“Tension” refers to pulling the bowstring, and “relaxation” to letting go of the string. This means alternating between tension and relaxation was the effective way for kings Wen and Wu to govern the country.

Therefore, whatever you do, you should follow specific pith guidance. Take the example of a CEO managing a corporation or an abbot overseeing a monastery. If the person is too strict, handling everything absolutely in accordance with the rules, then employees or monastic members might leave due to the rigidity. In contrast, if the person is too loose, setting no rules and allowing the organization to become disorganized and messy, then no one will want to stay.

This is an area where I really admired Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche because he not only practiced in a balanced manner but also managed Larung Gar Buddhist Academy with modern management skills.

When you are a manager, be it in a Buddhist center or a worldly organization, you should keep a balance. If you are too fierce, people may consider you a “mara,” which is not good. If you are too soft, people may not treat you seriously, which is also not good. As a manager, you should follow Mipham Rinpoche’s advice in *The Just King*:¹⁶⁰

Everyone praises someone who has the strength
to act peacefully or wrathfully as appropriate to the situation—
to be gentle with those who despise them, even if they’re
enemies;

¹⁵⁹ The *Book of Rites*, also known as the *Liji*, is a collection of texts describing the social forms, administration, and ceremonial rites of the Zhou dynasty, as they were understood in the Warring States and the early Han periods. The *Book of Rites*, along with the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhōulǐ*) and the *Book of Etiquette and Rites* (*Yǐlǐ*), which are together known as the “Three Li (*Sanlǐ*),” constitute the ritual (lǐ) section of the Five Classics that lay at the core of the traditional Confucian canon. (Each of the “five” classics is a group of works rather than a single text.) As a core text of the Confucian canon, it is also known as the *Classic of Rites* or *Lijing*, which some scholars believe was the original title before it was changed by Dai Sheng.

¹⁶⁰ Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, translated by Jose Ignacio Cabezon, Snow Lion (2017), p. 140.

to be harsh with those who run away, even if they're friends.

Thus, you should be both wrathful and peaceful. Regardless of the inner state of your mind, if you adjust your outer behavior according to this advice, you can easily get things done.

This also applies to your practice. You should not be too loose; otherwise, you may end up indulging yourself every day and living an undirected and pitiful life. You should not be too tight either. Although some people practice very diligently, which is good, it is hard to say whether they can remain in this state in the long run.

There was once a monk at Larung Gar who seemed very devoted at first. When he visited me at my cabin, he began doing long prostrations fifty meters away from my yard. I told him several times not to prostrate, but he insisted. His head began bleeding from the prostrations. With great determination, he said, "I follow you from today; I will completely devote myself to your Dharma activities; and vow to become your best disciple!" I felt he was overdoing it, which is not necessarily a good sign. However, since he was tech-savvy, I assigned him quite a few tasks.

It turned out that he became too relaxed later on, perhaps due to weariness or other reasons. He changed significantly from how he was before. So, when a person seems very diligent and dedicated at first—even if they cry or make a scene—I am hesitant to fully trust their commitments. This is because I can't be sure if they will remain as diligent in the long run.

Even worldly work, life, and relationships require long-term examination. Recently, a fellow villager told me a story:

A family married their daughter to the son of another family. At the very beginning of the marriage, the two families were on great terms. Initially, they each lived in their own separate tents, but because they grew so close, they decided to merge their tents into one during the Tibetan New Year. Living together in the same tent, they shared everything. However, the harmony didn't last long. A few months later, many conflicts arose, and they were no longer happy together.

It was quite sad. Many elders had predicted what would happen between the two families, saying, "These two families are too close this year. Therefore, something unpleasant may happen next year."

The same applies to listening to teachings and practicing the Dharma. When

a person goes to extremes—either too lax or too diligent—senior practitioners can tell that their practice won’t go right.

Dakini Machik Labdrön (1055–1149) said,

Neither too tight nor too loose:
This is an essential point for the View.

Machik Labdrön was a well-known dakini,¹⁶¹ or “sky dancer,” on the Tibetan Plateau. She attained realization through the scriptures on Prajnaparamita (the perfection of transcendent wisdom) and later followed the Indian sage Padampa Sangye. She established the lineage of Chöd,¹⁶² based on the Prajnaparamita sutras, which is still often practiced among Tibetan Buddhists from various schools. She also placed many *termas*, or hidden treasures, in sacred mountains, some of which were revealed by eminent masters of later generations.

There are varied descriptions of her birth and death years. Some say she was born in 1103 and died in 1204. Others say she was born in 1031. Nevertheless, with her compassion and realization of emptiness, she accepted innumerable beings. Through integrating body-offerings with compassion and emptiness, she subdued many nagas, ghosts, and spirits. As a great and accomplished master, she advised practitioners of later generations not to let the mind get too relaxed or too inwardly concentrated.

If too tense, the practice may go astray. For example, some retreatants overly focus on the practice and become somewhat unhealthy both physically and mentally. When a retreat is over, their eyes are red, their hair is very long, and they may appear frightening to others.

If they become too relaxed, it’s similar to when practitioners abandon their retreat and choose to have “fun” in the cities. They put the law of karma on the back burner, and everything, like empty space, seems to no longer exist. There are many practitioners like this.

Therefore, do not let your mind get too tense or too inwardly concentrated. Allow your senses to be naturally at ease, remaining in a balanced state between tension and relaxation. This is a profoundly important key to our practice.

¹⁶¹ Dakini in Sanskrit, Khandro in Tibetan, literally means “sky dweller” or “sky dancer,” and is the most sacred aspect of the feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism, embodying both humanity and divinity in feminine form.

¹⁶² The Tibetan word literally means ‘to sever.’

Sarahapa¹⁶³ says:

The mind is liberated
When the constraints are untied.

However, many people are very constrained by their longing for liberation. They say, “Guru, can you beat me with a stick? I really want to attain realization! I have not had the chance to study the Dharma in the past twenty-something years. Now that I have finally started to listen to teachings, I realize I have missed so much. There are so many sutras and shastras I have not studied; there are so many states of realization I have not experienced. I feel I am in a great hurry to catch up! I must attain divine vision right away!”

Such practitioners may even try to hit their heads against the wall, wishing for a divine vision to appear. This is also very unrealistic! Practice takes time. Beginning practitioners shouldn’t be hasty. It is wonderful that you have encountered the Dharma, but ensure you advance step by step, just as you eat food bite by bite. In doing so, the states of practice will naturally arise in your mind, one by one.

Dharma practice requires long-term persistence. Many great masters in the Tibetan regions and the Han region of China practice with perseverance and consistency for ten or twenty years. It shouldn’t be that you are diligent only when the guru is bestowing empowerment, during one or two teaching sessions, or while reading one or two books. Such temporary diligence can hardly help you attain liberation right away. You have to set a long-term plan. Only by doing so can you succeed in your practice.

In summary, do not let your mind get too tense or too inwardly concentrated; let your senses be naturally at ease, balanced between tension and relaxation. Of course, some people are good at relaxation, as Mipham Rinpoche says in his *Beacon of Certainty*:

If some idiots think, “Since there is no modal apprehension,
From the very beginning one should relax and not grasp

¹⁶³ Saraha, Sarahapa, Sarahapada, or in the Tibetan language The Arrow Shooter (circa 8th century CE), was known as the first sahajiya and one of the Mahasiddhas. The name Saraha means “The one who has shot the arrow.” According to one scholar, “This is an explicit reference to an incident in many versions of his biography, when he studied with a dakini disguised as a low-caste arrowsmith. Metaphorically, it refers to one who has shot the arrow of non-duality into the heart of duality.”

anything”—

Then because all beings are quite relaxed in their ordinary state,
Always wandering in the three worlds of samsara,
There is no reason to encourage or remind them!¹⁶⁴

I remind some Dharma students of this balance, saying, “Please take care of yourselves. Don’t work too hard!” Some respond, “Ah! Dear guru, you don’t have to persuade me to relax. I have no problem relaxing. I am good at two things: sleeping and eating. I don’t need any advice regarding these two things from a master.”

Nevertheless, as beginning practitioners, if you don’t know how to properly adjust the mind, if you become hasty about studying the Dharma—you want to study this, you don’t want to miss that—and especially if you insist on attaining realization while meditating in retreat, you may ruin your health in the end. As a result, you will fall into a vicious circle; you become hastier and more anxious, so your practice is less likely to be successful. Therefore, please do keep this advice in mind.

1.2.1.2.6. Discouragement

When you get hungry or thirsty during an overly long teaching, or suffer from being exposed to wind, rain, harsh sunlight, and so forth, you should not become discouraged and grow weary of listening to teachings.

Physical conditions for Dharma teachings in the past were very challenging in the Tibetan regions. When I first came to Larung Gar, the Dharma hall where I listened to my guru’s teachings was quite shabby, but it still sheltered us from the rain and wind. However, for nearly ten years, when my Dharma peers and I gave teachings or received oral transmissions, we were out in the open, exposed to scorching sun and fierce storms.

One winter day, in an outdoor yard, I tutored seventy to eighty Tibetan lamas on *Commentary on Valid Cognition (Pramāṇavarttika)*, which Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had just taught us. It often snowed heavily, and the ground we sat on was frozen solid, but we all endured the hardships for the sake of pursuing the Dharma.

Unlike some of you, who bring cushions to our present Dharma hall with

¹⁶⁴ Mipham’s *Beacon of Certainty: Illuminating the View of Dzogchen*, translated by John Whitney Pettit, Wisdom Publishing, 1999.

better conditions, we didn't have any cushions back then; we sat directly on the frozen ground. We also didn't have cloaks, so we were covered in snow and literally became snowmen. Sometimes a sudden gale would blow, sweeping away the pages of our scripture texts, and we had to chase after them. Such incidents were common back then.

Nevertheless, all of us persevered. Whenever we thought of past eminent masters' austerity and the sacrifices they made in pursuit of the Dharma, we would feel a sense of contentment about our own experience.

By comparison, some Buddhists complain, "It is too tiring to walk to attend the teachings!" or "It is so challenging to sit on a concrete floor!" Alas! They are a bit too picky.

Please don't get discouraged when a teaching lasts too long, moaning, "Why are you talking so much? Please dismiss the class and let us go!"

People who think this way may lack merit. In fact, the longer the teachings, the better. However, many people don't think like this. If the master teaches well, they feel time passes quickly, but if the master appears to give lengthy teachings, they start to complain. Regardless, what the master teaches is Dharma, and Dharma is so rare and precious that, no matter how long the teachings are, you shouldn't get tired.

Compared to their predecessors, today's Dharma masters don't teach as much, so Dharma students have less access to teachings.

Master Chengguan (738–839)¹⁶⁵, or Ching-liang, taught the eighty-volume *Flower Ornament Sutra* fifty times in his life, and his teaching lasted eight hours per day. In comparison, some Dharma teachers now teach only one or two hours a day, and they feel tired. As you can see, there is a great difference in people's mental strength.

Master Daoxuan (737–838 or 738–839) taught *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* (*Four Part Vinaya*) more than twenty times.

¹⁶⁵ Chengguan (or Ching-liang) (738–839) was an important representative of the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism, under whom the school gained great influence. Chengguan lived through the reigns of nine emperors and was an honored teacher to seven emperors, starting with Xuanzong until Wenzong. *The General Survey of Longxing's Chronology*, chronicled during the Southern Song, and *A Brief Account of the Five Patriarchs of Fajiezong of Qing* recorded a difference of one year in Chengguan's birth year (737–838 CE or 738–839 CE), but both documented that he lived to 102.

In the history of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Tsongkhapa excelled at Dharma teachings. Once he was by a fire with disciples, talking about the stories of eminent masters in the Tibetan Plateau and India. Lama Tsongkhapa said, “In the past, the Tibetan master who taught the most in the same period was Katok Dampa Deshek (1122–1192):¹⁶⁶ during one Dharma assembly, he could teach eleven different texts in a single day.” Then the disciples earnestly requested Lama Tsongkhapa to do the same thing: teach eleven texts in one Dharma assembly. Persuaded by their sincerity, Lama Tsongkhapa replied, “Maybe I can if I try a bit harder.”

Lama Tsongkhapa then entered a twenty-day retreat, reviewing sutras and shastras. When the retreat was over, he announced that he would teach fifteen different texts. Hearing this, the audience was very happy and came from all over the Tibetan region to join the Dharma assembly. As promised, Lama Tsongkhapa taught fifteen texts every day and never skipped one. (Back then, the Dharma students were also very persevering! Imagine how you would have felt if you were listening to fifteen teachings every day!) Two short texts were finished earlier, so Lama Tsongkhapa replaced them with another two texts, bringing the total to seventeen shastras taught during the Dharma assembly. Later, in another Dharma assembly, Lama Tsongkhapa taught twenty-one shastras.

Many masters in Tibetan Buddhism were truly remarkable in teaching the Dharma. Back then, those Dharma students were not like some of us. Some lay practitioners in the Han area recently spent three hours on a Sunday afternoon hearing the Dharma, and they whined, “Ah! My butt really hurts!” “My legs feel like soft jelly!” or “My legs are so stiff and hard!”

Well, I am not sure how you define legs as soft or hard. The flesh on the feet is soft, and the bones inside are hard—the feet are simply as they are. I never understand why the feet become soft or hard during a Dharma teaching!

If the householders were asked to watch a three-hour soap opera instead, I wonder whether they would feel tired at all. They might want to keep watching, eyes wide open. Deeply engrossed in the storyline, they can even skip meals, drinks, and bathroom breaks. They really “work” hard on this!

¹⁶⁶ Katok Dampa Deshek (Tib. ཀའ་ཐོག་པ་དཔལ་འདེ་གཤེགས་, Wyl. kaHthogpa dam pa bdegshogs) (1122–1192) is the founder of Katok Monastery. His eldest brother was Phagmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo, one of the main students of Gampopa. Dampa Deshek’s teachers included Phagmodrupa, the Sakya patriarch Sonam Tsemo, Dzamton Drowe Gonpo, a disciple of Zur Shakya Senge, and the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa. He founded Katok in the earth rabbit year, 1159. His extant writings include commentaries on the Sutra Gathering All Intentions (Tib. Dupa Do). (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Today's people are like this: they spend as much time as possible on insignificant things. It is just like a young kid who can spend hours playing outside, but if you ask him to do homework or read books, even just for one hour, he complains, "I cannot do it anymore! Can I go outside a bit?" Similarly, ordinary people start to have all sorts of issues when they begin doing something meaningful, including listening to teachings or practicing the Dharma.

So please persevere with the Dharma, uphold faith and devotion, and refrain from feeling tired of listening to teachings. You spend one out of twenty-four hours a day listening to the Dharma, and you may do other things during the rest of the twenty-three hours. Many householders living in the city only spend three hours per week attending a Dharma class in an afternoon. Given the many hours you have in a whole week, spending three hours on the Dharma is not too much. Please stop complaining by saying, "I've listened for too long; now I cannot straighten my back!" Alas! Does it mean that listening to teachings damages your spine?

Of course, if the teaching goes on for too long, and you become impatient and really don't want to continue, you can always follow Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang's advice:

Regarding getting discouraged when listening to the teachings, if you feel hungry and thirsty during a teaching that goes on for too long or have to put up with discomfort from the sun and rain, and so forth, there is a risk that you will want to leave the Dharma and the teacher. So, before you accumulate the bad karma of giving up the Dharma, you should pray that you will meet the teacher and receive teachings again, and then leave the assembly.¹⁶⁷

This piece of advice is indeed a pith instruction. Listening to teachings is not something imposed by others; it is for our own liberation, so the act of listening embodies great meaning. It is understandable if a householder doesn't grasp this, but as a monastic member, since you've chosen the path and forsaken all worldly things, you should be eager to listen to teachings.

Many householders living in the city choose to study together. This is admirable. They are like kids without parents around; they gather together and say, "We should study hard and work on our homework!" When parents are around,

¹⁶⁷ *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004.

it is good for kids to do their schoolwork under supervision; when parents are not around, it is admirable that children study on their own, without being pushed. Those are truly great kids.

In fact, ordinary beings are just like kids; without the guru's guidance, they surely won't do anything meaningful on their own. That being said, many Buddhists are already doing very well. I hope that they will keep up the good work and won't feel "that's enough" after listening to teachings once or twice. To succeed in worldly things, it's not enough to do it once or twice, let alone in your Dharma practice. Therefore, you must always reinforce and devote yourself to your Dharma study and practice.

If you are discouraged, please do not give up on the teaching; instead, you should remind yourself: "Now that I have the freedoms and advantages of human life, have not been reborn in a lower realm as a hell being, a hungry ghost, or an animal, and have met a qualified spiritual teacher to hear their profound teachings, this is the fruit of merits accumulated over countless kalpas. I must appreciate the opportunity as much as possible!"

What are the qualifications of an "authentic teacher"? There are many characteristics involved, but in a nutshell, the Gelugpa lineage considers the most essential characteristic as "renouncing this life"; for Kadampas, it is "upholding pure precepts" for both Sutrayana and Vajrayana masters; and for Nyingmapas, it is "having bodhicitta," as advocated by lineage masters such as Patrul Rinpoche.

In *The Great Chariot: A Treatise on the Great Perfection*, Longchenpa particularly says that a vajra guru must have eight characteristics, such as being well-versed in tantras, having perfected the mantra practice, having signs of approach and accomplishment, and so on. Moreover, Longchenpa adopted his guru Rigdzin Kumaradza's viewpoint and added one more characteristic—having pure lineage transmission.

Of course, it is hard in the degenerate age to find a teacher with all the above-mentioned characteristics. Therefore, as long as the teacher is well-versed and compassionate, they can be considered a qualified teacher. It is very fortunate to follow such a teacher.

I often think, "I am so fortunate to have met Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche in this short life! It is really the fruit of merits accumulated over tens of millions of kalpas."

Many practitioners go astray. Due to their lack of wisdom, they are complacent

when encountering a charlatan teacher and proudly boast about their “luck” in finding a teacher. They don’t realize that some of these charlatans are simply heretics.

Anything can happen in this degenerate age. Therefore, it is so very precious for us to have received the profound teachings that perfectly integrate Sutrayana and Vajrayana from Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, who is a great enlightened master comparable to the Buddha and who carries the clear, pure, and unstained lineage.

We shouldn’t have even the slightest doubt about this. It is truly a blessing that we have met Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s teachings in this chaotic era. This is a great merit in itself, and we should feel so blissful!

Some lay practitioners know well that it is due to especially auspicious causes and conditions that we have this great and rare opportunity to listen to teachings and practice at the same time.

Yesterday, I met a Dharma practitioner who used to stay in monasteries that either mainly practice Takuhatsu—an ascetic practice—or that focus on recitations. This practitioner later came to Larung Gar and realized that it is hard to practice the Dharma without having heard the teachings.

According to him, when practicing Takuhatsu, it is wholesome to follow the disciplines, such as eating once a day before noon; after all, upholding pure precepts is the foundation of all merits. However, even when his behavior was impeccable, he remained entangled by his defilements.

Then he went to a monastery that focuses on recitations. Since there were few opportunities for hearing and contemplation, many teachings remained unclear to him. Every day, he simply sat there, reciting mantras. As a result, he remained entangled, and his afflictions persisted.

Later, he came to Larung Gar and had the opportunity to study the Dharma thoroughly and to practice adequately. I am not trying to praise Larung Gar and belittle other monasteries, but after following Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche for years, many of us learned how to study Buddhism properly.

First, we must find a qualified teacher who has mastered the entire meaning of Sutrayana and Vajrayana. Then we follow a sequential order of practice, starting from hearing and contemplation, and then advancing to meditation. Meanwhile, we uphold precepts, which play a fundamental role in our practice. By doing all of these, we will perfect our Dharma practice. It is not just a random happenstance

that we encounter such supreme Dharma in this life. As stated in the Mahayana texts, such as *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*, the reason we can listen to the profound Dharma now is due to the merit accumulated over innumerable kalpas.

Some people think, “It is totally by chance that I took my ordination. I had a fight with my family, which made me become a monk,” or “I study Buddhism because of the influence of my partner or my friend,” or “I came to Larung Gar for no particular reason.” Actually, the reasons they mentioned are just secondary causes. The substantial causes are that they established an affinity with Mahayana Buddhism in previous lives and accomplished virtuous deeds in the presence of innumerable gurus and buddhas.

When you listen to my teachings on *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*, you will learn that just to hear teachings and to hold the texts in your hands, you need causes and conditions from previous lives. Otherwise, you may not hear even if you listen, you may not hold even if you reach out, and you may not see even if you look. This is the law of karma, which was taught by the Buddha himself, not fabricated by our conceptual minds.

It is indeed very rare to hear the Dharma. As stated in *The Sutra of the Buddha Speaking of the Unprecedented Causes and Conditions (Adbhutadharmaparyaya)*:

It is hard to encounter the Kalpa where buddhas are born;
It is hard to hear the Dharma teachings;
It is hard to retain one’s life;
It is hard to succeed in the path.

Being able to hear such profound teachings now is truly like having a meal once every hundred hours—it is a rare and joyful opportunity that comes once in a thousand years. Therefore, one should listen with the utmost diligence and joy.

Each of us has a different affinity with the Dharma. Some people, such as the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, spend their whole life studying the Dharma. According to his biography, from when he was five or six years old until his parinirvana in his 70s, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche never departed from the Dharma, not even during the decade of upheaval amid the Cultural Revolution. In comparison, how many teachings have you attended in this life? Each of you can reflect on this.

As for me, now I am in my 40s.¹⁶⁸ Although I have had the great merit of

¹⁶⁸ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche gave this teaching in the 2000s.

following my peerless guru, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, for over twenty years, it is hard to say what I will become in the future. I spent most of my youth herding yaks and attending schools, so I hadn't focused much on the Dharma before my ordination. I've heard teachings given by my guru, many of which were both my first and last time hearing them. Many of you might have had the same experience, so whenever you can listen to teachings, please do appreciate the opportunity as much as you can.

When some people follow a teacher, they prefer to choose someone famous. It is fine with them even if the teacher has no great qualities. This is not right. You should first examine the teacher and follow them if they are qualified. After following the teacher, you should have great faith in the teacher and in the Dharma, and you should refrain from examining the teacher with your conceptual mind. Specifically, you should act according to the Dharma and listen to the teacher's teachings with great respect.

It is imperative that you endure all hardships and difficulties and listen to the precious Dharma with great joy. Some people encounter a lot of pressure and have to face many situations when listening to teachings. Make sure you practice patience and perseverance. Most importantly, you should have joy toward the Dharma.

As said in *The Prajnaparamita Sutras*, a person's state of mind is very important. When a person is very interested in something, they will joyfully travel even hundreds of yojanas¹⁶⁹ to get it. But when they have no interest, even if it is within earshot, they will find the journey exhausting.

When you are motivated by joy, even if asked to destroy Mount Sumeru, you will feel the task is possible because Mount Sumeru is a conditioned phenomenon, and conditioned phenomena can be destroyed. With such diligence and perseverance, it won't take too long for you to attain supreme enlightenment, as the Buddha did. Therefore, when discussing diligence, *The Prajnaparamita Sutras* especially emphasize the importance of mental strength.

Indeed, when we genuinely want to see a friend, even if they live far away, we won't mind walking there if time permits, and we won't feel too tired. Whereas

¹⁶⁹ Yojana (Skt.; Tib. རྟོག་ཆེན་, paktse, Wyl. dpag tshad) — a measure of length used in the traditional teachings. In the Abhidharma teachings, one yojana is equivalent to sixteen thousand cubits (approx. 7.4 kilometers). In the Kalacakra tantra, one yojana is equivalent to thirty-two thousand cubits (approx. 14.8 kilometers). (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

when we must see a foe or someone we dislike, we become weary, even if they live nearby.

The power of the mind is incredible, so whichever texts you are listening to, make sure you have joy about the Dharma and think, “Listening to teachings brings great merit; now that I have this supreme and precious opportunity, I shall listen to the teachings by all means.”

You shouldn’t be like some Dharma students who always “bargain” with the person in charge of the group study, asking, “Can I skip today’s study? My friend is sick” or “Can I not attend the teaching today? I don’t feel very well?” or “May I not come today, because my work is a bit overwhelming?” or “May I take a leave of absence, because my mother is not feeling well?” or “May I skip today’s teaching? I will go sightseeing with friends.”

These are not necessarily legitimate reasons. If you prioritize Dharma teachings, you won’t be absent at all.

Once in Beijing, I met a civil servant who told me, “My job as a government worker can sometimes be a challenge to my practice. There are many strict rules at work. Nevertheless, since I truly want to study the Dharma, I can navigate around these challenges. For example, I sometimes tell white lies if necessary. In any case, since I started to join the group studies, I’ve never skipped a single Dharma class.”

It is the same for me. I give teachings every day. If I hadn’t spared time for teaching, then I would have been busy doing something else. Our conceptual thoughts arise unceasingly: today is this thing, and tomorrow that thing. In the end, I couldn’t have completed any teaching.

Therefore, I try to rank all my tasks and give top priority to my teaching. Thus, except on very rare occasions, I hardly ever skip teachings. By doing so, I always have time to give Dharma teachings.

This principle also applies to your listening to the Dharma. If you consider it the most important thing in your life, then certainly you can spare time for it. Even if you are very sick and have to take intravenous therapy, you can bring the infusion bottle to class so you can listen to teachings while receiving treatment. It can be an easy decision to make.

Each of you should boost your mental strength. Otherwise, if you consider listening to Dharma a pressure or a burden, you may not get much out of the Dharma, and your behavior may not be appropriate.

Therefore, don't get weary when listening to teachings; you should feel joyful instead. In my home monastery, there is a great master, Tulku Detsa, who always has indescribable joy toward the Dharma. I shared his stories with a few Dharma friends yesterday.

Tulku Detsa is a renowned practitioner in the region of Trango, or Luhuo.¹⁷⁰ Before I took my ordination, once I had the opportunity to meet him, I noticed he showed no interest in fame and wealth, and that the only thing he appreciated was listening to teachings.

Back then, the government's policy on religion was still very strict, so nobody dared to study the Dharma. If one person taught the Dharma to another, both would be imprisoned. Despite this, Tulku Detsa still managed to listen to teachings on vinaya from a geshe in a Gelugpa monastery. When he returned from the teachings, he would sometimes have visitors at his home. When the visitors spoke to him, he appeared absent-minded because his mind was focused on the teachings he had just received.

At that time, I didn't appreciate this precious quality in Tulku Detsa. I thought all practitioners were like him. However, as I meet more and more people, I admire his courage and devotion more and more.

Imagine if we were living during the turbulent years Tulku Detsa experienced; could we have had the courage to pursue the Dharma like he did? I am afraid not. Even if we had listened to the teachings, we might not have listened with joy.

To summarize, make sure you listen with joy. From tomorrow, I hope everyone will joyfully listen to teachings and feel great gratitude toward the teacher and the teaching. Otherwise, some people may think, "Ah! The Dharma teacher is so annoying! Listening to teachings is so challenging! How comfortable it is to stay home sleeping. This is the most pleasant thing in life, but I cannot fulfill this wish! Can I give some money to others to recite mantras so I can receive blessings to remove all my unfavorable conditions and circumstances without having to attend Dharma classes?" Such thoughts are very scary. Make sure you don't have these thoughts and listen to teachings with joy!

¹⁷⁰ Trango, or Luhuo County, is a county of Sichuan Province, China. It is under the administration of the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.



Lesson 10

“Avoid remembering the words ... is therefore indispensable.” [page 15–16]

As we already know, having the right attitude and conduct is very important while listening to teachings. Otherwise, we receive very few benefits. Many people listen to teachings very often, yet the teachings fail to bring them significant effects and do not merge with their minds. Why? The reason pertains to their ways of listening to teachings.

The fact that we are listening to the Mahayana teachings in this life is the fruit of merits accumulated over millions of kalpas. We need to create causes and conditions to ensure the Dharma infiltrates our minds. If not, the benefits we receive from listening to teachings will be very limited.

Regarding the conduct to avoid while listening to teachings, we’ve already covered the three defects of the pot and the six stains. Today, we will cover the five wrong ways of remembering. During this study, we should examine whether we have wrong ways of remembering. If we have these faults, we should start to eliminate them. Otherwise, our listening will hardly bring any substantial effect in transforming the mind.

1.2.1.3. The Five Wrong Ways of Remembering

- ♦ Avoid remembering the words but forgetting the meaning,
- ♦ Or remembering the meaning but forgetting the words.
- ♦ Avoid remembering both but with no understanding,

- ♦ Remembering them out of order,
- ♦ Or remembering them incorrectly.¹⁷¹

1.2.1.3.1. Remembering the Words But Forgetting the Meaning

Some people pay excessive attention to elegant turns of phrase when listening to teachings. If the teaching is full of elegant words, beautiful phrases, idioms, quotes, or couplets, they really enjoy it. This happens often with Dharma students who have received more worldly higher education or who stand out in writing. The first thing that such students pay attention to while reading a scripture or a Dharma book is its wording and phrasing. If the writing is not to their taste, they simply put the book or scripture aside and don't even bother to analyze the meaning of the words.

What we most need is to understand the profound meaning of the Dharma. Studying the Dharma is not for training us to become writers. However elegant the writing might be, if it carries no substantial meaning, such writing brings little benefit to the readers. As we have already seen, the words of many past eminent masters are plain, yet the content goes straight to our hearts and benefits us greatly.

If we only focus on the wording and phrasing, commenting, "This verse rhymes well," or "That idiom fits well," while neglecting the profound meaning, then we are like a child gathering flowers. A child may not have any specific purpose in mind when gathering flowers. They may simply find the flowers pretty and pick them mindlessly. This analogy means we only go after external enjoyment and fail to attain internal inspiration.

Those who love poetry and rhetoric tend to have such problems, as do those who delve too deeply into Buddhist logic. This can also apply to some Buddhists who often engage in recitation practice yet don't really understand what they recite. These individuals recite classic sutras such as the *Diamond Sutra* or the names of buddhas such as Amitabha on a daily basis. They like to count how many times they've recited, yet make no attempt to analyze the profound meaning of the texts. While such recitation does bring merit, when asked the meaning of the sutra, they become evasive and say, "I am just an ordinary person, so understanding the sutra is beyond my capacity." Reciting the sutra without understanding the meaning pertains to "the wrong way of remembering the words but forgetting the meaning"

¹⁷¹ The translation of this verse is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 15.

that we are discussing here. As Master Hanshan (1546–1623)¹⁷² said in his *Song on Wasting in Vain*:

It is easier to recite than to understand the sutras;
Oral recitation without understanding is in vain.

Therefore, Dharma students need to be clear that a Buddhist text containing profound meanings doesn't necessarily have elegant wording and phrasing. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche explains that since his lineage guru didn't use exquisite words, he therefore faithfully records the original teaching and writes the explanatory text only using plain and clear language.

As stated in a Tibetan proverb, the word is just a tool of expression, and the essence of the Dharma is the meaning. Therefore, if the meaning can be expressed with plain words, what is the use of the most exquisite words?"

If we pay excessive attention to wording and phrasing, we may neglect digging into the meaning. The outcome is that the teaching hardly benefits us. Many academic researchers tend to linger on the verbal expression of profound topics such as emptiness or compassion, not knowing that the words are simply the finger that "points to the moon." It can be somewhat challenging for them to fully comprehend these topics solely through words. Thus, if they attach undue importance to the words (the finger), they cannot grasp the ultimate meaning of the words (the moon).

It is of little use to just know the verbal expression without grasping the true meaning. You do need words to express, yet you shouldn't give excessive importance to words. It is important to maintain balance in this regard.

1.2.1.3.2. Remembering the Meaning But Forgetting the Words

Some individuals prioritize meaning over words, considering the way in which the teachings are structured as mere verbal expression without blessing power. They believe that all states of realization are attained through the understanding of meaning; thus, they undervalue the words and focus heavily on the profound meaning, which is also unreasonable.

Some Dharma centers in the Tibetan regions place little importance on listening and contemplation, and they do not advocate learning sutras and shastras

¹⁷² Master Hanshan (1546–1623) was a leading Buddhist monk and poet of the Ming dynasty in China who widely propagated the teachings of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism.

by heart. Also, some Chan centers in the mainland areas of China disregard scripture studies, using the following renowned ideas from Chan Buddhism as their support: “Not relying on words and letters; a special transmission outside of the scriptures; directly pointing to the practitioner’s mind; seeing self-nature and attaining Buddhahood.” Therefore, they think that not relying on words denotes the highest spiritual state.

In fact, Chan Buddhism also relies on words. It is through verbal expression that we get to know those great Chan stories. Moreover, many Chan masters attained realization through reading the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Shurangama Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and others. Therefore, the word is an indispensable tool, as is stated in a Tibetan saying:

The old man of meaning has to rely on the cane of words;
without the cane of words, the old man of meaning can barely
walk.

It is through words that meaning is expressed. Except for a few highly achieved masters, such as Vimalamitra and lineage masters of Chan Buddhism, who used symbolic gestures to help disciples attain realization, most ordinary people can hardly grasp the profound meaning without the help of words.

Many people believe they share the same level of faculties as Master Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism, so they are reluctant to listen to and contemplate the Dharma, as well as to conduct long-term ascetic practice. They expect to attain sudden realization upon reading one sutra or hearing a poem by a Chan master. Well, this might be hard to achieve.

You may want to examine your own faculties: How many afflictive emotions arise from morning till night? How many unwholesome thoughts surface every day? How many wholesome thoughts arise? You must be very clear about the answers. Unless you listen to and contemplate the Dharma in a proper sequence, even if you think highly of yourself, I am afraid you are only deceiving yourself.

Without relying on words, it will be very hard to realize emptiness and obtain liberation. Nagarjuna says in *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*:

Without recourse to the conventional,
The ultimate cannot be shown.
Without the realization of the ultimate,

There is no gaining of nirvana.¹⁷³

The realization of the ultimate truth of emptiness relies on the conventional means. Without the conventional means, one cannot realize profound emptiness; thus, one cannot attain nirvana. In the same way, while studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you also have to rely on words to grasp the meaning.

This instruction is also very important for all of you. I hope none of you will fall into the extreme of solely focusing on the meaning or the words. For example, some people disregard the words and only value the meaning, saying, “What is the use of memorizing all the texts? It is useless to do so! You just need to examine the mind, which is enough for your practice.” I disagree. If you don’t even know the words, then how can you comprehend the meaning?

In contrast, some other people consider words essential. They are extremely fond of wording and phrasing in Buddhist texts yet pay no attention to the meaning. This goes to the other extreme.

Buddhists shouldn’t fall into either of the two extremes. We should connect words and meaning, which, in fact, pertain to hearing, contemplation, and meditation. Hearing and contemplating depend on words, and meditation counts on meaning. If you integrate hearing, contemplating, and meditating well, you will pay attention to both words and meaning. In his Dharma teachings, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often told his fourfold disciples to pay attention to both words and meaning.

When attending a Dharma class, some people just close their eyes and listen without reading the corresponding text. However smart they are, they may not remember the whole text, so I am not a big fan of such a manner of listening, no matter who the listener is.

Others are obsessed with words but not with their meaning. Words alone are not useful for your practice. It is only when you grasp the meaning that you can eradicate afflictions and attain realization. Therefore, both words and meaning are important. Remembering the words but forgetting the meaning is not good, and neither is remembering the meaning but forgetting the words.

1.2.1.3.3. Remembering Both But With No Understanding

¹⁷³ Nagarjuna, *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way (the Mulamadhyamakakarika)*, translated from Tibetan by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2008.

Now that you pay attention to both words and meaning, you should also get what's truly taught in sutras, shastras, and the teacher's instructions. If you remember the teaching without taking its meaning at a different level—the expedient meaning versus the ultimate meaning, the true intention versus the indirect intention—you may become confused about what the words are about. This confusion can steer you away from the true Dharma.

As you know, the Buddha gave 84,000 teachings according to beings' different faculties and dispositions. These teachings cover both the expedient meaning and the ultimate meaning. I've covered the difference between expedient meaning and ultimate meaning multiple times in the past, so I won't give an extensive explanation here.

Briefly speaking, ultimate meaning accords with the ultimate truth of reality, including the emptiness of self in the second turning of the Dharma wheel, and the luminous Buddha-nature of the third turning, both of which cannot be refuted by any reasoning or philosophy. However, to guide those who are not yet ready to accept the ultimate truth, the Buddha gave the expedient teachings, which include the instruction on the existence of "self."

Therefore, to really understand the Dharma, you have to study it in a holistic, comprehensive, and systematic manner. Otherwise, if you take a text out of context and consider it as the ultimate teaching, you may get confused by many seemingly contradictory statements in the Buddha's teachings.

Some Dharma teachers have said, "What accords with your mental events is the ultimate meaning, whereas what doesn't is the expedient." But according to this explanation, our craving for money and attachment to someone can be considered the ultimate meaning because such pursuits are consistent with what we want in the mind. Therefore, such an interpretation is inappropriate.

If you identify the expedient meaning and the ultimate meaning and distinguish the true intention from the hidden intention¹⁷⁴—you will understand the Dharma without error. For example, when you read a sutra in which the Buddha says that reciting such and such mantra or Buddha's name can accumulate this or that much merit, you should know that it carries certain hidden intentions.

For in-depth understanding, you may refer to the eighth chapter of Longche-

¹⁷⁴ Hidden intention can also be translated as "indirect intention," as in Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang's *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (translated by the Padmakara Translation Group).

pa's *The Great Chariot: A Commentary on Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, which covers the four true intentions and the four hidden intentions.¹⁷⁵ After understanding these you won't take all of the Buddha's teachings as the ultimate teaching just because "the Buddha says so." Of course, it is through long-term study that we are able to discern correctly. Many of you have had such insight after studying Mipham Rinpoche's *Sword of Wisdom*.

Therefore, it is very important to have a comprehensive understanding of the Dharma. Many Dharma teachers only understand the literal meaning of the teaching but have no idea whether it is the ultimate meaning or the expedient meaning. As a result, their understandings and interpretations are likely to deviate from the true meaning. An eminent master of the past said:

To deviate from the sutras by a single word
is to speak as Mara (the Evil One);
To interpret the scriptures literally
is to do injustice to the buddhas of the past, present, and future.

Without long-term hearing and contemplating the Dharma, even if you have been teaching nonstop, your interpretation may deviate far from the true meaning. Such teaching brings great fault.

For example, it is said in the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*:

Kill your father and mother,
The king is doubly cleaned.
If we conquer the country,
Together with its surroundings,
The people will be pure.

The literal meaning of the verse is: Your father and mother shall be killed, the king and his companions shall be killed, the people and their surroundings shall be destroyed, then you will attain liberation. However, this is not the real meaning that the Buddha wants to deliver.

Longchenpa comments in *The Great Chariot*:

¹⁷⁵ The four hidden intentions are: the hidden intention of making enter, the hidden intention of characteristics, the hidden intention of antidote, and the hidden intention of transformation. The four true intentions are: the intention of equality, the intention of another meaning, the intention of other times, and the intention of thoughts of individuals.

Here “father and mother” are the craving and grasping in samsaric formations. Alaya is a “king,” because it serves as the support for various habitual patterns. The bhramanistic view of a transitory collection as having a self, along with grasping asceticism as supreme for discipline training in virtue, are the two things “doubly cleaned,” through the two purities of nature and the incidental. The ‘country and surrounding regions’ represent the eight consciousnesses and the inner ayatanas¹⁷⁶ of grasping and fixation. ‘Conquering’ them means that when purified, they become enlightened.¹⁷⁷

Without understanding that the Dharma is presented either as the ultimate meaning or the expedient meaning, you may try to understand the Buddha’s teachings with your own conceptual thoughts. In this case, you won’t grasp the ultimate and profound meaning of the Dharma, leading to layers of misunderstanding.

Therefore, please do study the Dharma as a whole, making sure not to take the words too literally or to interpret the meaning carelessly.

1.2.1.3.4. Remembering Them Out of Order

Studying the Buddha’s teachings should follow a proper sequence. This is like the sequential steps of worldly education: elementary school, middle school, and university are for students with different levels of knowledge. Only after a student finishes the lower levels of education can that student move ahead to the higher education of the university level. It never works that a first grader takes lessons originally designed for third-year university students.

The rationale is similar for Buddhist education. Whatever you study, be it Sutrayana or Vajrayana, Tibetan Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism, you have to follow the proper sequence. If you study out of order, obviously you are not following the sequence properly.

Many people have not yet comprehended the Dharma properly and have little knowledge about the proper sequence, so they believe it is better to hear and

¹⁷⁶ Ayatana is a Buddhist term that has been translated as “sense base,” “sense-media,” or “sense sphere.” In Buddhism, there are six internal sense bases (Pali: *ajjhakkaniyatana*; also known as “organs,” “gates,” “doors,” “powers,” or “roots”) and six external sense bases (*bahiraniyatana* or “sense objects”; also known as *vishaya* or “domains”).

¹⁷⁷ Source: <https://www.wisdomlib.org/buddhism/book/the-great-chariot>

practice the highest teachings first. Some so-called Vajrayana practitioners find the preliminary practices of Ngöndro too demanding because it takes quite some time to complete the systematic study and practice. Therefore, the practitioners want to take a “shortcut.” For example, some students somehow manage to receive the highest empowerment from the guru, so they are eligible to listen to the highest teaching of the Great Perfection. By so doing, they hope to attain realization in no time.

However, this is unrealistic. It is like building a mansion over an ice-covered lake, a building that will collapse when the ice melts in the spring. Similarly, if you don’t build a solid foundation from the bottom, you can barely reach the higher states of your Dharma study and practice. As Aryadeva says in *Lamp that Integrates the Practices*:

To help beginning Buddhists eventually grasp the ultimate truth, the Buddha uses this skillful means, which is like the steps of a ladder.

The Buddha’s teachings progress step-by-step, like the rungs of a ladder. If you ignore the steps, wishing to reach the sky in one step, you are working against the proper sequence of the teachings.

Therefore, make sure you complete the preliminary practices before advancing to the main practice. Among the lay practitioners I know, many have been paying attention to the sequential order. They start from systematically studying and practicing the preliminaries, and once they build a solid foundation, they proceed to the main teaching and practice of Vajrayana.

Some others don’t respect the sequential order. They don’t want to delve into long-term study, and they think they have superior faculties. Therefore, they only talk about the highest states of realization described in the *Platform Sutra*, the *Shurangama Sutra*, or in Vajrayana teachings, such as “The nature of all phenomena is indivisible,” “Emptiness and luminosity,” and “The nature of the mind is luminous clarity.”

Such people make no great effort to practice, including doing prostrations. When they talk to Dharma peers, their conversation is like, “Have you received any of the four empowerments?”¹⁷⁸ “I must receive the transmission of this lineage,

¹⁷⁸ The four empowerments include the vase empowerment, the secret empowerment, the wisdom empowerment, and the precious word empowerment.

and that lineage too,” “I want to practice tummo,” and “I want to attain realization soon.” It may seem high-spirited to discuss matters related to high teachings; however, the practitioner’s actual faculties may not be very good. If a practitioner rarely reflects on the foundational teachings, such as the precious human life, and has no faith in the indescribable blessings of the Three Jewels, the higher states of realization won’t arise in their mind.

If you mix up the proper sequence, your practice in this life can hardly be successful. Let’s bring back the example of worldly education: If you skip elementary and middle school and go directly to university, unless you have very special intelligence, you may end up learning nothing. Nowadays, there are a few masters who advocate, “It’s okay to just remain in calm-abiding without studying the text” or “It’s okay to just meditate on primordial purity without engaging in systematic studies.” Such instruction is not right.

Nobody can stop you from practicing the Dharma, as it is said, “Dharma has no specific owner, so everyone can practice.” However, if you don’t build a solid foundation, whatever way you practice the Dharma will rarely resonate with your mind.

I hope everyone will respect and follow the proper sequence, especially those groups who are currently practicing Ngöndro collectively. Except for very few practitioners with superior faculties, every one of you must complete Ngöndro. Soon we will do a survey to see if anyone says they don’t need Ngöndro practice. If there is indeed such a person, I will invite them over for a test. Although I have not attained a high level of realization, I somehow know the basic teachings and practical experiences in Vajrayana and Chan Buddhism. If it is true that this person doesn’t need Ngöndro, I have no problem exempting them from Ngöndro practice, and I am also willing to request teachings from them (*the audience laughs*). If this person can indeed give pointing-out instructions, we won’t feel at all jealous of them. Instead, we are happy to ask them to bestow us empowerment, grant us blessings, and also share their state of realization with us (*the audience laughs*).

However, if the person is just blatantly proud—thinking they have greater qualities than they actually possess—and has in fact attained no realization, then that person should practice in the proper sequence if they want to be free from samsara. I have heard several Dharma students boast about their state of practice, saying neither Ngöndro nor Dharma study is necessary for them. In this case, I’d like to test them in several ways, but dare they come to see me? Maybe they

will come. After all, their state of realization is already very high, so they won't be troubled with the choice to come (*the audience laughs*).

At this time, we have so many people across the world participating in the group Ngöndro practice, including some public officials and my school classmates. The merit accumulated through joining this large-scale collective practice must be substantial. Therefore, it is a great pity if, out of pride, you miss such a great opportunity.

In short, whatever you are doing, be it hearing, teaching, or practicing the Dharma, make sure it follows the proper sequence; otherwise, you may encounter many difficulties and conflicts in your Dharma study and practice. For example, if you have not internalized the basic teachings on “the preciousness of human life” or “the impermanence of life,” you will be happily wasting precious time on worldly pursuits every single day. Can higher states of realization then arise in your mind? I am afraid not.

Great masters and practitioners of the past all followed a sequential order. Whenever and wherever a qualified teacher was teaching Ngöndro, they would manage to attend the teachings and complete the preliminaries, even if they had to endure great hardships. Generally speaking, the higher a practitioner's state of realization, the less likely they are to despise the foundational practices. Such a practitioner will place great importance on the foundational practices, including “the preciousness of human life,” “the law of karma,” and so on.

In contrast, some practitioners without any state of realization tend to look down on those foundational practices. They think they are already great practitioners. This is just self-deceiving. It would have been better if they hadn't studied the Dharma, for they wouldn't have had such a wrong attitude toward the foundational practices. Therefore, I hope you refrain from being arrogant and that your practice follows the proper sequence.

1.2.1.3.5. Remembering the Teachings Incorrectly

The Buddha's teachings are errorless and pure, but some people fail to understand them correctly due to their lack of hearing, reflection, and wisdom. For example, it is taught in Chan Buddhism and the Middle Way Schools that all phenomena are empty. Upon hearing this, a person may misunderstand the true meaning of emptiness, thinking it to be nothingness. As a result, they may start to reject the law of karma, refuse to pray to the Three Jewels, refrain from virtuous

deeds, and eventually allow endless wrong ideas to proliferate in their mind. This will spoil the person's mind and debase the teaching.

There are many such so-called Buddhists. After sampling a little bit of teachings on emptiness, they think everything is complete nothingness, so they start to do whatever they want without scruple, and eventually commit various wrongdoings. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once told us a story in class:

An old man received a little teaching on emptiness, and he felt everything didn't exist. So he butchered a goat. During the slaughter, he was talking to the goat, "You, the goat being killed, don't exist, the 'I' who is killing you doesn't exist, either. So today I am going to kill you." He was even chanting the mantra of Avalokiteshvara at the same time. Alas!

Reflecting on emptiness, slaughtering the goat, and reciting the mantra, all at the same time! The old man's behaviors were very contradictory. Maybe he was scared of a bad rebirth, so he chanted the mantra while killing. This case shows that the old man remembered the teachings incorrectly.

Dharma teachers and tutors in the audience, please make sure that when you give teachings, you refer to the commentaries from eminent masters to ensure your understanding is correct. Otherwise, if you only interpret the words literally without thoroughly understanding the meaning, you may teach wrongly without realizing it. Such teaching will mislead listeners.

It is said in the *Udanavarga*:¹⁷⁹

The foolish recite a thousand chapters, but they can't understand
even one verse;

The wise understand one verse, then they can grasp a hundred
meanings.

Although a foolish person has read a thousand chapters of Buddhist scriptures, they don't understand even one verse. In contrast, a wise man understands the meaning of one verse; he can draw inferences from this one verse and grasp a hundred other meanings. More specifically, even if the wise man only understands one verse in a text of advice or one truth of life, such as "everything is impermanent" or "all tainted things are suffering," his life direction is already all set. The difference

¹⁷⁹ The *Udanavarga* is an early Buddhist collection of topically organized chapters of aphoristic verses attributed to the Buddha and his disciples.

between the foolish and the wise doesn't depend on eloquence or social contribution; the key is whether the Dharma has brought positive changes to their own life and eradicated their own afflictions.

There are many instances where the Dharma has been interpreted in the wrong way. Some Dharma students think they've understood the meanings of a scripture, but their understanding is actually a misunderstanding. Therefore, when listening to students' presentations, Dharma teachers have to check whether their understanding is right or wrong.

Many people, including a few Dharma teachers, have not overcome their worldly habitual tendencies, so they still equate the Buddha's teachings with worldly knowledge. Some Dharma teachers believe they are teaching the Dharma, yet what they teach is not even close to the teachings of Buddhism. Some other teachers think they've grasped the secret meaning of the Buddha and that they teach fairly well. However, their teachings are not really the Dharma. Therefore, it is very important to avoid "remembering the teachings incorrectly."

To summarize, you should avoid remembering the words but forgetting the meaning or remembering the meaning but forgetting the words. You should also avoid remembering both but with no understanding, remembering them out of order, or remembering them incorrectly. It is very important to avoid these five wrong ways of remembering.

Whatever text you are studying, make sure you first adjust your attitude and conduct. By doing so, you will be able to grasp the meaning. Therefore, before proceeding to the main text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* about all the preliminary practices, if you can follow Patrul Rinpoche's advice on how to listen to teachings, it can be of great help to your own study, as well as to the teachings you may deliver in the future.

Just casually listening to teachings is not enough. You have to study the Dharma comprehensively and consistently in the long run. Make sure to remember everything—the words, the meaning, and the order of the teachings—properly and without any mistakes.

When encountering difficult or lengthy teachings, such as *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, or the last few chapters of *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, please don't give up just because you can hardly understand the text. Some time ago, while studying the ninth chapter—

The Wisdom Chapter—of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, many lay Dharma students “surrendered.” They were doing fairly well when studying chapters one to eight, but the ninth chapter defeated them.

Well, you shouldn’t surrender so easily. Even when you study worldly knowledge, you shouldn’t give in too soon, let alone Dharma study that requires more perseverance. If Dharma students encounter a difficult teaching that they don’t understand today, then they should persist in studying it tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, until they can fully understand it.

Some Khenpos at Larung Gar are truly inspiring. In the course of their studying and practicing the Dharma, they persist in finding answers to their questions. Sometimes the questions remain unsolved for a long while, but they keep on checking scriptures and consulting teachers until they find the answers.

Such an attitude is indispensable for our study of the Dharma. We shouldn’t give up after a few difficulties. *The Wisdom Chapter* is indeed hard to understand for a first-timer. When I first studied the chapter, I also found it challenging, but I persisted, and gradually I started to grasp the meaning of the chapter.

Meanwhile, when encountering texts that are short or relatively easy to understand, such as *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* or *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you shouldn’t undervalue these as just elementary. Instead, you should study well and internalize the teachings.

Some Buddhists find lengthy and difficult teachings hard to comprehend, so they don’t want to study them. Meanwhile, they find short and simple teachings too easy, so they don’t bother to study them. When encountering short and simple teachings, they complain, “I already went through *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, so it is not necessary for me to study it,” or “I’ve memorized *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, so I don’t want to study it again!”

Some texts are relatively easy to understand, but it is not that easy to apply the teachings to our practice. Practitioners should remember and internalize those teachings in both this life and many lives yet to come. If you want to study neither the fundamental nor the advanced teachings, then you will end up receiving no teachings at all.

When teaching *The Great Perfection of Manjushri*, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said:

The monk¹⁸⁰ is not able to practice the lengthy and advanced teachings;
 The monk doesn't want to practice the short and fundamental teachings;
 Upon his death, the monk hasn't practiced anything!

Such behavior is common among many people. Therefore, whether the teaching is lengthy or short, difficult or simple, you should appreciate them all as precious nectar. Whoever is teaching the Dharma, you should listen attentively. Even a great master like Patrul Rinpoche listened to teachings on the preliminary practices more than twenty times. Those of us with very ordinary faculties may have to listen to the teachings fifty or sixty times before understanding them.

Many people tend to make this mistake: they prefer to attend teachings they've never heard before, while being reluctant to hear teachings they've heard before. This is not right. In the past, many eminent masters vowed to study *The Way of the Bodhisattva* or *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* one hundred times in this lifetime. Therefore, they happily join teachings no matter who is giving them. You should adopt this attitude as well. If this is your mindset, you will receive benefits from whichever teaching you attend, regardless of who is teaching it. Otherwise, you may encounter difficulties in studying and practicing the Dharma. So, never become weary of listening to teachings!

In short, when listening to the teaching, we should accurately remember both words and meaning in the right order and with everything properly linked together.

¹⁸⁰ It corresponds to the Tibetan word རབ་རྩུང་ (Rabjung), an abbreviation of the Tibetan rabtu jungwa (Wyl: rab tu byung ba), literally "one who goes forth." This is a preliminary to ordination, when someone takes the five root vows of not killing, not lying, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, and not becoming intoxicated, and the three renunciate vows of committing to leave behind lay clothes and signs, to wear the robes of an ordained person and shave the head, and to follow the teachings of the Buddha.



Lesson 11

“The conduct to be adopted ... instructions of our teacher into practice.” [page 16–17]

The Words of My Perfect Teacher has two parts: the proper way to listen to the teaching and the teaching itself. The first part covers the right attitude and right conduct. We’ve finished studying the part on the right attitude. Now we are studying right conduct, which includes the conduct of the body, speech, and mind.

Right conduct has two aspects: what to avoid and what to do. Conduct to avoid includes the three defects of the pot, the six stains, and the five wrong ways of remembering. While listening to teachings and practicing the Dharma, we must avoid all these wrong conducts; otherwise, our practice won’t be successful. Today, we start to learn “What to do”—the conduct to be adopted.

1.2.2. WHAT TO DO

The conduct to be adopted while listening to teachings is explained as the four metaphors, the six transcendent perfections, and other modes of conduct.

1.2.2.1. The Four Metaphors

While studying the Dharma, we should always keep in mind the four metaphors. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

Noble one, you should think of yourself as a sick person,

Of the Dharma as the miraculous medicine,
 Of your spiritual teacher as a skillful doctor,
 And of diligent practice as the way to cure the illness.

First, think of yourself as a critically ill patient, constrained by karma and defilements since beginningless time; the Dharma as the medicine, which can cure your diseases; the qualified teacher as a skillful doctor; and your diligent practice as the medical treatment.

In his *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, Longchenpa quotes scriptural evidence from the *Daśadharmasūtra* (*Discourse on Ten Dhammas*) to explain how a practitioner should think while studying the Dharma. In his *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, Longchenpa introduces the six metaphors¹⁸¹ when following a teacher, such as thinking of the teacher as a captain, a helmsman, a person in power, an escort, and more.

In *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Lama Tsongkhapa also introduces six metaphors,¹⁸² the first four of which are identical to those covered in the *Flower Ornament Sūtra*, and he adds the last two: “think of the tathagatas as excellent beings” and “wish that the teaching will endure for a long time” in the list.

¹⁸¹ Six conclusions can be shown to be reasonable by nature:

1. Given that you need to rely on doctors to cure you of ordinary diseases, it is entirely reasonable to rely on gurus to cure you of the disease of samsara.
2. Given that you need to rely on escorts to guide you through dangerous areas, it is entirely reasonable to rely on gurus to protect you in the after-death state.
3. Given that you need to rely on elders for good counsel, it is entirely reasonable to rely on gurus for counsel with far-reaching implications.
4. Given that you need to rely on more powerful people when you cannot do something alone, it is entirely reasonable to rely on gurus to alleviate negative circumstances.
5. Given that you need to rely on capable helmsmen when traveling by ship, it is entirely reasonable to rely on gurus when crossing the ocean of suffering.
6. Given that merchants need to rely on captains of oceangoing vessels, it is entirely reasonable to rely on gurus to ensure your attainment of enlightenment.

The excerpt is from: Lonchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, pg. 191–192.

¹⁸² 1. Think of yourself as a sick person; 2. Think of the instructor as a doctor; 3. Think of the instructor’s explications as medicine; 4. Think of earnest practice as the way to cure your disease; 5. Think of the Tathagatas as excellent beings. Develop respect by remembering the one who set forth the teaching, the Bhagavan [Buddha]; 6. Wish that the teaching will endure for a long time.

The excerpt is from: Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Vol. 1), translated by the Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, Snow Lion Publications, 2000, pg. 58–62.

More specifically, this is the meaning of the fifth thought—thinking of the tathagatas as excellent beings—in Lama Tsongkhapa’s teaching: Because during the degenerate age we don’t have the opportunity to see the Buddha in person, and because the Dharma is expounded by qualified teachers, seeing the teachers is no different from seeing the Buddha.

Here is the meaning of the sixth thought—thinking that the teaching will endure for a long time: the Dharma must be taught and received properly and accurately for it to be preserved in this world; Buddhists should not only learn and remember the Dharma without error, but also encourage others to do the same. Only in this way will the authentic Dharma survive and thrive.

It is very important to think in these ways when studying and practicing the Dharma. If you think of the teacher as a doctor or the teacher as the Buddha in accordance with the teachings in other scriptures, then the teachings will definitely bring you benefits and eliminate your “illness” of negative karmas and afflictions. Otherwise, if you think you exceed the teacher, that the Dharma is not very precious, that you don’t have the “illness” of karmas and afflictions, and that diligent practice is just a formality, you literally turn the four metaphors upside down. Then, even if the Buddha were right in front of you, his teachings would be of no use to you.

Therefore, when studying the Dharma, it is very important to have the right mindset. This is like a person studying worldly knowledge: they need to respect the teacher and appreciate the teaching; they should put themselves in a humble position and study diligently with a strong eagerness for knowledge. Such conduct is very basic for a worldly student. Otherwise, if the person disrespects the teacher and rejects the teaching, even if they are accepted by a top university, their mindstream won’t be changed by the knowledge they have received even after years of study. Therefore, if you truly want to merge eminent masters’ teachings with your mind, you have to establish the right mindset.

Specifically, we need to understand this: Since the beginningless time, we have been deeply trapped in the immense ocean of suffering in samsara; we are sick due to being tormented by the illness of the three poisons¹⁸³ and their fruit, the three kinds of suffering.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Three poisons: desire, anger, and ignorance.

¹⁸⁴ The three fruits of suffering: suffering of suffering, suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering.

All beings in the three realms¹⁸⁵ have the 84,000 different types of afflictions, including desire, anger, and ignorance, and these are the cause of beings' illness. Besides, they have also been tormented by the fruit of these afflictions—the three kinds of suffering. Some people believe they are fortunate enough to be exempted from these three sufferings. In fact, if you know the nature of samsara, you will know that however happy you seem to be now, you won't avoid suffering unless you attain realization, which is the only way to enjoy great bliss in both worldly and transcendental manners.

The so-called happiness in samsara carries the nature of suffering. However, people mistakenly believe that having the three poisons of desire, anger, and ignorance is totally normal and that it is precisely the lack of the three poisons that brings them suffering. For example, a young man wants to devote himself to the Dharma instead of getting married. People around him will consider him weird, gossiping that he has either physical or mental problems. These people don't know that they themselves are actually deranged, not the young man, because their own actions are driven by afflictions. As many eminent masters have said, the world we are living in is insane because our minds are wrapped in the darkness of ignorance, so the light of wisdom and compassion never shines.

Therefore, we must first realize that we are critically ill. For example, someone who has leprosy, tuberculosis, and more. To eradicate the physical pain and regain health, the patient will go everywhere for a good doctor with experience, knowledge, and empathy. The person will then follow the doctor's advice, take the prescribed medicine, and do all they can to get cured.

When I was in major hospitals in Shanghai, Beijing, or Chengdu, I noticed thousands of patients come and go. Some were young, some were old, some were children, and all of them were tormented by various illnesses. To get well, they go and visit the best doctor and then receive whatever treatment the doctor prescribes.

In the same way, we should cure ourselves of the diseases of karma, afflictions, and suffering by following a skillful doctor—our qualified teacher—by pleasing and serving the teacher in three ways,¹⁸⁶ by fully following the teacher's words,

¹⁸⁵ The three realms (Tib. kham sun) include the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm, which are all within the domain of samsara.

¹⁸⁶ In chapter six of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche says, "There are three ways to please the teacher and serve him. The best way is known as the offering of practice and consists of putting whatever he teaches into practice with determination, disregarding all hardship. The middling way is known as service with body and speech and involves

and by taking the medicine of the Dharma. Only in this way can we eradicate the disease of karma and suffering.

We should always vow to try our very best to follow the guru, serve and please the guru, and practice the Dharma throughout the rest of this life. Most teachers tame their disciples' minds through expounding the Sutrayana and Vajrayana teachings. There are also very few exceptional masters who tame disciples through different skillful means, like the ways Marpa tamed Milarepa as described in Milarepa's biography, and Tilopa tamed Naropa as recorded in Naropa's biography. In this scenario, the disciple must follow the guru with pure perception. As Patrul Rinpoche says, with pure perception, the disciple sees the guru as the Buddha and follows and serves the guru wholeheartedly; then the disciple can attain liberation and enlightenment very easily.

When following a guru, ordinary people tend to have various conceptual thoughts. But when the guru is indeed a great achieved master or a bodhisattva whose behaviors may be hard to understand, as long as the disciples take the guru's words seriously as teachings, they can still achieve their spiritual goals. The biography of the first Jetsun Dampa (Tenpei Gyaltzen, 1635–1723) records such a story:

When Jetsun Dampa began his pursuit of the Dharma, he lived a very frugal life and didn't have enough food to eat. To alleviate his poverty, he decided to do the Yellow Jambhala practice. So, he asked a coppersmith to cast a statue of Jambhala for him. When the statue was done, Jetsun Dampa carried it happily to his guru Ngawang Lobzang Choden (1642–1714), who was a very renowned master.

When Jetsun Dampa finally managed to see his guru, he put the statue in front of the guru, prostrated under his feet with reverence, and asked for consecration. Before Ngawang Lobzang Choden was able to consecrate the statue, his dog came over and peed directly on the statue. Seeing this, Jetsun Dampa felt the statue was tainted and the dependent arising was destroyed, so he was upset about the dog.

But Ngawang Lobzang Choden told him, "My dog is not an ordinary dog. You don't need me for consecration anymore. My dog has done it."

Feeling a bit concerned, Jetsun Dampa chose to nevertheless hold pure perception on this. He brought the statue back home, put it on his shrine table, and started

serving him and doing whatever he needs you to do, whether physically, verbally, or mentally. The lowest way is by material offerings, which means to please your teacher by giving him material goods, food, money, and so forth."

to practice diligently. Soon, his economic situation improved significantly. In fact, he became quite wealthy and eventually became a great master of his generation. According to historical records, Jetsun Dampa also served as the national master for the Kangxi Emperor. In his teachings, Jetsun Dampa often said, “Whatever the guru says is the vajra word, carrying extraordinary blessings and dependent origination.”

Therefore, if the guru is a great achieved master, their words carry hidden meaning and extraordinary connections. By following the guru’s teachings and practicing accordingly, the disciples will surely attain realization.

There are also some doctors of Chinese medicine or Tibetan medicine who give seemingly weird and useless prescriptions, which, in fact, really work. Of course, in the world of medicine, there are also charlatan doctors who barely know anything. Similarly, in the world of Buddhism, there are charlatan gurus whose deeds are not for the disciples’ liberation, but for their own worldly pursuits, such as fame and status. Therefore, make sure you remain wise and alert, so you can discern the difference between a qualified teacher and a charlatan. After examining the guru and being assured that they are a qualified teacher, you can rely on them like a patient relies on a great doctor. By doing so, you can eradicate the disease of afflictions.

On the other hand, following a teacher, even after many years, without putting the teaching into real practice is like rejecting your doctor’s prescriptions, which leaves no opportunity for the teacher to treat your illness. As Shantideva says,

What invalids in need of medicine

Ignored their doctor’s words and gained their health.¹⁸⁷

How can your disease be cured if you disobey your doctor? Similarly, when following the teacher, make sure to do what the teacher says. If the teacher instructs you to do a certain practice, simply do it. If you choose to do something else instead, your illness of the three poisons will never get cured. For example, if the teacher asks you to study the Middle Way, but you study Buddhist logic instead; or if the teacher asks you to practice ngöndro (preliminary practices), but you practice *tögal* (the main practice of direct crossing) instead; or if the teacher asks you to study the pith instructions on mind training, and you study the bardo teachings

¹⁸⁷ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

instead—it's like a doctor prescribing medication and you choosing to ignore it, opting for a different medicine on your own. This approach will hardly be effective.

Please reflect on today's teachings of the four metaphors and on how to follow a teacher. Compared to my previous teaching on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I am covering less content this time in each class. This slow-paced teaching also gives me the opportunity to read the text thoroughly again. I hope you will do the same and carefully contemplate the contents back and forth. Although the text seems simple, many profound pith instructions are embedded between the lines. If you are able to uncover these pith instructions and put them into practice, you will definitely receive great benefit from them. Therefore, we are not in a hurry studying the text. I will just take my time in my teaching. Sometimes I find myself a bit wordy and repetitive, but if I bring up important points again and again, this will help you understand and internalize the teachings.

I always believe *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* can bring significant changes to a person's lifelong practice. Many people have told me that *The Way of the Bodhisattva* has changed them a lot, but in my case, the effect of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* far exceeds that of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* in my own practice. Although I myself didn't study the text very well, which I feel a bit embarrassed about, I dare to announce that among all the texts I've studied in my life, my faith in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is among the strongest.

Although my teaching of the text is far from being perfect, I hope to successfully share with you my special connection with the text in my own words this time.

You should carefully contemplate the vajra words of Patrul Rinpoche back and forth, checking how you understand them. If you can carefully contemplate and apply the four metaphors you have learned today, not to mention other parts of the text, the overall direction of your lifetime practice will be more or less set.

Not taking the medicine of the Dharma, which means not putting the teachings into real practice, is comparable to having countless medications beside your bed but never taking them. This will never bring about a cure for your illness.

The Sutra of Persuading One to Generate Supreme Aspiration says:

I've taught you the supreme Dharma,
Yet you don't practice the Dharma,
It is like a patient who doesn't take medicine,

Even the Buddha cannot save him.

The Buddha has taught us the Dharma, but if we don't practice the Dharma, we will be like the patient who is very sick yet refuses the prescribed medicine. However good the doctor is, the patient cannot recover. Besides prescribing medication and offering treatment, the doctor has no other way to cure disease. Because the doctor is well-trained in medical science, they know why we get sick and how to treat our illness, so we must listen to the doctor.

Modern people tend to listen to the doctor if they are physically ill, but when they are mentally ill, few will listen to the guru. Many people like to make up their minds regarding Dharma practice. However, these people have not been swimming in the ocean of Dharma for long, so although they might know a little bit about Buddhist teachings, they are still far away from reaching the state of the guru. Therefore, we should avoid being judgmental toward the guru and their teachings; neither should we “bargain” with the guru.

As long as the guru is a qualified teacher, they will definitely care about the success of your practice. Therefore, please practice according to the guru's advice. In doing so, you will increase your chances of success in practice.

In contrast, if you only follow your own gut feelings or conceptual thoughts, thinking, “The guru is not right; I think I'd better practice something else,” it means you have already established the path of practice for yourself. Then why bother following the guru? This is like a patient who receives a prescription from the doctor but thinks, “This is not right; I'd better take another medicine.” Why then bother going to the doctor?

The Buddhist center where we study and practice the Dharma is like a hospital. For example, Larung Gar is like a big hospital, where Dharma doctors, nurses, and medical specialists are treating patients with mental issues coming from everywhere around the country and the world. It's better if the patients take the Dharma prescriptions and medicines.

I don't think all the Dharma teachers at Larung Gar are highly accomplished practitioners who have attained certain bhumis, or stages, of the bodhisattva path. But at least the Dharma teachers have certain qualifications and have grasped the basics of the Buddha's teachings. This is similar to doctors in a hospital, who must have medical degrees or certificates to treat patients. In today's world, Buddhist centers greatly need Dharma teachers who are like good doctors.

There are tens of thousands of people with mental health issues living in a city, more than the number of people with physical diseases. But how many qualified teachers, the “doctors,” are there in the city who can provide treatment for mental illness? I am sure you also know the answer is “not too many.” Therefore, once you encounter a good Dharma “doctor,” you should follow his “prescription” for a long time. A Kadampa master says, “Beings in the three realms are patients with chronic diseases, so just taking the medicine once or twice is barely effective for treatment.”

Some people have very naive thoughts such as, “I’ve received the highest empowerment, and I’ve practiced for over a month, so why have I not attained realization, and why do I still have afflictions?” “I took my ordination three years ago, but why do I still have desires? Dear guru, does it mean my practice has gone wrong?”

Such thoughts are not right. Our afflictions are deeply rooted within us. Since beginningless time, we have been repeating and reinforcing our afflictions in samsara. Therefore, the time we have spent practicing the Dharma is in no way comparable to the time we have spent developing afflictions. Just like a longtime bedridden patient won’t fully recover immediately after receiving just one shot or taking one tablet.

When I was sick, my doctor told me, “Just receiving one shot is not enough. You have to receive injections three times a day, plus intravenous drips. Is that okay with you?” I trust my doctor. After all, my body won’t recover without receiving enough treatment. Similarly, when more and more Dharma “medicine” enters your mind, your mental health issues are more likely to be resolved.

In comparison, some people treat the Dharma as a panacea, hoping that after listening to teachings once or twice, their afflictions will be gone completely. Or they hope that after receiving an empowerment or blessings, they will attain realization in no time. They think when they enter the guru’s room as ordinary people, they will be transformed into first-bhumi bodhisattvas upon exiting the room.

However nice this would be, it is just daydreaming. Such things are unlikely to happen. Without consistently taking in the nectar of the Dharma over time, we are unlikely to attain liberation. We must frequently practice the teachings we have received. As Patrul Rinpoche says, “Without practice, what is the use of Dharma at the moment of our death?”

Nowadays, many people believe, “As long as I pray to my guru, asking him to

take care of me with his compassion, it's highly possible for me to attain liberation without practicing the Dharma. Dear guru, I give myself totally to you! When you go to the Blissful Pure Land, don't forget to take me with you. If not, you have no mercy on me."

This is as if they are signing a "contract" with the guru to make sure that when the guru goes to the realm of the Buddha Amitabha, the students will be taken along. Such people seem overly optimistic, saying, "My guru is a great enlightened master! He has promised me that I will definitely be reborn in the Pure Land. Even if I have committed many terrible deeds, there won't be any consequences because my guru is an extraordinary teacher!" They believe their teacher is omnipotent and that they are exempt from experiencing the karmic results, despite having accumulated many negative actions. They think the teacher, out of compassion, will toss them into a pure realm as easily as throwing a pebble.

Such a thought is not right. A qualified teacher does have compassion, but it is still hard for them to get you liberated simply out of their compassion. In the three-thousand-fold universe, the Buddha has the greatest wisdom, compassion, and power; the Buddha loves all beings as if each were his only child. Nevertheless, when the Buddha was in this world, there still existed many beings who didn't believe in Buddhism. Even though the Buddha had great compassion toward all of them, he couldn't toss them to the pure heavenly realms. Many things are not as simple as we think they are. The Buddha said:

The karmas of all beings cannot be washed away by water;
The sufferings of all beings cannot be eliminated directly by the
Buddha;
The wisdom of the Buddha cannot be transferred to the mind
of all beings;
Through expounding teachings of tranquility and suchness, the
Buddha liberates all beings.

Thus, other than offering teachings to sentient beings, the Buddha cannot literally lift them one by one to the heavenly realms.

The homage verse¹⁸⁸ in *The Ornament of Clear Realization* says that Prajna-

¹⁸⁸ The homage verse is: She is the one who, through the all-knowledge, guides the sravakas who search for peace to utter peace. She is the one who, through the knowledge of the path, makes those who promote the benefit of beings accomplish the welfare of the world. Being

paramita, the mother of the Buddha, guides the four noble ones (śravakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddhas), and the only purpose for the Buddha attaining enlightenment is to benefit all beings through turning the Dharma wheel.

The last chapter of *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, “*The Dharmakaya*”, states that, through teaching the Dharma, the Buddha establishes some in the support of the path, some on the path of accumulation, and some in the fruition. It may seem high-spirited to discuss things related to high teachings; however the practitioner’s actual faculties may not be very good. All three activities pertain to teaching the Dharma, so the only way the Buddha liberates sentient beings is through turning the Dharma wheel.

It is the same for the guru. It is good if you have trust and faith in the guru. After all, if a patient doesn’t respect and listen to a doctor, then whatever medicine the doctor prescribes will be of no use to the patient. But even if the patient has fervent trust in the doctor, just relying on the doctor’s compassion for recovery, without taking medicine or receiving injections, isn’t realistic. If the doctor happens to be a bad-tempered person, they may even throw you out, yelling, “What can I do if you don’t take the medicine? My only way to treat you is to prescribe the right medicine. The only way you can get well is by taking the medicine. Otherwise, it is of no use to stick with me all the time.”

However, some people may have too much “faith” in the guru, and they think, “My guru is always blessing me. I don’t need to take good care of my wallet. I am sure it won’t get lost since I am blessed by the guru!” Well, this might not be the case because the guru’s own wallet is often lost or stolen (*the audience laughs*). So, you’d better not expect the guru to give blessings on those things.

The guru is indeed full of compassion, but make sure you understand what exactly the guru’s compassion is. I often ponder this: Great masters such as Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche are really compassionate because they guide us ignorant beings into the truth of reality through Dharma and liberate us from the abyss of samsara, so their compassion is far greater than that of our parents. Our parents have been truly kind to us; they taught us how to walk, eat, and dress. But other than those

united with her, the sages proclaim this variety endowed with all aspects. I pay homage to this mother of the Buddha with his assemblies of śravakas and bodhisattvas.

This translation is from *Gone Beyond: The Prajnaparamita Sutras, The Ornament of Clear Realization, and Its Commentaries* in the Tibetan Kagyu Tradition, translated and introduced by Karl Brunnholzl, Snow Lion Publications, 2011.

daily living skills, they never taught us how to eliminate the long-lasting suffering of samsara. In contrast, the teacher takes us under their care with compassion, expounds profound teachings, tells us what to do and what not to do, and shows us the path to liberation taught by the Buddha. According to the Kadampa's instruction, that which accords with the Buddha's teaching is the authentic Dharma, and that which does not is spurious.

To examine whether a guru has compassion, one must check whether their teaching is consistent with the sutras and shastras. If not, then this guru might have their own personal secret agenda; if yes, this guru indeed has compassion, and there is no greater compassion than this.

Many disciples think that the compassion of a guru is other than their teaching the supreme Dharma. They think the guru is compassionate if they call them often, take them on a pilgrimage, or have dinner with them. This definition of a guru's compassion is wrong.

During the process of a disciple following a guru, if the guru never teaches the Dharma but instead sends the disciple to run errands every day, it is very hard for the disciple to attain realization unless the guru is a great achieved master like Marpa. In general, when a guru accepts a disciple, the guru should teach the Dharma to the disciple. It is not enough that the guru just calls the disciple, gives them some cash, or comforts them when they are in a bad mood.

As for the disciple, they should keep the guru's teachings in mind and always put them into practice. It is unrealistic to think that after giving teachings, the guru will supervise you every day, as a parent watches his child doing homework, to ensure you've remembered everything. A qualified teacher starts to give teachings when the teacher is a young adult or a middle-aged person. After finishing teaching the disciples who have an affinity with them, the teacher then goes to another realm or place, due to various reasons.

Many qualified teachers I've met in my life are like this. Some were reborn in a pure realm, and others went elsewhere. None of them stayed with us forever. It is just like when you finished elementary school, your elementary school teacher didn't follow you further, and when you finished high school, your high school teacher didn't accompany you to university. Except for a very few disciples with immense merits, most people don't have the opportunity to always be with their

teacher. Therefore, while you are still able to hear the guru's teachings, make sure you keep them in mind and always put them into practice.

It is up to us whether or not we take advantage of the teacher's compassion and actually embark on the path to liberation. As the old saying goes, "The master brings us in, and now the practice is up to ourselves."

The Buddha also told his disciples:

I have shown you the methods
That lead to liberation.
But you should know
That liberation depends upon yourself.

This is the Buddha's way of helping us: giving teachings such as the Four Noble Truths to his disciples as vast as the ocean. Good disciples follow the Buddha's instructions and eventually attain enlightenment. Bad disciples don't follow what the Buddha says; instead, they generate wrong views toward the Buddha and eventually fall into the three lower realms.

Now that we have the freedoms and advantages of human life, and we know what to do and what not to do,¹⁸⁹ our decision at this critical moment—where we have the freedom to choose—signifies a turning point that will determine our destiny, for better or worse, far into the future. It is of utmost importance that we choose between samsara and nirvana once and for all and put the teacher's instructions into real practice.

Now that we can listen to teachings, whether our future is bright or dark totally depends on ourselves. Some people are very wise in this respect. Yesterday, a Buddhist who is a college student studying abroad decided to forgo everything and become a nun at Larung Gar. Normally, a prospective monk or nun needs a four-month probationary period before officially taking ordination. But she was very determined to immediately take ordination, saying the turning point about whether she will have eternal liberation or eternal suffering is now because everything in life is meaningless except becoming a monastic. Her words made sense. Since she had forgone everything—family, career, and studies—it seemed

¹⁸⁹ It means we know the principle of cause and effect, the proper way of following a spiritual teacher, the defects of samsara, the importance of taking refuge, and the importance of generating bodhicitta.

she really meant it. Therefore, after careful consideration, I decided to exempt her from probation and give her ordination right away.

Each of us thinks differently; some can let go easily while others cannot. Regardless, you should all know that now is the most crucial moment. Now that you have a precious human life and have heard the Dharma, which are very rare causes and conditions, your future depends on yourself. If you conduct wholesome deeds, you will have a good rebirth,¹⁹⁰ or go to the Land of Great Bliss; if you conduct unwholesome deeds, you will have a bad rebirth¹⁹¹ and experience ceaseless suffering. After following a qualified teacher, you should completely follow their instructions and practice steadily. By doing so, you can discern the borderline between samsara and nirvana. This is very crucial.

When following a teacher, many Dharma students are like detectives: They “investigate” the Dharma teaching in this center today, and tomorrow they will move to another center; or they rely on this teacher today and that teacher tomorrow. In the end they follow too many teachers and eventually get so lost. What a pity!

After reflecting on my own experience from many years of study and practice, I suggest that you first find a qualified teacher with an altruistic mind and great compassion, and then follow that teacher wholeheartedly for a long time.

Following a teacher half-heartedly does you no good. For example, a Dharma student follows a teacher who tells them *The Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* is very good, so the student recites that sutra for a few days. But soon, the student finds another teacher who says the *Diamond Sutra* is supreme, so the student starts to recite that sutra instead. Due to a lack of good signs through reciting the sutras, the student then goes to the Tibetan Plateau and finds a third teacher there and practices Yamantaka¹⁹² for a few days. This student has sampled many different practices, switching from one teacher to another constantly, but in the end, the practice is in vain.

So, sutras, shastras, and tantras all say that before following a teacher, a disciple should examine them. After following a qualified teacher, it is better to follow them

¹⁹⁰ Being reborn as a god, an asura (demi-god), or a human.

¹⁹¹ Being reborn as a hell being, a hungry ghost, or an animal.

¹⁹² Yamantaka is a wrathful aspect of the Bodhisattva Manjushri, who assumes this form to vanquish Yama, the god of death. By defeating Yama, the cycle of rebirths (samsara) that prevents enlightenment is broken.

for as long as possible. When I was following Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, there were also other great masters around. I personally didn't have any negative views about those masters. It was just that I felt I had received enough teachings for my practice, and the key was to put all those teachings into real practice. So, I didn't choose to follow those other great masters.

If you always follow the teacher's instructions and practice accordingly, you won't fall into the lower realms. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* says:

Practicing the virtue in the long nights,
But falling into the lower realms,
And experiencing negative consequence—
There is no such a thing.

If you practice the authentic Dharma for a long time, it is impossible for you to fall into the three lower realms or experience negative karmic consequences. Of course, ordinary people's motivation for conducting wholesome deeds is relatively weak. But as long as you try your very best, you can still do something virtuous. For example, every day from morning until night, you occasionally generate unwholesome thoughts, deluded ideas, or negative emotions. But as long as you spend most of your time focused on hearing, contemplation, and meditation, and live your whole life in such a manner, your liberation will be guaranteed.

Some monastic members at Larung Gar have felt that they had bad thoughts arising every day. So they were concerned about whether they would be reborn in a lower realm. Well, you don't commit killing, stealing, or other wrongdoings every day. Instead, you are upholding precepts and reciting mantras every day. Since the law of karma never fails, definitely your practice will bring you liberation.

With the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, now you can practice the Dharma. Therefore, you should often make aspirations in your mind: "In this short life, I wish my faith will never regress. I vow not to slander the Dharma and not to do anything against the Dharma." The power of aspiration can be very strong.

Now that you have met the true Dharma and the qualified teacher, although you dare not say that you will definitely attain very high levels of realization, just spending your life as a true practitioner can already make you happy and peaceful.



Lesson 12

“Those who conduct village ceremonies... a milestone to the lower realms.” [page 17–18]

Each practitioner should place importance on the preliminary practices. Without sufficient and good practice of the preliminaries, it will be extremely challenging to make any progress on the main practice. The practice guidance is easy to read in words yet a bit hard to understand in meaning, so every one of us should practice in accordance with the state of our minds. Only when the preliminary practices are well accomplished will the sequence of our practice not fall into disorder. Moreover, preliminary practices are also the most effective and powerful way to eliminate afflictions.

In this degenerate age, many people don’t adhere to the prescribed sequential order and the instructions of their lineage masters. As a result, it is not uncommon for those people to encounter obstacles during their practice or have no spiritual experience arising in them, causing them to simply leave the path, lose faith in the Dharma and the teacher, or even generate wrong views toward Buddhism. It is not easy for us to embark on the path to liberation, so we must practice according to the pith instructions of lineage masters. This is extremely important.

Yesterday, we learned we should contemplate the four metaphors. More specifically, we should think of the teacher as a skillful doctor and ourselves as patients. The only way the teacher can guide you to liberation is through teaching the Dharma. If you follow the teacher’s instructions, your practice will definitely reach fruition.

If a severely sick person wants to recover, he must follow the prescriptions

of the experienced doctor. If the patient doesn't follow the doctor or doesn't take the medicine prescribed by the doctor, he can hardly recover. As for the doctor, however skillful he is, he cannot treat a patient without prescribing anything. Therefore, make sure you understand the interdependence between the patient and the doctor.

These days, some people are going to extremes. Some practitioners say they don't need any teacher and hope to achieve realization through their own intellectual capacity. But this is just impossible! Throughout history, except for the very few practitioners with superior faculties, ordinary practitioners cannot achieve this. On the other hand, some practitioners overly rely on the teacher; they are unwilling to practice, hoping the teacher will take care of everything for them. But even if the teacher is a great enlightened master, he is incapable of transferring his realization directly into the minds of those disciples who engage in little practice.

As I said yesterday, the impartial love and compassion from the buddhas of the three times is indescribable. And let alone the buddhas, even the love and compassion of bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteshvara, are beyond our imagination. If the buddhas and bodhisattvas could completely dispel the sufferings of all sentient beings, how could they merely witness beings falling into lower realms without offering any help?

It is only through studying the Dharma that you will find the answer to this question. People with wrong views either believe the teacher can liberate everyone, so they don't have to practice at all, or they think the teacher doesn't have any capacity. Both views are wrong. Dharma students won't fall into such extreme views if they understand the causal link between the doctor and the patient. Is it possible for the patient to not take the prescribed medicine and still be cured by the doctor? Anyone with basic knowledge of medicine knows that this is impossible. This is why wrong views must be stopped.

This is a serious phenomenon you find in Tibetan Buddhism these days. Many seemingly faithful disciples claim, "My guru is a highly realized tulku, so it doesn't matter if I commit wrongdoings. My guru promised he would bring me to a higher rebirth when I die." Some unlearned masters promise, "It is all okay! As long as you are thinking of me at the moment of death, I will appear to guide you. Therefore, it is not a big deal if you commit wrongdoings now." Such kind of affirmation doesn't make sense. For monastic members who will take disciples in the future, please make sure you don't carelessly say something like this.

An individual who has committed a felony will receive legal punishment. Even if his family member is the head of the government, he cannot be exempt from charges. No one can override the law of cause and effect, even in the secular world. Therefore, one must understand this when following a teacher.

We've learned that the present moment marks the turning point that will determine our outcome, for better or worse, far into the future. It is crucial that we choose between samsara and nirvana once and for all and put the instructions of our teacher into practice. Therefore, our true hope lies in following a qualified teacher, receiving their instructions, and diligently putting the instructions into real practice. This is our only path to liberation.

Tibetan monastics who conduct village ceremonies for the deceased would recite the *Bardo Thödol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*), in which there is one verse:

It is the decisive moment for going up or down,
Like steering a horse by the reins.

“Going up” refers to rebirth in the higher realms or the pure land, while “going down” means rebirth in the lower realms. As when a horse rider pulls the reins, the horse heads toward the designated direction; so, the ceremony conductor recites that the consciousness of a just-deceased person is like a horse guided by the reins, and that the moment of death is the turning point. During the time of Patrul Rinpoche, those conductors would recite this text during an end-of-life service.

In fact, it is the present moment, while we are still alive, that is the turning point, not the moment of death. Both Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu and Patrul Rinpoche have said during their teachings, “It’s very hard for people like me to transfer consciousness only by receiving a recitation service during the bardo stage, so practices conducted while still alive are very important.” Most people may not attain liberation during the bardo stage, except for eminent masters who achieve liberation in the luminous bardo of Dharmata due to their practice during previous lives.

If an experienced practitioner doesn’t attain liberation during the luminous bardo of Dharmata, he may follow the instructions whispered into his ears by the teacher or by Dharma peers while the practitioner is in the karmic bardo of becoming. If he wants a rebirth as a human again, he visualizes his consciousness as the seed syllable “HUM” (ཧཱུྃ) or “HRIH” (ཧྱེཿ); if he wants to attain liberation,

he visualizes his mind as the seed syllable “HRIH (ॐ),” which then merges into Buddha Amitabha, who goes to the Blissful Pure Land. There are many such visualizations in Vajrayana practice.

When the deceased person’s outer respiration ceases but the inner respiration is still ongoing, or when their inner respiration ceases and they receive pointing-out instructions every day for the forty-nine days after death, they may have the chance to transfer consciousness. Even if heavy karmic burdens are bringing the deceased toward a lower rebirth, through their guru’s forceful phowa—a profound practice of transference of consciousness—a few individuals with specific affinities may still be reborn into a higher realm or even attain liberation.

Nevertheless, for most deceased individuals, it is extremely difficult to transfer the consciousness simply through receiving recitations. At the moment of death, if you have not mastered the path through diligent practice while you are alive, the fierce wind of your past negative actions will be chasing after you, while in front, a daunting black darkness will surge toward you. Helplessly, you will be propelled along the long and perilous path of the intermediate state. If you have committed severe negative actions such as killing, the Lord of Death’s countless henchmen will be pursuing you, crying, “Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!” Eminent masters have taught that the scenes of hell realms will immediately arise at the moment of death for those individuals with heavy karmic debts. How is it possible that at such a moment—when there is no place to escape or hide, no refuge and no hope, when you are desperate and lost—how could such a moment be the turning point when you can decide whether you go up or down?

If this is the case, does it mean that the *Bardo Thödol* text is wrong? It is not. For some people, the recitation does offer help, and after receiving such pointing-out instruction, they can attain liberation. But for most individuals, the moment of now is the most important.

Some people tell me, “I can’t engage in virtuous acts now, so please perform the transference of consciousness for me when I die.” The parents of some monks or nuns place their hope on their child, saying, “You are a monastic, so make sure you transfer my consciousness when I die,” or “You are a Buddhist, so I will be okay if you recite prayers for me when I die.”

Such a deliverance service is indeed beneficial, but the most important thing

is that you engage in virtuous acts while still alive. The precious merit accumulated by yourself cannot be taken away by anyone else.

Recently, I established a senior center for Tibetan lay persons in my hometown. I told the lay practitioners in the center, over one hundred of them, “Now that you are old and at the last stage of your lives, you barely have a say in things at home anymore. If you don’t practice the Dharma well while you are still alive, then when you die, your family will just offer you recitations for forty-nine days and then send your corpse to a cemetery or a funeral home. The family’s actions may be beneficial for you, but it is far less than the benefits you get from your own practice. Even if you just listen to one Dharma class per day, or do prostrations, recite mantras, or offer a butter lamp, you will accumulate far more merit and receive far more benefit for yourself than from your family.”

Therefore, do not place all your hope on the guru’s phowa, thinking that the guru is almighty, so you can rest assured of the guru’s help without practicing anything. Such a view is very wrong. In some rural places, because people don’t know too much about the Dharma, they think they can commit whatever wrongdoings they like and will be completely okay if a guru performs the transference of consciousness when they die. It is not that easy. It’s just like if a person is put into prison for their crimes, it will be quite challenging for them to gain release through their social connections. As Padmasambhava says:

By the time empowerment is given to the card marked with your
name,
It’s already too late!
Your consciousness, aimlessly drifting in the
Intermediate state like a bewildered dog,
Will find it immensely hard to even think of higher realms.

What is meant by “empowerment given to the card marked with your name?” According to Tibetan tradition, when a person dies, his family will invite the guru or sangha members to offer recitations of deliverance prayers close to the deceased’s pillow for forty-nine days. The family has to prepare a card marked with an image of the deceased. The Buddhist masters will attract the deceased’s consciousness onto the card, and the card will be the object of empowerment when the masters recite the *Bardo Thödol*. If the deceased person is a male, the card will depict a man; if it is a female, then a woman. The style of drawing varies according to different traditions

in different areas, but in general, the deceased will be depicted as crouching under a parasol with two palms put together. The card will be decorated with a parasol, a flower garland, and things the deceased is very much attached to—for example, corals and pearls for a rich person and mala beads for a poor person.

This is a common practice, also described in the terms of Padmasambhava. Normally when a Tibetan dies, his family will invite sangha members to recite the *Bardo Thödol* for forty-nine days if they are affluent enough, or at least for seven or fourteen days if they are less affluent. After the deliverance ceremony is finished, the family will bring the card with its precious decorations to a guru in whom the deceased had the most faith. The guru will then handle the card and its decorations.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, he received a lot of such cards sent by people from everywhere. On the fifteenth day or the thirtieth day of each Tibetan calendar month, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche would invite the sangha to do recitations and then handle the cards properly.

Actually, it is very common for a deceased person to attain liberation through the guru's blessings or the sangha's recitations. But here, Padmasambhava emphasizes that the turning point for going up or down is right now. So, he says it is too late by the time empowerment is being given to the card because the deceased person's consciousness is already wandering in the intermediate state like a dazed dog. No matter how hard the ceremony masters try to attract the person's consciousness, it is not coming back. The wind of past actions carries the consciousness here and there, and the deceased person cannot even think of higher realms, let alone go to the pure land.

However, if we encounter the bardo practice on a seemingly random occasion when alive, it can bring great benefit. Here is a well-known story about an old lady in Tibet:

Once upon a time, there lived a very rich man in Tibet. One of his neighbors was an old lady who got along well with the man and his family. One day, the man died, and the sad wife sent someone to tell the news to the old lady. The old lady went to the rich man's house to help the wife deal with the man's death, such as making food offerings.

The old lady was a Buddhist practitioner who performed good deeds. However, since she lived in a remote place, she was not familiar with the mandalas and deities of tantric practice.

The wife invited many lamas to recite the *Bardo Thödol* for forty-nine days for the rich man, and thangkas of the hundred peaceful and wrathful deities were displayed in the shrine room. The old lady had never seen such thangkas before, so she stared at them with great curiosity. A lama happened to be in the shrine room, so the old lady asked what was portrayed on the thangka. The lama told her, “Those are deities that appear at the moment of death.” The old lady felt doubtful, saying, “Really? I wonder why these things show up when we die.” She was not sure what she had heard, but nevertheless, her faith in the deities somehow arose.

Three years later, the old lady died. Her children were very sad and invited many lamas to offer recitations for forty-nine days. When the ceremony was over, the family planned to give her card to the renowned Karmapa. One of her sons went to Lhasa so he could give the card and the old lady’s jewelry and mala beads to the Karmapa.

There were many visitors to see the Karmapa, so the son was unable to meet the master until the third day after his arrival in Lhasa. The Karmapa was sitting in a chair in a garden, and the son made a generous offering. The son then handed the old lady’s card to the Karmapa, saying, “My mother has died. Please guide her to liberation. Please promise me you will do it!”

The Karmapa answered, “I can’t promise this to you. Sentient beings are under the influence of their own karmas, and I don’t have the power to change that.”

“Then tell me,” said the son, “where was my mother reborn?”

The Karmapa said, “How should I know! I don’t have that psychic power! I don’t know!”

The son said, “No, no! You must tell me where my mother was reborn. Please guide her and bless her, so she can attain realization in the Buddha’s pure land.”

The Karmapa replied, “I have neither such power nor clairvoyance.”

The son insisted, “You must have both power and clairvoyance!” He held the Karmapa’s legs and earnestly pleaded, “You must promise me! Otherwise, I won’t let you go!” Saying that, the son started to sob. (The son must have loved his mother very much. Many Tibetans are like this: on the one hand, they have deep affection for the deceased parent, and on the other hand, they have strong faith in the guru, so they insist on making the guru promise to help the deceased.)

Finally, the Karmapa said, “Your mother was reborn into the Pure Land several weeks ago.”

The son didn’t believe the Karmapa, so he said, “You must be lying. My mother didn’t know how to practice the Dharma. She rarely recited mantras or chanted the Buddha’s names, so how could she possibly attain liberation? You told me this just because I was holding your legs, didn’t you?”

The Karmapa said, “No, I didn’t. Didn’t someone die in your neighborhood three years ago? When your mother went to help the family, she happened to see the images of peaceful and wrathful deities at the ceremonial site. A lama told her that the deities would appear at the moment of death, so when your mother saw the deities when she died, she recognized them and attained liberation right away. If you don’t believe me, you can go back and ask the lama about what happened three years ago.”

When the son returned home, he immediately went to ask the lama. The lama replied, “Oh, yes! When your mother saw the *thangka* of bardo deities, she asked me what they were. I told her that these were all the deities that would appear in the bardo stage when we die.” After hearing this, the son generated a strong faith in Vajrayana.

This is a true story, not a made-up tale. Therefore, if we are capable of doing the bardo practice, we may attain liberation during the bardo stage; if not, we have the chance to encounter the profound tantric teachings in the next life and then attain liberation. Even if we have never done the bardo practice, if we have the sources of merit and the opportunity to know the peaceful and wrathful deities during our lifetime, then we will not fall into lower realms and may even attain liberation during the bardo stage.

Therefore, if we have a chance to see images of peaceful and wrathful deities, we should remember them clearly and know they will appear when we die. Of course, people have different levels of faculties. During the bardo stage, some people will see images of deities in *yab-yum*,¹⁹³ the peaceful deities, and the wrathful deities all appearing before them. For other people, the deities’ images may not appear as they are, and deities may even appear in the forms of animals. But in this case, make sure you neither generate hatred nor simply see the deities as animals. If you fail to

¹⁹³ *Yab-yum* (Tibetan literally, “father-mother”) is a common symbol in the Tibetan art of India, Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet. It represents the primordial union of wisdom and compassion, depicted as a male deity in union with his female consort.

recognize they are deities, they will immediately become horrifying henchmen of the hell realm, which, as you should know, are in fact also the projection of your own mind.

Currently, many people hold wrong views about Vajrayana, which we cannot prevent. Even during the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, some people held many wrong views toward not only Vajrayana but also Sutrayana, which also couldn't be stopped. However, individuals with an affinity for Vajrayana shouldn't reject anything they have not yet understood. For example, upon seeing a yab-yum image, one shouldn't carelessly dismiss it as something unnecessary or meaningless. Please make sure you don't think this way.

Such images carry many profound meanings that have nothing to do with the lust, hatred, and ignorance of your initial understanding. Buddhism is not this shallow or unintelligent.

Even if you don't understand the embedded meanings, just seeing the images of peaceful and wrathful deities is of great benefit. The old lady in the story neither received empowerment nor did bardo practice when she was alive. All she did was see the images of the bardo deities, and she was even a bit suspicious about them. Regardless, when the old lady died, she was able to attain liberation right away. Therefore, the turning point is right now, while you are still alive.

As human beings, we can arouse bodhicitta, receive ordination, and practice tantra with our precious human life. Such positive actions are far more powerful than those of beings in the other five realms of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras, and gods. Thus, we have the opportunity here and now in this very life to cast rebirth aside once and for all.¹⁹⁴ For example, some Kadampa eminent masters attained the state of Vajradhara (complete enlightenment) after lifelong diligent practice; many Nyingma renunciates went to the Buddha's pure land after an entire life of practice. Some eminent masters of the Chan and Pure Land schools of Chinese Buddhism, who were once just ordinary worldly people, were able to let go of mundane life and devote themselves wholeheartedly to Dharma practices by relying on uncontrived faith in the teacher and the Dharma. As a result, they freed themselves from future rebirths in samsara.

But, as human beings, our negative actions are also more powerful than those of beings in other realms. Thus, we are also quite capable of ensuring that we will

¹⁹⁴ The Tibetan expression here literally means "getting rid of the skull," which refers to discarding one's body in the sense of freeing oneself from future rebirths.

never be free from the depths of the lower realms. Why? Because, in no time, we may start to commit severe wrongdoings, such as holding evil views toward the guru, the Three Jewels, the law of karma, and so forth, slandering them verbally, and defaming them in our minds. This is unachievable for animals like yaks and hell beings.

Humans' power to commit negative actions is increased in this era, given the rapid development of science and technology. If a person holds wrong views, they may produce nuclear weapons like atomic bombs, which can kill tens of thousands of lives at once. Even if they just create a traditional land mine, the blast can still kill many.

Humans' capacity to commit wrongdoings is truly formidable. Before embracing Buddhism, some people, including those who are listening to my teaching, used to commit wrongdoings much more vicious than those of a yak. Although yaks also have afflictions, including lust, hatred, and ignorance, they don't deliberately kill others or produce deadly weapons. Therefore, some wrongdoings that a human is capable of committing in this life may prevent this person from being free from samsara.

Luckily, now that we have encountered the teacher—the skillful doctor, and the Dharma—the miraculous medicine that frees us from the cycle of rebirths, now is the time to apply the four metaphors, putting the teachings you have received into real practice and embarking on the path of liberation. By doing so, the blessings and the power of the Dharma will progressively integrate into your minds.

(I often think of this: Among all the causes and conditions that happened to me, encountering the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche is the greatest blessing in my life. I am not just paying lip service here; I truly mean it. If I had not met my guru, I would have been like my classmates whose lifestyles, views, and actions are totally centered around worldly concerns.)

It is very important that Buddhists often pray to the guru and to the Three Jewels. Through prayers, spiritual responses and blessings from the buddhas and bodhisattvas will merge with our minds. Studying Dharma is unlike studying worldly knowledge, which only requires intellectual understanding. A Buddhist has to cultivate faith and devotion so he can receive blessings from lineage masters, buddhas, and bodhisattvas. When the blessings merge with our own wisdom, the union of these two is very powerful, which can help us refrain from wrongdoings

and guide us to liberation. Hence, studying the Dharma is very different from studying worldly knowledge.

Therefore, I hope that on your path of Buddhist practice, you will pray to the guru and the Three Jewels in the morning after you wake up, at night before you fall asleep, and on every occasion, including walking, standing, sitting, or sleeping. Make sure you are never apart from the guru's blessings and luminous wisdom.

This practice was done by many past eminent masters and practitioners. For example, when seeing beautiful flowers in a garden, they wouldn't be attached to the beauty of the flowers. Instead, they would offer the flowers to buddhas and bodhisattvas in their visualizations, or they would feel gratitude to the guru because it is due to the guru's blessings that they are able to enjoy the beauty of the flowers.

A person with practice and realization sees both happiness and pain as blessings from the guru and the Three Jewels. When he experiences excruciating pain due to sickness, he won't think, "Poor me! I am so sick for no reason." Instead, he will think, "The blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels are incredible! Being sick gives me an opportunity to eliminate my bad karmas. Because of this, I am able to remove the karmic obscurations accumulated since beginningless time." This is the conduct of a superior practitioner.

In contrast, some laypeople constantly complain. They say, "I am so unlucky and miserable! After studying the Dharma for so long and trying to accumulate merits through so many lamp offerings and life releases, I caught a cold again! Why didn't the Three Jewels bless me? I am losing my faith in the Dharma!" Such people only have a shallow understanding of the Dharma. They have no idea what the blessings of the Three Jewels really mean.

Furthermore, we should also cut off the opposite of the four metaphors—the four wrong notions—while listening to teachings by following the four metaphors. Jigme Lingpa says in the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

Shallow-tongued men with evil natures
Approach the teacher as if he were a musk deer.
Having extracted the musk, the perfect Dharma,
Full of joy, they sneer at the samaya.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ The translation of the version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 18.

Here, Jigme Lingpa says such people see themselves as hunters, the teacher as a musk deer, the Dharma as the musk, and diligent practice as the skillful means to hunt the deer.

In the past, hunters adopted deceptive means to trap musk deer. For example, they would dig a hole in a forest passage, in which they would put a lasso with one end tied to a pliable stick. After the trap was set, they covered the hole with grass or leaves. When a musk deer walked by, the animal would fall into the hole, which activated the pliable stick and tightened the lasso. Thus, the musk deer was trapped. The hunter then caught the musk deer, killed it, and sold its musk for a fortune.

A bad disciple is like the hunter. He first follows the teacher by deception. For example, if the teacher likes wealth, the disciple will make more material offerings; if the teacher likes fame, the disciple will please him through flattery. Why is the disciple doing so? The goal is to get the pith instructions from the teacher. Until receiving the instructions, the disciple will follow the teacher for years and never leave.

Once the teacher has given the Sutrayana and Vajrayana teachings, the disciple discards the teacher and his vows. The disciple starts using the teachings to pursue worldly gains, including fame, wealth, and praise.

There are many such disciples in the degenerate age. Some people manage to receive transmissions of the lineage through various means, and then they start self-promoting, selling the Dharma in the same way the hunter sells the musk. Such bad disciples feel no gratitude toward the teacher, and they don't even admit they've received teachings from the teacher. Instead, they boast that they understand the teachings all by themselves, without any guidance from any teacher. Even worse, some avoid mentioning their teacher's name because they worry that doing so will undermine the "grandiose" self-image they are trying to build.

Because of the disciple's lack of gratitude to the teacher, the disciple's Dharma teaching, which may be of temporary help to the listeners in the beginning, is ultimately of little benefit to himself and others. Therefore, when we follow a teacher, we must avoid these four wrong notions. Otherwise, such bad actions—disobeying the teachings, discarding, and deceiving the teacher—will trap the disciples in the hell realms, life after life, without a chance of liberation. Such horrifying consequences are clearly described in the tantric teachings.

When we follow a guru, our actions should be impeccable. With reverence

and pure perception, we should pray that the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels will merge with our minds. Only when we think of ourselves as patients can the elixir-like Dharma benefit us.

If a person follows the guru for self-interest and, after receiving teachings, completely ignores the teacher and even goes so far as to avoid mentioning they ever received the teacher's teachings, or if they do mention it, they do so with a disrespectful tone—such actions are truly terrible.

Even if the teacher only taught you one verse of the Dharma, you should feel grateful to them and never forget them in your life. A wise person will never forget the kindness of a worldly teacher, so since the Dharma is far more valuable and beneficial to us than worldly knowledge, we must feel even more grateful to our Dharma teachers. Only by doing so can the Dharma empower blessings to your mind. Otherwise, the Dharma teachings you have studied will remain as mere words on the surface and won't have the power to diminish afflictions or bring you happiness and liberation.

In short, after listening to teachings, please don't remain indifferent and fail to put the teachings you have heard into practice. I am not covering too much content in each class, so I hope you are able to read the text thoroughly, contemplate it carefully, and practice steadily. As such, you can receive the inconceivable blessings of the lineage masters. Hence, you will become a pure and authentic practitioner for your entire life, and your faith won't regress. Meanwhile, it's crucial to be grateful for the guru's great kindness. As such, the teachings you've received can benefit all sentient beings.

In contrast, if you rarely practice the authentic Dharma, never think of the kindness of the guru, constantly generate wrong views, and accumulate negative actions through Dharma, then all these actions will drag you down to the lower realms like a millstone. We pursue Dharma for the purpose of liberation, not for deliberately falling into the lower realms. However, sometimes pursuing Dharma can be as risky as having major surgery. If the operation is done in the right way, the patient will be cured; if it is done in the wrong way, he will die. Thus, we must be very cautious about our own conduct. By doing so, we are considered a real wise person, as mentioned in the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*.

Please contemplate the above teachings again and again.



Lesson 13

“In the Tantra of Thorough Comprehension ... That is the way to listen to the teaching.” [page 18–19]

We have finished studying the four metaphors. Now we proceed to the second conduct to be adopted while listening to teachings: the six transcendent perfections.

1.2.2.2. The Six Transcendent Perfections

A person listening to the teaching should practice the six transcendent perfections (Skt. *pāramitā*). In *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*, Longchenpa says that the practice of the six transcendent perfections is indispensable to Mahayanists who set forth to benefit all beings.¹⁹⁶ Thus, all the deeds of the Buddha during his casual stage¹⁹⁷ are encompassed within the six transcendent perfections.

Therefore, when we listen to teachings, study and practice the Dharma, and propagate the Buddha’s teachings, practicing the six transcendent perfections is of vital importance. Without this practice, you are not necessarily on the Mahayana path.

¹⁹⁶ The corresponding root text is:

“The children of the Buddha
Train themselves in every field
And chiefly in the six transcendent virtues.”

Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

¹⁹⁷ Skt. *hetu-avasthā*, meaning when one has not become a buddha.

Some people think, “When I am practicing generosity, I cannot uphold discipline; when I am upholding discipline, I cannot practice patience; when I am practicing patience, I cannot practice diligence, meditation, or wisdom.” In their minds, the six transcendent perfections seem to be segregated from each other, like one hill in the east and another hill in the west. Such a viewpoint is wrong.

It says in the sutras and shastras, including *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, and *The Sutra on the Mahayana Principle of the Six Paramitas*, that the practice of one transcendent perfection can simultaneously include all the other five transcendent perfections. In other words, each transcendent perfection encompasses all the other perfections—this is the supreme state of a bodhisattva. Particularly, the last few chapters on practice in *The Ornament of Clear Realization* often bring up the subject of one transcendent perfection encompassing the other five, saying this signals the perfection or culmination of practices.

You shouldn’t think, “I spend my whole day listening to teachings, so I don’t have the opportunity to practice generosity, discipline, patience, and more. How is it possible for me to practice the six transcendent perfections?” Please do not think this way.

Even if you have no time for virtuous actions, such as practicing generosity by organizing or participating in a charity event for the underprivileged, you can still practice the six transcendent perfections by listening to teachings with impeccable manner and an appropriate demeanor. Some people used to know little about this, so they shunned Dharma teachings and instead collected alms everywhere and donated the money, thinking that by doing so they could perfect the practice of generosity. This was very wrong. If you follow the skillful means introduced later in today’s teaching, you can perfect the practice of the six transcendent perfections through attending one Dharma class.

In contrast, if you don’t follow the skillful means below while listening to teachings, you won’t accumulate merit from practicing the six transcendent perfections. Instead, you may generate many negative karmas. So please pay extra attention to this.

In general, before a Tibetan master gives teachings, he will first introduce how to listen to teachings properly. Therefore, except for those who didn’t receive Dharma teachings in a systematic manner, most Tibetan practitioners are aware

of the proper way to listen to teachings. Whichever ethnic group you belong to, and wherever you live, I wish for you to also know the proper way and to act accordingly. By doing so, the benefits of pursuing Dharma can finally sprout and root in your mindstream.

We should listen to teachings for attaining liberation, not for building up a nicer image in front of others. For example, some people are afraid of being judged negatively if they don't attend Dharma classes, so they join a class just to put on an act and only listen sporadically when sitting in the Dharma hall. Such an attitude is not right.

We should all adjust our attitudes before listening to teachings. It's best if we generate the bodhicitta motivation of great beings. When, occasionally, thoughts of self-interest or selfishness arise, they should be dispelled through mindfulness and vigilance. By doing so, listening to teachings renders genuine meaning.

How exactly do we practice the six transcendent perfections when listening to teachings? *The Tantra of Thorough Comprehension of the Instructions on all Dharma Practices* says:

Make excellent offerings such as flowers and cushions,
Put the place in order and control your behavior,
Do not harm any living being,
Have genuine faith in your teacher,
Listen to his instructions without distraction
And question him in order to dispel your doubts;
These are the six transcendent perfections of a listener.¹⁹⁸

More specifically, the six transcendent perfections pertaining to a person listening to the teaching are:

- 1) **Generosity:** make excellent offerings such as flowers and cushions

Before the teaching starts, prepare the teacher's seat and arrange cushions on it. If there is nothing on the seat but a flat board, the teacher may feel uncomfortable after sitting on it for a long time. Therefore, a cushion should be put on the seat. The

¹⁹⁸ The translation of the version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 18.

great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche mentioned that the cushion should be neither too hard nor too soft. If the cushion is stuffed with super-soft foam, the teacher will sink into it, and he will find it difficult to get up. The teacher will not appear graceful when struggling to get out of the seat. Offer a mandala, flowers, lamps, or other offerings in front of or around the teacher's seat. This is the practice of generosity while listening to teachings.

The teacher's seat is an object of offering. However, due to the management rules, you are not allowed to place any offerings in this new Dharma hall. I know some of you have complained, but I do hope you understand the situation and respect the rules. You can make offerings in your own shrine room. Moreover, I don't think there is any benefit for you to offer me lamps or flowers, so you are better off making offerings in front of a statue or an image of the Buddha.

To lay practitioners: the place where you listen to teachings is equivalent to a Dharma hall; your teacher is on TV, so you can make lamp offerings in front of the TV. I am joking here. Well, it is not necessary to make such offerings.

But when you listen to teachings in a group, it's better to clean up and decorate the room and to provide a TV for the listeners. This is also a practice of generosity in itself.

The TV plays an important role for Dharma listeners. You can see it as a manifestation of buddhas and bodhisattvas. The TV represents the teacher, so if possible, you should get a good TV. Some laypeople live in very nice houses, yet the TV is quite shabby—the teacher doesn't appear graceful. Even worse, sometimes when more than twenty people listen to teachings together, there's only a small laptop on a desk for viewing, so many can barely see or hear. This is not very good, either.

Living conditions in cities are not too bad these days, so you should be able to afford a decent TV to listen to teachings. If the situation is indeed challenging, then each of you may contribute so the group can afford a big TV. I think this purchase is not a waste of money. Just think how much worldly people have spent on meaningless drinking and eating. Therefore, we shouldn't casually deal with such meaningful things as listening to teachings.

Some people may think, "We are sharing the cost, but the TV stays in that person's house. It is unfair!" or "So many people are listening to teachings! Forget it, let's just use that broken TV for a formality." In such cases, the group may not

hear the teachings well. You don't have to listen to teachings by physically sitting in front of the teacher. Whichever skillful means you use to benefit from the Dharma, you should see those means as the manifestation of the teacher.

In the past, when a teacher was teaching, only a limited number of Dharma students could hear. If the crowd was too big, it was almost impossible to deliver the teachings to everyone present.

Due to technological advancements, tens of thousands of people living in different places can listen to teachings at the same time via TVs, computers, and mobile devices. Therefore, you should consider these electronic devices a "teacher" as well.

Creating favorable conditions that help people listen to teachings is the practice of generosity. Some laypeople are quite generous and bring fruits and bottled water to share when attending group studies. By doing so, they practice generosity, bringing happiness to other group members, so more and more people join the group. In comparison, members of other groups bring nothing to share, not even water, so gradually people leave those groups. Actually, it shouldn't be like this. One shouldn't join a Dharma group study for the sake of getting fruit or bottled water.

Although it is necessary for people to practice generosity, we shouldn't require people to buy things to share if they don't have the means. A Tibetan saying goes, "If a man is poor, it is impossible for him to donate his property; if a man is dead, it is impossible for him to stand up." If you really cannot afford to make offerings, you may simply visualize the practice of generosity or aspire to do so in the next life. If, on the other hand, you are capable, then you should spend money on meaningful things instead of wasting it on meaningless things.

In short, when listening to teachings, you should try your best to practice offering and giving. This is the practice of generosity.

2) Discipline: put the place in order and control your behavior

To make the place neat and comfortable, you should gently dampen the dust with water, thoroughly clean the area, spray fragrance, and so on. Meanwhile, you should refrain from all disrespectful behaviors and adopt appropriate conduct from the beginning to the end of a teaching, whether it spans as long as an entire teaching series or as short as a single lecture. This is the practice of discipline.

When listening to teachings, eminent masters and good practitioners will always listen with bliss and joy, as if they were enjoying precious nectar. In contrast, because of their karmic influence, some people whisper to each other and do sneaky things in class. In fact, you shouldn't do something else when listening to teachings. Your actions of body, speech, and mind should be impeccable and respectful, and you should abandon behaviors such as arrogance and refrain from disdainful others.

In fact, it is not too difficult to practice these six transcendent perfections. It is hardly possible for an ordinary person to rest in a state of threefold purity—a state beyond any conceptualizations and fabrications—but it is relatively easier to practice the six transcendent perfections as long as you often examine your body, speech, and mind with mindfulness and vigilance.

3) Patience: do not harm any living being

When listening to teachings, make sure not to harm living beings, including insects, either deliberately or accidentally. Of course, it is rarely possible to kill a big animal like a yak while listening to teachings. But when you are bitten by a mosquito on a hot summer day, you shouldn't swat it while listening. The same principle also applies to other insects, including cockroaches and ants.

Meanwhile, you shouldn't harm your Dharma peers, including vajra sisters and brothers. Some Buddhists display a bad temperament and engage in inappropriate conduct. During group studies, such a person may vent their anger, verbally abuse, and attack group members. This is really bad.

In addition, when listening to teachings, no matter how hot or cold the conditions are, however long the teaching is, or however difficult the situations you encounter are, you should try your very best to bear it. For sangha members at Larung Gar, it costs nothing to walk from their living quarters to the Dharma hall, whereas urban lay practitioners very often have to spend money on transportation in order to attend teachings. If they don't have money, it's hard for them to listen to teachings or participate in life-releasing.

Some laypeople participate in the events of releasing lives for one hundred consecutive days, and they spend a substantial amount of money on the relevant expenses, including transportation, every year. This is a significant expense for many people.

In order to listen to teachings, low-income lay practitioners have to take buses or taxis, and sometimes they may also contribute to a potluck with Dharma friends. The expense can be a bit high. If these people don't practice patience well, when spending money on Dharma-related events, they may feel a bit of discomfort.

Furthermore, when listening to teachings, accepting whatever the teacher teaches is a practice of patience. Due to a lack of merit from previous lives, some Buddhists are reluctant to listen when the teaching is basic, complaining that it is too easy and they just want to leave. But when the teaching is profound, they complain that it is hard to comprehend, so they are unwilling to stay in the classroom. In comparison, Buddhists with great merit are willing to accept whatever the teacher teaches, whether basic or profound.

As for myself, I never become impatient, whether the teachings are basic or profound. Instead, I experience indescribable bliss when listening to teachings, suggesting that perhaps I had listened to and contemplated them in previous lives. When I was a school student, I disliked secular subjects such as physics, chemistry, and history. I felt that these subjects didn't cover the ultimate reality, so they were not interesting.

When I finally encountered the Dharma, I was and still am deeply impressed by every single teaching I received. For example, some Buddhist works, such as the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, and *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*, may appear to be compilations of ordinary stories to many people, but I find profound meanings embedded in these stories. Worldly stories told by intellectuals don't attract me much, whereas Buddhist stories, however simple they appear, always enchant me.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once taught us the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, and back then I didn't remember many of the stories in this sutra. Before his parinirvana, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught the sutra again, about which I felt so delighted. People's karmic connection with the Dharma really varies, so that, for example, some Buddhists can accept neither basic nor profound teachings—a manifestation of their lack of patience. In fact, you should remain grateful and blissful about whatever you listen to. Holding such an attitude is the practice of patience.

4) Diligence: have genuine faith in your teacher

Set aside any wrong views concerning the teacher and the teaching, and listen

with genuine faith and joy. This is the practice of diligence. I once watched a video of a Dharma master teaching in a Buddhist college. The teacher was beaming with joy while teaching, yet somehow the listeners appeared upset and gloomy, displaying various facial expressions. Had I been the master, I might have stopped teaching; it is not necessary to upset others. But everyone has their own way of handling things, and it seems that that Dharma master was okay with the audience's reactions.

Normally, when listening to teachings, you shouldn't be upset or angry; but instead, you should be delighted. This joy arises because of how very rare it is, in hundreds of thousands of kalpas, to have the opportunity to listen to Mahayana teachings. Such an opportunity doesn't occur by chance, nor can it be attained merely through capacity or courage. It actually requires the accumulation of innumerable merits and causal conditions through many lifetimes. Now that you are fortunate enough to encounter a Mahayana teacher and the teachings, you should listen with great joy.

In fact, this principle also applies to worldly teachings. If students appear annoyed and unhappy, the teacher won't be interested in teaching them. Ah? Why do you all look kinder now? Well, feeling delighted about Dharma teachings is a long-term endeavor, so having such a feeling just for today is not enough. There are very few people in the sangha who always have a straight face. I have never seen them smile, during or after my class. Well, you know if I am referring to you.

5) Meditation: listen to the instructions without distraction

When listening to teachings, do not get distracted by thoughts or external factors. When distracted, you won't absorb the profound meanings of the Dharma. You have to focus on the teachings from the beginning until the end. Listen wholeheartedly and focus on the teachings—this is the practice of concentration or meditation.

Lay aside anything else when listening to teachings; this is a good habit you should form. If you consciously do so from the start, you can always focus your attention on the teachings whenever you attend a Dharma class. In contrast, if you like mind-wandering, then you will barely remember the teachings.

Our mind is like a young kid. If the kid is trained well, he will always behave properly, whereas if the kid is used to mind-wandering, it will be hard for him to

correct this habit. Sometimes the teacher explains something very important in class, but the students hear nothing, as if their ears were not present.

If you ask them, “What did you learn in the one-hour class?”

“Ah? The teacher taught something.”

“Taught what?”

“Let me think...er...I don’t remember. I will tell you later!”

Such students should feel embarrassed. They don’t concentrate on the teaching, and sometimes they just doodle on their notebooks when they are supposed to be listening to teachings.

Such a thing often happens during a worldly teaching. The teacher is teaching enthusiastically, while a student is doodling a picture of an apple with eyes. When the class is over, the student hears nothing, but his “artwork” is done. Back in my school days, many of my classmates were like this. I hope you don’t do the same thing. When listening to teachings, it’s important to stay focused and try to perfect the practice of concentration as much as possible.

Of course, it is hard for an ordinary person to always give one hundred percent concentration on the teachings. It is quite challenging to remain fully concentrated for a whole class. Nevertheless, we humans can concentrate better than animals. If a parrot, after frequent training, is able to recite “*Om Mani Padme Hum*”, then we humans should have no problem developing a habit of listening to teachings without distraction.

6) Wisdom: question the teacher in order to dispel your doubts

When questions arise, you may ask the teacher or discuss the questions with your Dharma peers. By doing so, you will dispel doubts, wrong views, and misconceptions. This is the practice of wisdom.

It is meaningful to promote the practice of debate in Tibetan Buddhism among Buddhist groups. If you have never experienced debating, when someone asks you a small Dharma question, you may flush with anger, thinking he is challenging you.

For example, a Buddhist helper was transcribing my teachings, and a Dharma friend commented on his work, saying, “You shouldn’t do this; you should edit that way.” Hearing this, the helper immediately argued back, “What do you know? This

is my work! You have no right to say a word!” Actually, the Dharma friend wanted to be helpful, and his comment was on the transcription rather than on the helper.

If the comment makes sense, the helper should welcome it with open arms. However, some people lacking open-mindedness are not always like this. As a Tibetan saying puts it, “Except for the kitchen, he hasn’t seen anything else; except for his mother, he hasn’t met anyone else.”

Those who have never debated before can be especially reactive. They can barely accept a comment from others; they take it too personally and immediately argue back with anger, all of which is unnecessary.

Through debate, we can internalize the genuine meaning of the Dharma. I hope you won’t simply leave after class; you can instead initiate discussions with others. You may feel a bit uneasy at the beginning, which is totally fine. I was like this when I first attended a debate, but I never quarreled with others. Sometimes I had a long Dharma conversation with my wise and intelligent peers; we would debate from 6 p.m. to midnight, or even to 3 or 4 a.m.!

Sometimes I visited a khenpo, and we would begin debating a topic. If we didn’t finish that day, we would continue the next day, and sometimes the debate would last for half a month until we dispelled all our doubts. Because of these debates, I still remember the topics vividly.

Thus, studying Dharma should be like refining gold. You must adopt all kinds of methods and completely dispel doubts in front of a wise person. Then you will reach the conviction that the logical reasoning of Buddhism is paramount. If you have never gone through the “refinement” process for your own thoughts, you will think those thoughts are absolutely true; however, when examined by Buddhist reasoning, your thoughts will collapse as quickly as toilet paper soaked in water. Your “wisdom,” which you think is invincible, cannot stand any examination at all.

Therefore, after listening to teachings, you should discuss them with each other during the tutoring session. Please refrain from getting frustrated. Your Dharma classmates are talking about Dharma rather than attacking you, so don’t get personal. Some laypeople feel hurt by unintentional comments from other Buddhists, and the conflict leaves a scar in the minds of both parties. Eventually, the two people refuse to speak with each other. Alas!

When debating, monastics often challenge each other, intentionally or unintentionally, with very challenging words. For example, I might know that my

counterpart understands a specific topic well, but I will still challenge him with incisive words to refute his viewpoint. Although I hold no grudges against my debate mate, through such debate, I can examine his wisdom. This happens often during monastic debates.

Some Dharma friends never experience this, so they are like paper tigers;¹⁹⁹ their statements may appear powerful, yet they cannot withstand challenges in the debate. Thus, these Dharma friends often get upset when being challenged. This is not good.

The above discussed the six transcendent perfections with regard to listening to teachings. Make sure you practice them accordingly. In *The Middle-Length Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Lama Tsongkhapa says:

If one practices the six transcendent perfections when studying
and practicing the Dharma, the power is tremendous.

In fact, when practicing the Dharma, you should also check whether you have the six transcendent perfections. If the answer is no, this means your practice is not impeccable.

Ouyi Zhixu, an eminent Chinese Buddhist master, suggests we should practice the six transcendent perfections while reciting the buddha's name wholeheartedly:

While reciting the buddha's name wholeheartedly, laying aside
the attachment to the physical and spiritual worlds is the
practice of Generosity;

While reciting the buddha's name wholeheartedly, not giving
rise to lust, anger, and ignorance any more is the practice of
Discipline;

While reciting the buddha's name wholeheartedly, not
discerning right versus wrong and me versus you is the practice
of Patience;

While reciting the buddha's name wholeheartedly, not getting
interrupted and mixed with thoughts is the practice of
Diligence;

¹⁹⁹ "Paper tiger" is a calque of the Chinese phrase, referring to something or someone that claims or appears to be powerful or threatening but is actually unable to withstand challenge.

While reciting the buddha's name wholeheartedly, not giving rise again to discursive thoughts and chasing after them is the practice of Meditation;

While reciting the buddha's name wholeheartedly, not getting confused by others' wrong paths is the practice of Wisdom.

The virtuous action of life-release can also be carried out with all the transcendent perfections. Saving an animal's life is normally considered the practice of generosity, in the form of "giving protection from fear." It also includes the components of "material giving" and "giving Dharma in generosity."

From the Theravada perspective, harming no beings is the practice of discipline; from the Mahayana perspective, directly and indirectly benefiting beings is the practice of discipline. When engaging in a life-release, you harm no one, and you benefit others, so it is the practice of discipline.

You bear heat, cold, misunderstanding, criticism, and other hardships, so this is the practice of patience. No matter how tiring and demanding life-release is, you never stop saving animals and releasing them back into nature, so it is the practice of diligence. You don't have any hidden agenda, and all you think of is bringing freedom and happiness to the animals, so it is the practice of meditation. You bless the animals through chanting mantras or prayers, hoping to plant seeds of liberation in their mindstream, or you are free from the three concepts of "me," "animals," and "the action of life-release" so it is the practice of wisdom.

According to Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, the six transcendent perfections apply both to the person listening to the teaching and to the teacher. Here is how the six transcendent perfections apply to the teacher:²⁰⁰

Generosity involves explaining the teaching without hoping to gain anything, be praised or become famous.

Discipline involves not being sarcastic or scornful of others and so forth.

Patience involves answering questions again and again without getting irritated.

Diligence involves tirelessly teaching the Dharma day and night.

²⁰⁰ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by Dipamkapa with the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004, page 38–39.

Concentration involves focusing one's attention on the words
and their meaning.

Wisdom involves being free from the three concepts and
inspiring disciples to study and reflect.

Speaking of concentration, a teacher definitely has to maintain concentration while teaching. If not, he cannot teach the whole class. It is easier to concentrate when teaching than when listening. When listening, a person physically stays in the class, but his mind may wander everywhere, and discursive thoughts arise one after another. Unless detected by another's psychic power, the listener's mind-wandering can barely be revealed. Listeners, like mango fruits, can be categorized into four types: unripe but seemingly ripe; ripe but seemingly unripe; unripe appearing as unripe; and ripe appearing as ripe. That is, a listener can be unconcentrated but seemingly concentrated; concentrated but seemingly unconcentrated; unconcentrated appearing as unconcentrated; and concentrated appearing as concentrated. Therefore, some listeners appear concentrated, seemingly staring at the teacher attentively, yet their minds are wandering elsewhere.

In contrast, if a teacher has even the slightest mind-wandering, he might not be able to deliver the teachings fluently.

In short, whichever virtuous deeds you are doing, be it listening to or giving teachings, releasing life, reciting mantras, and so forth, make sure you do it with the six transcendent perfections.

1.2.2.3. Other Modes of Conduct

Dharma listeners should also conscientiously comply with other modes of conduct. The *Vinaya* says:

Do not teach those who have no respect,
Who cover their heads although in good health,
Who carry canes, weapons and parasols,
Or whose heads are swathed in turbans.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ The translation of the version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 19.

This verse lists a few kinds of people who shouldn't be given teachings. We should reflect upon the list to see whether we are qualified Dharma recipients.

Who shouldn't be given the Dharma teachings?

a) **Those who have no respect:** When studying secular knowledge, a student knows he should be respectful in the pursuit of knowledge. In the case of studying the transcendental Dharma, the student should show even more respect so that he may be granted the teaching.

b) **Those who cover their heads even though in good health:** The student is allowed to cover his head for health reasons. Other than that, if he covers his head, for example, with a shawl, he should not be given teachings.

c) **Those who carry parasols:** However hot or rainy it is, the student is not allowed to listen under an open umbrella. Of course, you can use an umbrella if the teacher gives special permission. In the past, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche gave us outdoor teachings, sometimes he permitted us to use umbrellas, while other times he wanted to test our perseverance through ascetic practices, so no umbrellas were allowed.

I remember when Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught us *The Great Perfection of Peaceful Manjushri*²⁰² on the eastern summit of the Five Peaks Mountains, or Mount Wutai, in Shanxi Province. One day around noon, rain was pouring down, and Phuntsok Rinpoche told us not to open our umbrellas. He said, "It is now summer when sparrows won't freeze to death outside. When listening to this teaching, you'd better not hold an umbrella or cover your head with your shawl, showing your respect toward the Dharma."

All of us were soaking wet, but we kept on listening attentively. Dharma students are not like this anymore. If the teacher doesn't allow them to use an umbrella in heavy rain, the students will surely complain, thinking the teacher is unkind. They don't know that using no umbrella actually indicates respect for the Dharma.

d) **Those who carry canes;**

e) **Those who carry weapons;**

²⁰² The full title is: *Placing Buddhahood within Reach: The Practice Manual of Peaceful Manjushri*.

f) Those whose heads are swathed in turbans.

There is a similar verse in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Do not teach the Dharma to the disrespectful:
To those who, though not sick, wrap cloths around their heads,
To those who carry weapons, staffs, or parasols,
To those who are with covered heads.²⁰³

Be sure to comply with the modes of conduct and act accordingly when listening to teachings. Otherwise, your listening can result in major negative consequences, even including falling into the animal realm as a parrot.²⁰⁴ *Emperor Liang's Jeweled Repentance*, a classic work of Chinese Buddhism, says:

Having listened to the Dharma teachings,
Yet remaining indifferent in mind—
This will lead to being reborn as a long-eared donkey.

Therefore, if after listening to the authentic Dharma a person remains indifferent, or worse yet sneers at the teachings and doesn't put the teachings into practice, such a person will be reborn as a stubborn long-eared donkey.

The text also states:

While listening to the Dharma teachings,
If one gossips and distracts others from listening—
This will lead them to be reborn as a barking dog.

Some people pay no attention to the teachings and, even worse, they send text messages, eat snacks, or whisper to each other, saying, "Hello, how are you lately? Let's have a private chat and ignore the teacher's teaching!" Such inappropriate conduct is rarely seen at Larung Gar; our Buddhist Academy is a place for

²⁰³ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

²⁰⁴ According to Lala Sonam Chodrup's Commentary on the Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati, especially during the act of listening to the Dharma, if one doesn't focus on the teaching and listen attentively, it will be like pouring water into an upside-down pot—no teachings will be retained in one's mind; meanwhile, if one also engages in idle talk, this act will become an obstacle to both oneself and others in hearing the Dharma; as stated in the sutra, this conduct is a wrongdoing of abandoning the Dharma, which results in being reborn as a parrot.

serious Buddhist studies and practices. However, many laypeople, when listening to teachings elsewhere, do not uphold proper conduct. Those who distract others from listening to teachings will be reborn as barking dogs.

Zermig, one of the principal texts of the Bön religion, includes a story about a man listening to teachings. During the Buddha's time, this man attended the Buddha's teachings for three years. While his behaviors appeared very proper, his mind was always filled with evil thoughts, including thoughts of killing or stealing. In the end, this man was reborn into the hell realm, experiencing excruciating suffering from extreme heat and cold.

From listening to teachings, we all hope to gain benefit for ourselves and others, and to avoid falling into the three lower realms. Therefore, we should comply with proper modes of conduct.

Ascertaining the Three Vows lists twenty-six types of individuals with disrespectful behavior who shouldn't be given the Dharma teachings, including those who have shoes on, who wear a hat, who carry an umbrella and weapons, and more. A bhikkhu is not supposed to deliver teachings to such individuals; otherwise, the bhikkhu is considered to be breaching the precepts by committing an auxiliary fault.

However, it seems that some teachers do not know this. For example, some teachers wear hats while teaching, and the listeners imitate them by also putting hats on while listening. If the teacher is a bhikkhu, then the number of listeners is also the number of times the auxiliary fault is committed by the bhikkhu. This should not be happening. There are also people who listen to teachings with their shoes on, which should also be discouraged. These modes of conduct are not unique to Tibetan Buddhism; they come from the *Vinaya*, a set of rules applicable to monastics.

Sadly, many monastics have not undertaken systematic studies in Buddhism, so they lack such knowledge. Now that we have such great causes and conditions, I hope everyone, including monastics and lay practitioners, will study diligently. From a Buddhist's conduct, we can sometimes infer whether they have received teachings. For example, if they have proper conduct and their practices are in sequence, we know this person must have studied the Dharma. In contrast, from the conduct of some other people, we can easily tell they have not listened to any

teachings. Therefore, it is very important to have impeccable modes of conduct when listening to teachings. We should commit no wrongdoing through Dharma.

The above covers the modes of conduct to avoid, so now let's move to the conduct to adopt:

And the *Jatakas* says:

Take the lowest seat.

Cultivate the dignified bearing of thorough discipline.

With your eyes brimming with joy.

Drink in the words like nectar

And be completely concentrated.

This is the way to listen to the teaching.²⁰⁵

What should we do?

“Take the lowest seat”: Dharma students should be seated lower than the teacher, not at the same level as the teacher. It is not the correct etiquette if the teacher sits on a small chair at a lower position while the students sit on a comfortable sofa in a higher position. Many people, when listening to video teachings, put the TV or computer on the ground and seat themselves in a tall chair so they look down at the screen. To receive Buddhist teachings in this way is not appropriate. Although the video is not the teacher in his physical form, it is still the image of the teacher, so you should be respectful.

Once, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was teaching in the Great Dharma Hall at Larung Gar, some disciples sat on the left stairs that were higher than Phuntsok Rinpoche's Dharma seat. Phuntsok Rinpoche appeared displeased and criticized them, saying, “You are sitting higher than me; then I don't have to teach you anymore. It should be you teaching me instead. Don't you remember what it says in the *Vinaya*? Please get down!”

Similarly, when you listen to teachings via TV, make sure you sit on the floor if possible. If you have health conditions, or if space is limited for group study, then it is okay if a very few people sit on the sofa. When you listen to my teachings on the spot, I often check your modes of conduct, for example, whether you wear a hat

²⁰⁵ The translation of the version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 19.

or shoes, or whether you sit properly. Please pay attention to your conduct when listening to teachings.

“Cultivate the dignified bearing of thorough discipline”: When listening to teachings, you should remain gentle and dignified and refrain from anger and other inappropriate conduct.

“With your eyes brimming with joy”: You should look at the teacher with joy, but make sure you don’t appear ecstatic. If you have a big smile all the time, become overly cheerful, and even wave to the teacher, this is not good. The teacher is delivering the teachings; what’s the point of waving to them? You just need to listen attentively to the teacher.

“Drink in the words like nectar and be completely concentrated”: *The Meeting of Father and Son* has a verse I really like, and it says:

The Dharma teacher with skillful means
Is capable of showing the real path to the
Unconditioned (nirvana).
Those who aspire to seek peace and enlightenment
Shall venerate the teacher and stay close to him.

So those who aspire to attain enlightenment should rely on the teacher with joy and respect, follow him for a long time, and cut off all inappropriate modes of conduct.

I still have many things to share, but time is up for today’s teaching. I have to end here. Well, just let unspoken words be concealed in the Dharmadhatu of my wisdom!



Lesson 14

“The main subject of the chapter ... their faculties are incomplete.” [page 19–20]

We have learned the proper way to listen to teachings, including the right attitude and the right conduct. Today, we move to the teaching itself—the whole sequence of ngöndro, or preliminary practices.

I have repeatedly stressed that, although the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* seems simple, its meaning is very profound, so we must devote ourselves to studying it to generate conviction. Such conviction is indispensable to any practice, so please contemplate the text repeatedly in order to internalize the teachings.

This sequence of practice is very important for each of us. Many Dharma masters, from the Tibetan and Han regions of China, accept and guide disciples with various skillful means. While the disciples have different preferences and intentions, the masters should always urge them to establish a solid foundation through embracing the basic teachings of Buddhism. By doing so, their practice in this life won’t go wrong.

When Venerable Atisha came to Tibet, he secretly gave Dromtönpa (1005–1064) the teachings of the ngöndro practice sequence, from the practice of “the precious human life” to “transference of consciousness.” Dromtönpa was puzzled, asking, “Why do you give other disciples empowerment and the secret mantras while you teach me the ngöndro sequence?”

Atisha answered, “Because I have no one to whom this teaching can be

entrusted except you.” Due to this, Dromtönpa became the lineage holder after Atisha, and his Dharma activities were very vast.

Once, Kadampa master Puchungwa (1031–1106) asked Geshe Chengawa (1033–1103), “Two options: one is well-versed in the five major sciences,²⁰⁶ having the five psychic abilities²⁰⁷ and attaining eight ordinary accomplishments;²⁰⁸ and the other is experiencing the stages of the path to arise in the mind. Which one do you choose?”

Geshe Chengawa answered, “Not to mention ‘experiencing the stages of the path to arise in the mind,’ even if it is just ‘having the conviction that the stages of the path are indeed like this’ is sufficient for me to make the choice. In our past lives, we have been well-versed in the Five Major Sciences, have had five psychic abilities, and attained eight classical siddhis innumerable times, yet we were not freed from

²⁰⁶ The five major sciences (Tib. རིག་གནས་ཆེན་པོ་ལྔ་, rigné chenpo nga; Wyl. rig gnas chen po lnga) are part of the ten sciences or traditional fields of knowledge in which a learned person is supposed to be well-versed. They are:

- craftsmanship (Skt. śilpa; Tib. བཟོ་རིག་པ་, Wyl. bzo rig pa)
- logic (hetu; Tib. གཏན་ཆོག་པ་, Wyl. gtan tshigs)
- grammar (śabda; Tib. སྒྲ་, Wyl. sgra)
- medicine (cikitsā; Tib. གསོ་བ་, Wyl. gso ba)
- ‘Inner science’ or Dharma (Tib. རྩ་དོན་རིག་པ་, Wyl. nang don rig pa)

²⁰⁷ The five psychic abilities include:

- The divine eye
- The divine ear
- Knowledge of other minds
- Recollection of previous lives
- Various supernatural powers

²⁰⁸ The eight ordinary accomplishments or siddhis are:

- The siddhi of the celestial realm is the ability to dwell in celestial realms while still alive.
- The siddhi of the sword (Skt. khadgasiddhi; Tib. རལ་གྲི་དོན་གསུམ་, Wyl. ral gri'i dngos grub) is the ability to overcome any hostile army.
- The siddhi of the pill (Tib. རིལ་བུ་, Wyl. ril bu) is the ability to become invisible by blessing pills and holding them in your hand.
- With the siddhi of fleet-footedness (Skt. pādukasiddhi; Tib. རྩ་མཚུགས་, Wyl. rkang mgyogs), by wearing boots you have blessed, you can walk around a lake in an instant.
- With the vase siddhi you can create a vessel that makes anything you put inside it, food or money for example, inexhaustible.
- The siddhi of yaksha is the power to make yakshas your servants. They then follow your orders and accomplish the work of a million people in a single night.
- The siddhi of the elixir (Skt. rasasiddhi) gives you a lifespan as long as the sun and the moon, the strength of an elephant, the beauty of a lotus, and makes you feel as light as cotton wool whenever you get up from your seat.
- With the siddhi of the balm of magic sight (Skt. añjanasiddhi; Tib. མིག་ལྷན་, Wyl. mig sman), you can see things beneath the earth, such as treasures and so on, when you apply balm to your eyes. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

samsara. If we have conviction about the ngöndro practice sequence, definitely we will be liberated from samsara!”

Therefore, practitioners in the degenerate age shouldn't first go after the high teachings. Instead, we must start with the ngöndro practices. We should understand the meaning of the ngöndro guidances, but most importantly, we must meditate on each guidance one by one. For example, when meditating on the “precious human life,” we should develop this conviction:

“It is very precious for me to have this human life, and it is even more precious to have a human life during which one can study the Dharma. Now that I have this precious human life, from now on I must always use it to diligently practice the Dharma.”

If such a conviction arises in you, your practice will start well and end well.

We should follow in the footsteps of eminent masters of the past. Being practitioners with superior faculties, those masters still followed the sequence and completed the practices with great diligence. In comparison, how can we—ordinary people with heavy karmic debts and strong afflictions—not dedicate ourselves to the diligent practice of ngöndro?

If you want your practice along the path to not regress, the key lies in your current effort with the ngöndro practice. Since the beginningless time, our afflictions have been deeply rooted in our mindstream. So, your afflictions won't be uprooted right away by just studying the Dharma sporadically for a short period of time. Thus, we must first complete ngöndro, including the common and uncommon preliminary practices.

It is not too hard to understand the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. For example, what are the eight states without freedom? What are the ten advantages? How is the cyclic rebirth in the six realms? The contents in this text are much easier to understand than those in Buddhist logic and *Treasury of Abhidharma*.²⁰⁹ But when you practice ngöndro, make sure you don't just know the verbal meaning of the text; the most important thing is to develop conviction in the mind and generate irreversible faith in each meditative guidance.

²⁰⁹ Abhidharma is the third of the three pitakas, or collections (literally ‘baskets’), into which the Buddhist teachings are divided. This pitaka, which is associated with the training in wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*), defines many of the topics mentioned in the sutras and arranges them in classifications, such as the five skandhas, 12 āyatanas, and 18 dhatus, thereby providing tools for generating a precise understanding of all experience. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Once, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang went to visit his guru. His guru asked him about the progress of his ngöndro practice. Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang answered,

“I can’t say that I have completed the four common preliminary practices perfectly and impeccably, but from my practice here are some things I feel certain about myself:

Since I was a young child, I had little interest in worldly wealth and fame. Especially now, your blessings have enabled me to understand that everything is an illusion without inherent existence. So, I don’t have to try hard to generate renunciation, as my renunciation arises naturally.

Meanwhile, my faith in the Three Jewels increases day by day, and what I say aligns with what I really think. I fully understand that bodhicitta is the foundation of the Mahayana path, so whoever I meet in daily life—friends or foes, family or strangers—I regard them as my mothers of past lives and sincerely hope they will be free from suffering and will enjoy happiness.”

Hearing this, his guru was very happy, saying, “That is certainly ideal! However, it is worth mentioning that the state attained through ngöndro may regress easily if not followed by sustained practice. This is because our mind is obscured by heavy afflictions; thus, although you seem to know the text very well now, over time you may easily forget it. You should thoroughly know by heart and firmly hold onto the definition, outline, and sequential order of each ngöndro practice. Therefore, you’d better memorize by heart the entire text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.” The guru then gave him a copy of the text.

Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang followed his guru’s instructions and memorized the entire text. Knowing this, his guru was very delighted and highly praised him. Unlike many of us, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang didn’t “negotiate” with his guru by saying, “I am busy,” “I am tired,” “I am sick,” and so forth. Some Dharma students would come up with many reasons to avoid memorizing the short text of Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*, let alone such a long text!

Many practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism memorize the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* word by word. Of course, to achieve this, practitioners must put great effort into mastering the text, and by doing so, the text will be etched in their memory for their whole lifetime. Whenever they need certain contents from the text, the words naturally arise in their minds.

In contrast, you merely attend the teachings and then lay aside the Dharma

book, which you never read again, or you flipped through the book a few years ago and have never touched it since. In such cases, not to mention remembering the content by heart, you won't even easily recall a single piece of scriptural evidence in the text.

Many khenpos at Larung Gar are well-versed in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. For example, some of them have memorized the text by heart. Others are exceptionally familiar with the content, although they have not memorized every single word. When a story, quote, or paragraph is brought up, they immediately know where it is by heart.

As for me, I have a very deep affinity with *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. When I first studied the Dharma, I listened to the teaching of this text. At that time, I wrote down all the scriptural evidence and Buddhist stories in my diary. While I was practicing my ngöndro, I would try to memorize these notes during my lunch break. Therefore, I have memorized all the scriptural evidence and stories in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Although I didn't memorize the text word by word, I still remember clearly which stories, scriptural evidence, and arguments appear in which sections of the text. Patrul Rinpoche's words—the essence of his wisdom and compassion—arise very often in my mind.

However, many people don't pay enough attention to the text; they just put the copy on their shrine as an object of veneration or put it away after reading it only once. Many people read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in the same way they read a novel: they go through the text overnight, then put it back on the bookshelf and never read it again. This is not right.

If a great enlightened master like Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang²¹⁰ made a great effort to memorize the text by heart, how can we ordinary people place little importance on it? If we don't place great emphasis on the text, we can hardly get genuine blessings and attain states of realization.

Many people are skilled in their fields of expertise, such as computer science and medicine. They can easily accomplish professional tasks. Some sangha members at Larung Gar are like this. For example, one practitioner hasn't received any special training in information technology, but whenever a computer goes wrong, they just need to "meditate" on the problem for a short while, then they can pinpoint the reason and solve the issue. I find this amazing. But can they apply this special

²¹⁰ According to prophecy, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang is the emanation of Vimalamitra.

“talent” when studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*? Can they pinpoint and internalize the essence of the teachings right away? I am not sure.

Some people may think, “Where ngöndro is concerned, all the lineages in Tibetan Buddhism, be they Sakya, Gelug, or Nyingma, always talk about things like ‘the precious human life,’ ‘the impermanence of life,’ and more. Why not bring in innovations? Wouldn’t it be great if a new practice sequence was introduced?”

Such a thought is truly naive.

Eminent masters are fully aware of the sequence an ordinary being needs to go through in order to attain the fruition of a sublime being. By following the practice sequence, innumerable beings have attained realization in the past, and innumerable beings will attain realization in the future.

Many senior Dharma masters and practitioners I’ve encountered put emphasis on the same instruction: Practitioners shouldn’t rush to the high teachings; they should first practice ngöndro well. These great masters never said a practitioner should skip ngöndro and directly land on the summit of all practices, and then descend in a top-down manner. Especially those great masters who have been practicing for their whole lives have all praised the importance of ngöndro. They say only when one practices ngöndro well can one avoid falling into the lower realms and instead attain real accomplishment.

Meanwhile, when practicing ngöndro, it is indispensable to pray to the guru with faith and devotion. Why does Patrul Rinpoche title the text “Kunzang Lamé Shyalung,” which literally means *The Oral Teachings of the Samantabhadra Teacher*? Here, “Samantabhadra” refers to his root guru Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, in whom Patrul Rinpoche had extreme faith. To Patrul Rinpoche, his guru was inseparable from the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra. Hence, he called his root guru “Samantabhadra.”

In Tibet, a faithful disciple dares not refer to the guru directly by name. For example, debaters in Tibetan Buddhism refer to venerable Longchenpa as “Longchen Rabjam of the Dharmakaya,” while disciples of Khenpo Shenga (1871–1927)²¹¹ refer to their guru as “Vajradhara Shenga Rinpoche.” Guru

²¹¹ Khenpo Shenga (Tib. མཁན་པོ་གཙན་དགའ་, Wyl. mkhan po gzhan dga’) aka Shenpen Chökyi Nangwa (གཙན་པན་ཚེས་ཀྱི་སང་པ་, Wyl. gzhan phan chos kyi snang ba) (1871–1927)—an important figure in the Rimé movement who revitalized the study in much of Eastern Tibet by founding shedras and revising the scholastic curriculum with an emphasis on the classical treatises of India. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche mentioned that Khenpo Shenga had 25 illustrious disciples, who all attained great conviction about Mahayana Buddhism.

devotion is extremely important. If you regard *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* as an ordinary novel-like text, and you never pray to the lineage masters with faith, you won't be able to open the door of wisdom.

Buddhism always emphasizes that a practitioner should never be parted from faith and compassion. Lineage masters and their teachings have inconceivable blessings, and the teachings are actually the essence of all buddhas and bodhisattvas. Now that we are fortunate enough to encounter the teachings of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and lineage masters, we should have extraordinary faith in them. This is the meaning of “never be parted from faith.”

Meanwhile, we should think in this way: Due to our ripened merits, we have encountered the supreme teachers and the Mahayana teachings, whereas tens of thousands of beings around us are still deeply trapped in the ocean of samsara's suffering due to their ignorance. Thus, we ought to generate fervent compassion toward those beings, hoping that one day we will liberate them all; we will share the Mahayana teachings with them instead of keeping them to ourselves, so that all beings in the three realms will be nourished by the Dharma rain. This is the meaning of “never be parted from compassion.”

If studying and practicing the Dharma with faith and compassion, our mind will be nourished and will gradually soften. In contrast, without faith in buddhas and bodhisattvas and compassion toward beings of the six realms, perhaps you may remember and explain the teachings clearly at the beginning, but eventually your Dharma activities may not necessarily flourish.

Dharma study is not like an intellectual contest on the pure accumulation of knowledge. Instead, a Buddhist must integrate the teachings bit by bit into their mind and heart. In fact, the inner state is reflected by the outer signs of speech and actions. If your mind is at peace, your body and speech will appear peaceful. Wherever you are, be it a quiet temple or a crowded marketplace, if your mind remains peaceful, you will always be as carefree as flowing water and floating clouds and will not get tainted by the muck of worldly affairs. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

Just like the lotus flower to which mud and water cannot cling,
Or sun and moon that course unhindered through the sky.

By then, whatever you do—dwelling in the mountains and forests with tigers

and wolves as companions or living a bustling worldly life with many others—you are benefiting other beings. And when causes and conditions ripen, you can teach the supreme Dharma to others.

If you aspire to benefit beings and propagate the Dharma, you will always find the opportunity to do so at any time. Of course, you must first complete the ngöndro. If you have never contemplated the “precious human life,” you will still feel that wealth and social status matter, and that human life is nothing precious. As a result, you will pursue worldly goals and can hardly succeed in your Dharma practice.

In contrast, if you understand the ngöndro teachings, contemplate them again and again and practice well, you will have absolutely no problem with any other practice. I dare to guarantee you this!

Speaking of “guarantee,” when a patient asks whether a doctor can guarantee a cure, the doctor may answer, “Oh! I cannot guarantee anything, not even a cure for a cold.” Similarly, if you don’t practice ngöndro, I dare not “sign” a guarantee saying your practice will definitely be a success. But if you practice well, even a person like me will dare to “sign” such a guarantee.

Many people tell me, “I want to become a real Dharma practitioner in this life, so please, my guru, sign a guarantee for me!” Well, it depends on your ngöndro practice. If you practice well, you should be able to become a good practitioner, so I am okay to sign.

Otherwise, the world is quite complicated and filled with temptations; ordinary beings can easily be lured by external distractions. As no one dares to guarantee a child’s safety if the child wanders into a battlefield, I dare not guarantee anything for those living in this turbid world who never practice ngöndro. Thus, ngöndro is crucial for practitioners of this degenerate era.

2. THE TEACHING ITSELF

The teaching itself has three parts: first, the ordinary or external preliminaries (or common preliminaries); second, the extraordinary or internal preliminaries (or uncommon preliminaries); third, the swift path of transference.

The difference between “common” and “uncommon” lies in the following aspects:

First: “Common” means the teachings are in common with Sutrayana; “uncommon” means the teachings are only in the extraordinary Vajrayana. For example, teachings concerning “the precious human life” and “the impermanence of life” can also be found in Sutrayana, whereas teachings concerning the refuge of the inseparable union of the three kayas, the purification practice of Vajrasattva, and the kusali’s accumulation are exclusively in Vajrayana and are not explicitly covered in Sutrayana.

Second: “Common” means the teachings are in common with those in Theravada; “uncommon” means the teachings are unique to Mahayana. Teachings of “the precious human life,” “the impermanence of life,” “following the teacher,” and more can be found in the classical Theravada texts, whereas teachings of Mahayana refuge, bodhicitta, and Vajrasattva cannot be found there.

Third: “Common” means the teachings are in common with those of other lineages such as Gelug and Sakya; “uncommon” means the teachings are unique to Nyingma. For example, all the lineages have teachings on “the precious human life” and “the impermanence of life,” whereas practices involving the visualization of Padmasambhava are unique to Nyingma.

Fourth: According to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, “common” also means the teachings include foundational instructions that can be practiced by people from different lineages, whereas “uncommon” means the teachings are pith instructions that cannot be practiced by practitioners of other lineages.

In short, there are different ways to interpret “common” and “uncommon.”

2.1. THE COMMON PRELIMINARY PRACTICES

The common preliminary practices include six subjects: first, the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages; second, the impermanence of life; third, the defects of samsara; fourth, actions—the principle of cause and effect; fifth, the benefits of liberation; and sixth, how to follow a spiritual teacher.

The chapter on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages is explained in four sections: reflecting on the nature of freedom, reflecting on the particular advantages related to Dharma, reflecting on images that show how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages, and reflecting on numerical comparisons.



THE COMMON PRELIMINARIES



THE DIFFICULTY OF FINDING THE
FREEDOMS AND ADVANTAGES

THE IMPERMANENCE OF LIFE

THE DEFECTS OF SAMSA RA

ACTIONS: THE PRINCIPLE OF CAUSE
AND EFFECT

THE BENEFITS OF LIBERATION

HOW TO FOLLOW A SPIRITUAL TEACHER

2.1.1. THE DIFFICULTY OF FINDING THE FREEDOMS AND ADVANTAGES

2.1.1.1. Reflecting on the Nature of Freedom

Generally speaking, “freedom” refers to having the opportunity to practice Dharma and not being born in one of the eight states devoid of opportunity.

Many people complain, “I am so busy! I have to work,” “I have to handle things at home; I have no time for ngöndro,” “I have no time to listen to the teachings. When I finally retire and my family members are less dependent on me, I will go back to the Dharma.” Day after day, they procrastinate about their practice. This wrong attitude and its corresponding actions are also considered a sort of “lack of freedom.”

But strictly speaking, “lack of freedom” refers to those states covered below. They are categorized into eight states, according to beings’ existential states and particular conditions. If one were to be born in one of the eight states, there would indeed be no opportunity to practice Dharma.

A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher covers extensively the eight states without freedom. When meditating on the “lack of freedom,” Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang suggests starting from the Guru Yoga practice, then proceeding to analytical meditation on the eight states, with each state described in great detail in the text. Each of you should consult this guide, which includes profound pith instructions for practice.

Recently, we learned Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang’s suggestion on meditation: Each meditation session should consist of the preliminary practice, the main part, and the conclusion. The preliminary practice includes the essential points for the body, speech, and mind. While the main practice focuses on meditating according to the guidance, starting by meditating on the topics of “the precious human life.”

When studying the preliminaries, you should integrate the contents of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* with the practice instructions in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and the scriptural evidence and reasoning in *The Great Chariot*—Longchenpa’s auto-commentary on *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*. Then you should devote yourself to the practice accordingly. By doing so, a rock-solid conviction will arise in your mind.

Those who are following the teaching meditate on the ten instructions regarding the “precious human life.” If you are not satisfied with your present practice, you may repeat the meditations all over again. The text in the meditation guidance seems very easy to understand, so some people don’t see the point in doing the practice. However, knowing the literal meaning versus generating conviction in the mind are two very different things, so please make sure you emphasize meditation.

The eight states of “lack of freedom” are not unique to Tibetan Buddhism. They are explicitly explained in the classical Buddhist works, including *Madhyama Agama* and *The Sutra of the Eight States Without Freedom and Eight Freedoms*.²¹² Unfortunately, many of these classical works have long been stored in the sutra repositories and remain untouched, gathering dust over time. Throughout history, giving and listening to Dharma teachings have not been a particularly popular tradition in Chinese Buddhism.

Today’s lay practitioners have a relatively good understanding of the Dharma, but some monastics seem to be occupied with various other activities, and their interest in listening to and reflecting on the Dharma appears to be lacking. Normally, monastics should carry out the tasks of giving teachings and benefiting others, whereas lay practitioners cannot fully devote themselves to Dharma activities because they have to make a living. If a lay practitioner doesn’t work as a businessman, an industrial worker, or a farmer, who else can support their living?

A monastic shouldn’t stay in the temple all day to simply relax or practice alone and feel content to just make lamp offerings in front of buddhas’ statues. Since the monastic has forgone everything, including family and career, they should devote themselves wholeheartedly to protecting and upholding the Buddha’s teachings. Therefore, the monastic should not only be well-versed in the Dharma but also give teachings to others.

I wish that every monastery or temple would offer Dharma teachings. Only when there is teaching can the true Dharma still remain in the world. If monastics do not give teachings, then the temples would be left with only Buddhist statues and scriptures. Whether there are monastics in the temple or not would not make much difference. Such a temple is no different from ordinary tourist attractions

²¹² The sutra is translated from Sanskrit to Chinese by master Yijing, a Tang-era Chinese Buddhist monk famed as a traveler and translator.

where, for the sake of collecting donations, statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas marked with words like “blessing” or “safety” are placed.

Except for a very few temples, most temples in Han Chinese areas don’t emphasize Dharma studies enough. The tradition of giving and listening to teachings is far less popular in Han areas than in Tibetan areas. Therefore, I sincerely wish for each temple in a Han area to have a teaching center for listening to teachings and a retreat center for practicing the Dharma. Teaching and practicing are the core of the Dharma, while everything else is just peripheral to monastics.

Some monastics aspire to spread the Dharma; however, they don’t have a voice in their temples. Similar situations also occur in Tibetan monasteries. For example, a khenpo wants to vigorously promote Dharma teaching, but the abbot disapproves of it, so the khenpo cannot do too much. Some monastics experience the same situation as this khenpo: they wish to give teachings, yet the abbot wants to keep the status quo and make no changes; as a result, the monastics’ wishes are met with conflicting reality.

A temple and a monastery should play the role of propagating the Dharma and benefiting beings. Otherwise, it is just a place for making incense offerings to statues of the buddhas; therefore, whether that qualifies as an activity propagating the Dharma is worth further examination. Thus, Dharma teachings should be promoted as much as possible. If some temples don’t have the tradition of teaching the Dharma, they should now try to establish one.

“Lack of freedom” refers to those eight states devoid of such an opportunity:

Being born in the hells, in the preta realm,
As an animal, a long-lived god or a barbarian,
Having wrong views, being born when there is no Buddha
Or being born deaf and mute;
These are the eight states without freedom.²¹³

1) Being born in the hells

Hell beings have no opportunity to practice the Dharma due to the endless suffering they endure from extreme heat or cold. They also experience excruciating

²¹³ The translation of the version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche’s *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 20.

sufferings in the ephemeral hells and the neighboring hells. *The Sutra of the Eight States Without Freedom and Eight Freedoms* says:

Beings in the hells of copper pillars and iron hills suffer
excruciating pains,
So do beings in the hells of the pit of hot embers, the swamp of
putrescent corpses, and the forest of swords;
While being tormented in the hells,
How can they have the opportunity to listen to the authentic
teachings?

2) Being born in the preta realm

The *pretas*, or hungry ghosts, have no opportunity to practice the Dharma due to the suffering they experience from hunger and thirst.

Let alone hungry ghosts, even a human missing one meal doesn't want to practice. For example, someone takes the eight one-day precepts,²¹⁴ and by the evening, they have no energy for listening to teachings, memorizing verses, or making prostrations; they try to go to sleep earlier but cannot. Therefore, when in a state of hunger and thirst, it is hard for a person to practice the Dharma. The Buddha says:

Extremely hungry and thirsty, the preta's throat is thinner than
a needle,
And the sufferings are excruciating;
Rain falls into the river and becomes a raging fire,
And pretas are tormented in it;
How can they have the opportunity to listen to the authentic
teachings?

We are so fortunate we were not reborn as a hungry ghost in this life. Otherwise, let alone engaging in a formal Dharma practice, we wouldn't even have had the opportunity to recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara or listen to the teachings of one sutra.

²¹⁴ The eight one-day precepts are: no killing, no stealing, no sexual contact, no lying, no taking intoxicants, no sitting on high or expensive beds or seats, no entertainment and ornamentation, and no eating after midday.

3) Being born as an animal

Animals, such as fish and shrimp in the ocean, or cattle and horses on the ground, have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they are subjected to enslavement and attacks from other animals. The Buddha says:

Constantly intending to harm each other, often seeking to
devour others,
The animals are tormented in such a realm;
How can they have the opportunity to listen to the authentic
teachings?

4) Being born as long-lived gods

The long-lived gods have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they live in a state of mental blankness. There are different explanations regarding where these gods live; it could be in the *arūpaloka*—the world of formlessness, the *kāmadhātu*—the world of desire, or the fourth heaven of the *rūpadhātu*—the world of form. Nevertheless, beings reborn as long-lived gods abide in a state of perceiving nothing²¹⁵ for kalpas, so they cannot practice the Dharma.

Some Dharma practitioners stay at home mindlessly; half an hour has passed, and their minds are still blank—maybe they are about to be reborn as long-lived gods. Very dangerous! (*The audience laughs.*) The long-lived gods don't generate a single thought within multiple kalpas, and eventually, they fall into lower realms due to the arising of a wrong thought, so they don't have the opportunity to practice. The Buddha says:

Those who were reborn in the abode of Akanishtha
Due to the merits of previous lives,
Live a long life but cannot discern enlightenment and wisdom;
How can they have the opportunity to listen to the authentic
teachings?

5) Being born as a barbarian

Barbarians—those born in border countries—have no opportunity to practice

²¹⁵ According to Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the gods without perception have created a blankness in their minds and perceive nothing, as in the state of deep sleep without dreams.

the Dharma because the Buddha's teaching is unavailable in such places. There are no scriptures of the Dharma, no realization of the Dharma, and no fourfold assembly—comprising monks, nuns, male lay disciples, and female lay disciples—in such places, resulting in no opportunity to practice. People living in some places have never even heard the name of the Three Jewels; they cannot distinguish buddhas from gods. In particular, people living in certain rural areas know nothing about Buddhism, and their way of thinking is scary—they think the law of karma doesn't exist at all. If a person is reborn in such a barbarian place, they definitely have no opportunity to practice the Dharma.

For example, the hometowns of some Han Chinese monastics here at Larung Gar have no signs of Buddhism, so these places are literally “border countries.” When a person from such a place becomes a monastic, their family feels ashamed. As a matter of fact, when a person from a family that has been committing negative actions for generations decides to take ordination, all of their family members will receive the benefit, so they should be as delighted as if they received a wish-fulfilling jewel. It was often said by past eminent masters, “When one child takes ordination, nine clans of kinsmen will ascend to heaven.”

The views of these family members, however, are upside down. They think, “What a shame that my daughter is now a nun! When she comes back to visit me for the spring festival, I hope she is not hairless! She should grow her hair before coming back; it is fine even if the hair is very short! Otherwise, how can I hold my head up in front of others?” Such people are considered barbarian. The Buddha says:

Being born in border countries full of unvirtuous actions,
Never hearing the teachings of the Dharma,
Having no discernment, and always living in barbarian places,
How can those people have the opportunity to listen to the
authentic teaching?

When I see certain Han Chinese monastics at Larung Gar not studying and practicing well, I sometimes feel a bit disappointed and discouraged. But when I think that they forwent family and career, resisted all pressure, and became ordained in this sacred place, I feel inspired by their courage, especially when I compare them with those worldly people. Some of these monastics used to have

beautiful hair, but even though they found nobody to give them the head shaving ceremony,²¹⁶ they managed to shave all the hair off by themselves. What courage!

As you have witnessed, many people constantly engage in wrongdoing such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying; they excel in negative actions but rarely do anything wholesome. Upon first hearing the term “Three Jewels,” they may associate it with agate, coral, and diamond. How precious it is that we have the opportunity to practice the Dharma in this turbid world!

6) Having wrong views

Those born as *tirthikas* or with similar wrong views have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because their minds are deeply entrenched in those mistaken beliefs.

Tirthikas refer to non-Buddhist religious or philosophical traditions, adhering to extreme views of eternalism and nihilism. Presently, there are many proponents of nihilism who refute the existence of rebirth, karma, the Blissful Pure Land, hells, and so forth.

There are also some people who, although holding no such extreme views, have no particular visions or life values. They are content with just a decent living standard—eating well and dressing well. Their goal of life is no different from that of a yak. The Buddha says:

Having no faith in the Three Jewels,
Refuting the law of karma and the existence of noble beings,
These wrong views obscuring the mind,
How can those people have the opportunity to listen to the
authentic teachings?

Sometimes we hold wrong views and have doubts. If a child, early on, establishes right views, including that the Pure Land exists and the law of karma is true, when he grows up, it is very likely that he will still hold those views. However, many people didn't grow up with Buddhism; they were inculcated with atheistic views. When they first study the Dharma, it is hard for them to change those views. Therefore, doubts may easily arise. Such doubts can be cleared with the true

²¹⁶ The ceremony occurs when someone is entering monastic life and has to shave his or her head before the ordination ceremony.

wisdom of Dharma. Without uprooting those doubts, wrong views will always arise in people's minds, preventing them from practicing the Dharma.

7) Being born when there is no buddha

Those born during a dark kalpa have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they never even hear of the Three Jewels and cannot discern between good and bad.

Luckily, we were not born during a dark kalpa. Now that the Buddha has appeared and has turned the Dharma Wheel three times, and the Dharma still abides in the world, we are fortunate to have been born in an era illuminated by the wisdom of the Buddha, which guides us in discerning between good and bad. If we were born during a dark kalpa, we would have no opportunity to practice. The Buddha says:

The buddhas don't appear;
The sublime Dharma doesn't come into the world;
Being born in such a dark kalpa,
How can people have the opportunity to listen to authentic
teaching?

8) Being born deaf and mute

Those born mute or with cognitive impairments have no opportunity to practice the Dharma due to their incomplete faculties.

The Buddha says:

Negative karmas from previous lives,
Result in rebirth as a person with incomplete faculties.
When a person is deaf, blind, mute, or mentally deficient, like
a yak living in the form of a human,
How can that person have the opportunity to listen to authentic
teaching?

In short, the Buddha says:

The eight states without freedom that I listed
Are the difficult states of sentient beings;

Those who are in the states with freedom
Are rare and precious in the world.

The eight states without freedom in the Buddha's teachings are the difficult states of sentient beings; if an individual is free from the eight states and has freedom, then he has no obstacles preventing him from practicing Dharma. Such a person is truly rare and precious in this world.

Some people applaud an individual's worldly success, saying, "He earned one million dollars this year! So rare and precious!" "He is promoted to the position of a top government official! So rare and precious!" Alas, nothing is rare and precious about these so-called successes.

The truly rare and precious thing is this: You used to be a busy "prisoner" living in the city, and you could not even spare one hour a day on Dharma practice. But now that you have laid aside worldly matters and practice the Dharma with ease, this kind of happiness is indeed rare and precious. Therefore, we should try our very best to have such freedom.

Where worldly pursuits are concerned, some people are well-organized and always have time. However, when it comes to Dharma practice, they find all kinds of excuses to dodge practice. They say, "I don't have time," "I am too busy," etc. For example, if the goal is to meditate on bodhicitta, it may be hard for someone to get up at 8 a.m. to practice; yet, the same person has no problem getting up at 7 a.m. for work. This indicates they have serious karmic obstacles.

We are practicing ngöndro. Some can do 180 to 200 prostrations in half an hour every day, while others cannot. In fact, it is you who create the conditions that limit your freedom. However busy you are, you can surely spare half an hour. Please discipline yourself well. This is very important.



Lesson 15

“The inhabitants of ... of the opportunity to practice them.” [page 20–21]

Yesterday, I briefly covered the eight states without freedom. Today, I will provide a more in-depth analysis.

Three lower realms (for hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals)

Beings in the three lower realms constantly face torment from heat, cold, hunger, thirst, and other forms of suffering as a result of their past negative actions. This leaves them with no opportunity to practice the Dharma.

As human beings, we cannot see the scenes in the hells and the *preta* (hungry ghost) realms, but we can see animals with our own eyes. No animal, even just for one day, can commit virtuous deeds by first taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, and later dedicating merit. Therefore, we can infer by comparison and know that hell beings and hungry ghosts are even less likely to have the opportunity for hearing or practicing the Dharma.

The summer heat and winter cold in the human realm are nothing compared to the heat and cold of the hells. During exceptionally cold winters or hot summers, we humans may lack the drive or courage to practice the Dharma, let alone hell beings. Hunger and thirst in the human realm are nothing compared to those in the *preta* realm. If we don’t eat anything just for one day, we humans don’t feel like practicing, let alone hungry ghosts who have nothing to eat for tens of thousands

of years. Animals also have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they undergo enslavement and lack the mental capacity.

Therefore, we must understand that the inhabitants of the three lower realms have no opportunity to practice the Dharma, as stated in the *Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma*:

How can they hear the Dharma?
 Animals attack each other;
Pretas suffer from hunger and thirst;
 Hells are full of torments.

This sutra clearly describes the sufferings in the three lower realms.

We should constantly aspire not to be reborn into the lower realms. Among all the inhabitants of the three lower realms, being an animal is considered relatively better. Yet, once we are reborn in the animal realm, the suffering still lasts a very long time. When Anathapindika was building Jetavana Monastery for Buddha Shakyamuni, the Buddha referred to the ants on the ground, telling him: “They were ants since the era of Buddha Vipassī; they were reborn again and again as ants and have experienced the birth of seven buddhas in total. Today they are still ants.”

Once, Sariputra entered into samadhi—a state of meditative concentration—examining a pigeon’s past and future. He saw the bird had been reborn repeatedly as a pigeon in the past eighty thousand great kalpas and would remain a pigeon in the future eighty thousand great kalpas. Sariputra couldn’t see when the pigeon started and when it would end its rebirth as a pigeon.

Buddha Shakyamuni told Sariputra, “Apart from the lifetimes discernible by shravakas and pratyekabuddhas during which this being was and will be reborn as a pigeon, it will continue to be reborn as a pigeon for kalpas as countless as the grains of sand in the Ganges River. After its negative karmas are exhausted, this pigeon will then take continuous rebirth in the five realms, until finally it will be reborn as a human. After being a human for five hundred lives, it will finally have the opportunity to encounter the Buddha’s teachings and eventually the capacity to practice the Dharma.”

It is so difficult for animals to attain a human rebirth, let alone hungry ghosts and hell beings. Once a being falls into a lower realm, not for one life or two lives but for innumerable kalpas, this being won’t have the opportunity to hear the

Dharma. Without hearing the Dharma, this being cannot attain liberation, and thus will be deeply trapped in the sufferings of samsara for innumerable kalpas.

A wise person should carefully reflect on each instruction in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It is only through repetitive contemplation that the Dharma practice becomes effective. Otherwise, even if the guru gives you pointing-out instructions of the highest teachings in the Chan School or Vajrayana, such as “the nature of mind” or “the luminous and uncompounded nature of everything,” which may sound inspiring to you at the moment, but the “feeling” or “experience” won’t last. It’s like pouring hot water on a frozen lake on a winter day: the ice surface may start to melt, but soon it will freeze again.

Why is it so? This is because you have not established a solid foundation; thus, your so-called awakening experience is unstable and will not remain in your mindstream. Therefore, please practice preliminaries well; and after your Dharma foundation is solid, then proceed to the higher teachings and practices. Only by doing so can you truly gain benefits.

However, many people are doing the opposite: When the guru is giving the highest teachings, people flock to the Dharma hall, but when the guru is teaching ngöndro, the preliminaries, people disappear. The highest teachings in this case won’t benefit such people. Some practitioners rarely contemplate the eight states without freedom and think it is very easy for them to attain higher realization. It is a good aspiration, but without nourishing and softening their stubborn minds with the nectar of the Dharma, the states of realization won’t arise.

Therefore, I hope you will practice the preliminaries well. You should keep contemplating the sufferings of the three lower realms until true conviction arises. Otherwise, when a Dharma teacher asks you to meditate on the sufferings of the lower realms, you may just practice that briefly and generate a few ordinary thoughts, which is definitely not enough.

A practitioner must internalize the Dharma and eventually develop unwavering conviction. Exactly what kind of conviction? The practitioner must think, “I must not fall into the three lower realms; otherwise, I will never have the opportunity to hear the true Dharma, let alone practice it.” If you can give birth to such a conviction, it means you have developed aversion to the three lower realms.

Barbarians

“Barbarians” refers to those living in the thirty-two border countries,²¹⁷ such as Lo Khatha. It is said in some scriptures that there are 108 border countries or places, and if the smallest border places are counted in, there are a total of twelve hundred. Nevertheless, many tribes and ethnic groups in the world don’t believe in Buddhism. Moreover, some of them have many pernicious customs; for example, they regard harming others as an act of devotion and taking a life as a virtuous action.

These are truly inappropriate behaviors. Buddhists embrace harmony with other religions and non-religious groups for the sake of unity with humanity. However, when encountering conflicting views of non-Buddhists, we Buddhists should keep a clear mind and uphold our own views. Some Buddhists lump all religions together. This is not right because the Buddha says:

Those who harm others are not *śramanas*.²¹⁸

Some Buddhists comment, on many occasions, that all major religions are the same because they all promote virtues. Regarding virtuous conduct, some other spiritual groups engage in charitable deeds such as building hospitals, and these are really good, and we Buddhists also encourage such charity. But it is not reasonable to assume that these belief systems and Buddhism share the same views just because of their shared commitment to charitable deeds.

As far as the Tibetan region is concerned, Mipham Rinpoche mentioned that there had been historical conflicts between Buddhism and Bön, the ancient indigenous religion of Tibet. Bön and Buddhism have fundamentally different views, so people shouldn’t confuse one with the other. For example, Bön practitioners turn a prayer wheel counterclockwise, as they also do when circumambulating a sacred mountain. Buddhists, however, believe that counterclockwise action destroys merit, so when a Buddhist notices an electronic prayer wheel is turning counterclockwise, he will immediately adjust it.

²¹⁷ It refers to places in ancient India.

²¹⁸ Śramana (Skt. śramaṇa; Tib. རྟོན་པ་, gejong, Wyl. dge sbyong) — a wandering ascetic or mendicant. The śramana culture was already in existence at the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. There were both Jain and Buddhist śramanas. It also became an epithet of the Buddha, who was referred to as ‘the Great Śramana’ (Skt. Mahāśramaṇa). (Source: Rigpawiki.org) Here, it refers to those who follow the Buddha and his teachings.

Therefore, it is worth further examination if one assumes that Buddhism and other belief systems share the same view, meditation, action, and fruition without having any divergence, just because of certain similarities between them. It is important not to construct various justifications merely to serve one's own purpose.

Buddhists shouldn't blend our own views with those of non-Buddhists, but at the same time, Buddhists shouldn't hold grudges against or turn their backs on non-Buddhists, who, after all, are sentient beings. Guided by the aspiration of bodhicitta, we should treat all beings impartially and try to bring benefit to them. However, we shouldn't treat their views impartially, thinking it is equally acceptable to study our own texts and their texts; we shouldn't think that pursuing Buddhism and other belief systems is equally good.

Some people think Buddhism and other belief systems are the same, so they persuade many Buddhists to forget Buddhism and join other spiritual groups. I don't agree with them at all. Each Buddhist should clearly know the benefits of taking refuge in the Three Jewels and the faults of abandoning the Dharma. Every one of us should have a clear understanding. Therefore, when it comes to significant matters, we should sharpen our "wisdom eyes" of discernment and handle them with the utmost care.

These people living in border regions have human forms, but their minds lack the right orientation, and they are unable to attune themselves to the Dharma. In particular, while some cities in the world seem extremely prosperous and bustling, the vicious deeds committed there are extremely prevalent. Thus, such cities can also be considered "barbarian places."

Don't think that a barbarian place or a border region only refers to an underdeveloped rural territory, so that major cities like Beijing or Shanghai are excluded from the list. In fact, one should distinguish between a border region in terms of the Dharma and a geographic border region. A region outside of India is considered a geographic border region, whereas a region that lacks fourfold assembly or brings no benefit to the fourfold assembly living in it is considered a border region in terms of the Dharma. Thus, some urban dwellers, who dress well and eat nicely but know nothing about the Dharma, are therefore considered "barbarians."

Inheriting immoral customs from their forefathers, they live in a manner completely contrary to the practice of Dharma. Such customs still exist in some places in Eastern India. For example, in 2006, a teenage boy named Raben decided

to marry a mountain in order to bring relief to his injured mother. On the wedding day, Raben, dressed in traditional groom attire, along with over four hundred villagers, walked three kilometers to the Lakshmi²¹⁹ mountain. As they climbed the mountain, they sprinkled water along the way. At the mountaintop, Raben placed a floral wreath on the “bride’s head.” With this act, the Lakshmi Mountain became Raben’s wife. According to an anthropologist at Ranchi University, marriages between a human and an animal or an inanimate object are not uncommon in some tribes.

Barbarians are capable of committing all sorts of misdeeds. They have human form, but their conduct is against the Dharma, ethics, and morality. Therefore, it is quite rare for them to believe in Buddhism and practice the Dharma.

A man I know often says, “I grew up among non-Buddhists, yet I am so fortunate to have believed in Buddhism. Especially, what I pursue is Tibetan Buddhism, which excels in hearing, contemplating, and meditating. Of more than one hundred of my classmates in primary school, middle school, and university, I am the only one who believes in Buddhism. How fortunate am I!”

His words do make sense. Many people believe that virtuous actions are driven by superstitious motives, studying Dharma is an act of escaping from reality, and vices are worth pursuing. Therefore, all their actions are negative, and they are particularly adept at harmful activities such as killing insects and hunting wild animals.

Sometimes it seems that just having one meal, let alone a lifetime of wrongdoings, can leave some people deeply stuck in the lower realms for many kalpas. The wrongdoings committed by many people, especially those who are rich, are terrible. Some rich people are very demanding about each meal; just eating meat is not enough; they want live carp, lobster, pangolin, and even monkey brain.

This shows that hell realms are not somewhere beyond human vision; when you visit a restaurant serving living beings, you see hells in the human realm. Those diners, however pretty or handsome they may appear, are no different from the henchmen of hell: Their teeth are covered with animals’ blood. To satisfy those people’s cravings for food, many animals lost their precious lives.

Are we moving toward a better society or regressing? This is a question worthy of our reflection. Many people praise our economic advancement: Once we dressed

²¹⁹ Lakshmi means “Goddess of Blessing” in Hindi.

in rags, and now we are clothed nicely; once we lived in makeshift cabins, and now we reside in elegant tall buildings. As shown on TV and in newspapers, many people applaud how wonderful these advances are.

However, we often ignore how “broken” our spiritual world is behind the fast-growing material world. Putting aside for a moment the extraordinary ideals of compassion in Mahayana Buddhism, many people have abandoned even basic human morality, such as filial piety to parents and respect for teachers. Children are addicted to online games, and adults pursue hedonistic indulgences—we are living in a crazy world.

Some Tibetans’ conduct is also very disappointing. Two days ago, an acquaintance called me, asking whether I could lend him money to save his life. I asked what had happened. He told me he had lost over 1.5 million Chinese yuan in a month to gambling. He used to earn a salary of several thousand yuan per month and lived a happy life, but then he became obsessed with gambling, which messed up his life. He gave me a “good” reason: “After all, I am also a sentient being. Can you use the life-release fund to save my life?” I flatly refused, saying, “The fund is not used to pay off gambling debts. That is for sure!”

I know many people in several nearby towns, including some civil servants, who have taken out usurious loans for gambling. If they borrowed 10,000 yuan one day, they had to pay back 15,000 yuan the next morning. If they failed to pay back, the interest rate increased exponentially.

Driven by their greed, many mindless borrowers set aside the ramifications and take out a usurious loan. Then the interest multiplies exponentially, and the debt grows rapidly, like a snowball sliding downhill. Some people cannot pay back their debts, so they run away. For the rest of their lives, they live in hiding, constantly on edge with fear. Even worse, some lose everything: wealth, career, family, and even their own lives.

The stench of moral decay can now be found everywhere. The skylines were less majestic in the past, but people seemed happier, with more compassion and contentment. Many ignorant persons, even some so-called Buddhists, simply mimic others’ wrongdoings, destroying all their merit and happiness.

The so-called developments, such as modernization, industrialization, and technologization, also bring problems of environmental pollution, ecological imbalance, and moral decay. It is worth contemplating whether our society is

progressing or regressing. If we embrace the views of nihilists who reject the law of karma, one day, when our negative actions have caused unfavorable outcomes, our regrets will be too late.

In today's world, when people get together, they may just talk about the weather, food, travels, or sports. Many of them are not even interested in philosophy, let alone the supreme Dharma.

Many people, especially schoolteachers, used to be well-versed in classic poems from the Tang and Song dynasties. However, today's people, including some schoolteachers, often think about, "How can I get a pay raise?" or "So-and-so is quite wealthy; he bought a house and a car. I must surpass him!" Their minds are contaminated by the three poisons, thus losing their direction in life. They simply have no clue about the Buddha's teachings.

Sometimes I have wanted to give teachings, but knowing the situations outside Larung Gar, I felt a bit discouraged. Although I don't have high states of realization about the Great Perfection or the Great Middle Way, I dare to say that I have attained convictions about ngöndro practices, including "the precious human life" and "impermanence," thanks to the lineage gurus' blessings and my diligence. Such convictions cannot be shaken by anyone.

If such a conviction can be transferred to another person's mind, definitely it will benefit the person greatly. Sadly, it is hard to find a qualified Dharma recipient. I do want to transfer the convictions and states of realization to others, but few are willing to listen to the teaching. Even if they hear the teaching, they won't put it into practice; instead, they will occupy themselves with trifles and won't bother to review the teaching. If this is the case, how can they grasp the meanings in the teaching? Without understanding the teaching, how can they succeed in practicing the Dharma? There are more and more signs of decay during this degenerate age; even some monastics are not behaving properly... Never mind! I'd better stop here; I am not here hosting a session to criticize others.

All in all, barbarians are very good at wrongdoings. Many things they do are unwholesome. Many of them fall into lower realms immediately upon death. For such people, there is no opportunity to practice the Dharma.

The long-lived gods

The long-lived gods are celestial beings who are absorbed in a state of mental

blankness. As it is said in Jamyang Loter Wangpo's *Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*: the sphere of long-lived gods is located around the fourth heaven inhabited by the deities of Great Fruits in rūpadhātu—the world of form. Beings born in this sphere remain in a state of mental blankness, like a frozen fish, and perceive nothing for five hundred kalpas or eighty thousand great kalpas.

Marmots in Tibetan regions spend three or four months in “retreat” underground. These animals are also free from all mental activities, but they still breathe. On winter mornings, frost can be found around some burrows' entrances, which means a marmot “retreatant” resides there.

Some people just sit every day and meditate with a blank state of mind, engaging in no other good deeds. It is fine if this is helpful to their attainment of liberation, but sometimes it's worth an in-depth examination of the real value of their meditation. It is beneficial for practitioners of the Chan School and Pure Land School in Chinese Buddhism to integrate the systematic teachings and training of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the step-by-step cultivation of renunciation or bodhicitta, into their practice while keeping their own legacies and traditions.

Hearing this, someone may wonder, “Are you trying to woo people? Is it a way for you to convert me?” To be honest, such an intention has never even appeared in my dreams. It's just that I have been studying the Dharma for so many years that I am quite aware of the obstacles a practitioner may encounter. Such obstacles are more likely to appear during the degenerate era, so I really wish that different schools or lineages can learn from each other.

As it is documented in the biographies of eminent Chan masters, there were many Chan practitioners who attained realization. However, later on, some pith instructions were not transmitted impeccably to the successors. As a result, those who meditate with their own interpretations of the teachings often go astray on the path.

Therefore, it is very necessary to guide one's practices and confirm one's state of realization through hearing, contemplation, and meditation. Otherwise, if practitioners always remain in a state of mental blankness, they may be reborn as long-lived gods. They remain in such states of concentration for great kalpas. However, once the karmic effect that created that condition exhausts itself, they are reborn in the lower realms due to their wrong views.

Some gods are absorbed in a state of mental blankness, so they lack any

opportunity to practice the Dharma; other gods overindulge in hedonistic pleasures, so they don't have time to practice. Some urban dwellers in Han areas start to embrace hedonistic lifestyles once they get wealthier. They seem to live heavenly lives, but their hedonism negatively impacts their Dharma practice.

Here is a Buddhist story about the hedonistic gods:

During the Buddha's time, healer Jivaka, the physician of the Buddha, the sangha, and the king, took refuge in the Three Jewels in front of Maudgalyayana. After his death, Jivaka was reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. Once, Maudgalyayana ascended to this heaven to seek medical suggestions from Jivaka about one of his disciples' illnesses. When Maudgalyayana arrived, it happened that the gods were entering the Garden of Bliss, so he stood by the road and waited. No god looked at Maudgalyayana.

When Jivaka arrived, he remained seated in his elegant chariot, waved only one hand to Maudgalyayana, then passed by immediately. Although he was a great arhat, Maudgalyayana still felt a bit upset, thinking, "Why did my own disciple treat me this way? I've come all the way from the human realm to the god realm, but Jivaka doesn't even bother to welcome me properly! He simply waved to me and left!"

Maudgalyayana then stopped Jivaka's chariot with his magic power. Jivaka had no choice but to exit the chariot and bow to Maudgalyayana. Upon hearing his teacher's scolding, Jivaka protested, "I didn't mean it. We gods are busy indulging ourselves and having fun every day. You saw the other gods didn't even greet you. It is because I used to be your disciple in the human realm that I tried my very best to greet you by waving my hand!"

Life in the human realm is nothing like life in the god realm, but whenever possible, some people will choose to indulge: Watching a TV program today, singing karaoke tomorrow, visiting a park the day after tomorrow, traveling to tourist attractions a few days later. They are constantly distracted by such activities, so they never find an opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Some other people feel that the human realm is full of suffering, so they aspire to be reborn in the god realm. But enjoyment in the god realm is not real liberation; such a rebirth brings no solid meaning. Please refrain from having such an aspiration.

Tirthikas (those with “wrong views”)

The term “wrong views” generally refers to eternalist and nihilist beliefs, which are views that go against and lie outside the teachings of the Buddha. Eternalists believe in the permanent existence of a creator God and Indra, whereas nihilists believe that all things just arise by themselves, so there is no rebirth, no karma, no Three Jewels, and no Four Noble Truths. Such views corrupt our minds and prevent us from cultivating trust in the authentic Dharma to the extent that we no longer have the opportunity to practice it.

In the Tibetan region, because Padmasambhava entrusted the protection of the land to the Twelve Tenma,²²⁰ the *tirthikas*’ wrong views have not really gained any significant foothold.

Once, Sakya Pandita had a debate with a brahman Shastri²²¹ named Trokchey Gapo. The two reached a deal: If Sakya Pandita was defeated, he would abandon Buddhism and convert to Hinduism; if Trokchey Gapo was defeated, he would abandon Hinduism and convert to Buddhism. In the end, Trokchey Gapo lost the debate. Sakya Pandita then decided to bring Trokchey Gapo to Tibet. When they crossed the border between Nepal and Tibet, Trokchey Gapo hesitated, saying, “I’d better not visit Tibet; otherwise, the Twelve Tenma won’t let me in.” Sakya Pandita assured him, “It’s fine. You are coming with me, so you should be all okay.”

Yet when they approached Tibet, Trokchey Gapo suddenly vomited blood and died. Some also say he was killed by lightning. Sakya Pandita then took Trokchey Gapo’s braid back to Sakya Monastery. His braid is still reportedly kept in the monastery.

²²⁰ Twelve Tenma (Skt. *sthāvarā*; Tib. *bstan ma bcu gnyis*) refers to the female protector deities of Tibet, bound under oath by Guru Padmasambhava at Asura cave, in present-day Pharping, Nepal. They consist of the Four Female Demons (Tib. *Dümo Shyi*), the Four Menmos (Tib. *Menmo Shyi*), and the Four Yakshinis (Skt.; Tib. *Nöjin Shyi*). They are called the “Twelve Mother and Sister Tenmas” because they take care of us like a mother or like older sisters. They are accompanied by the divisions of a hundred thousand female assistants. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

There are several lists of the Twelve Tenmas. The Palchen Düpa from the Longchen Nyingtik cycle gives: Tseringma, Töna Dorje Yamakyong, Nöjin Gang la Kunzangmo, Drokchen Khordul Gekkyi Tso, Jomo Gangrar Chenchikma, Changna Khading Lumo Gyal, Kharak Dorje Khyung Tsunma, Machen Pomrar Drakmogyal, Gongtsun Demo Bökham Kyong, Dragtsan Dorje Menchikma, Jomo Nakgyal Yarmo Sil, Wuna Dorje Zulemen. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

²²¹ A Shastri degree is also awarded to students after a degree in the old college system of India in a stream than Sanskrit.

With the protection of the Twelve Tenma, non-Buddhist religions have not been able to penetrate the Tibetan region. Many masters, including the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and other eminent masters residing elsewhere, have composed prayers to the Twelve Tenma of Tibetan Buddhism, which are often recited in monasteries. Although Tibetans at large are not as pure as before and there are both eternalists and nihilists in the land, other religious worship places and missionaries still cannot penetrate the Tibetan region. In comparison, cities elsewhere in the Han Chinese area are almost “occupied” by various non-Buddhist religions. The flourishing of Buddhism in the Tibetan region is attributed to the inconceivable protection of the Twelve Tenma and other Dharma protectors.

Buddhism in the Tibetan region is extraordinary. It would be a great pity if it is tainted by other religions and sects, so we should keep praying to Dharma protectors. Since all Tibetans believe in Buddhism, every one of them, be it a child, adult, or senior, has the habit of chanting mantras and praying to the Three Jewels. Buddhism is no longer an individual belief in the Tibetan region; it has been integrated into all aspects of Tibetan culture. The Tibetan outlook on life is embedded with the compassion of Buddhism, and the influence of Buddhism can be seen everywhere in their lives.

A place like the Tibetan region is indeed very rare. When a non-Buddhist visits the Tibetan region, even just for a quick tour to Lhasa, his mind may get purified. For example, a few professors recently visited Larung Gar. They previously strongly opposed Buddhism, but after the trip, they completely changed their views toward Buddhism. Such a change is also attributed to the blessings of the Dharma center and the Dharma protectors. Thus, non-Buddhist religions can barely survive in the Tibetan region.

However, anyone whose understanding is like that of the Tirthikas, and contrary to that of the authentic Dharma and authentic masters, will thereby be deprived of the opportunity to practice according to those true teachings.

Nevertheless, those who hold the views of tirthikas, which go against the authentic Dharma and the teachings of true teachers, will thereby have no opportunity to practice according to those true teachings. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said, “Once a person’s mind is spoiled by wrong views, then however great qualities the teacher has, this person won’t be able to see them.”

Within the three worlds, there is no teacher more qualified than Buddha

Shakyamuni, who has perfect freedom and realization. However, in the eyes of Purnakasyapa,²²² who was deluded by wrong views, the Buddha had nine faults and eighteen ugly marks, instead of thirty-two excellent signs and eighty exemplary features. This is similar to how a patient with jaundice sees a white conch shell as yellow.

Similarly, in the eyes of those with wrong views, gurus can be greedy, hateful, jealous, arrogant, or stingy. Such people only see the faults but not the great qualities of the guru. Even if they stay close to the guru for years, it brings no benefit but harm to them.

Once a person told me, “I always find faults in you, so I am leaving Larung Gar tomorrow.” I responded, “You don’t have to wait until tomorrow. You’d better leave today!” Seriously, he didn’t have to stay longer. I am not saying I have the characteristics of a qualified teacher. I remember this verse from Longchenpa’s *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*:

It is a contradiction to want to be a teacher
If you yourself do not yet have the qualifications of a disciple.²²³

I don’t think I am even qualified as a disciple, let alone being a qualified teacher. But the Dharma itself has great blessing power, so my teaching may be of some benefit to others. It’s similar to a deaf person who cannot hear but can make others happy when playing a musical instrument. As said by the Buddha, even if the teacher has bad characteristics, his Dharma teaching is still meaningful to those faithful listeners. This is the rationale behind my teaching.

When you follow a teacher, you should examine your state of mind. If you don’t have pure perception, however long you follow the teacher, it may be of no benefit to you. For example, the monk Sunaksatra served as the Buddha’s attendant for twenty-five years (some also say twenty-four years), and yet he lacked even the slightest faith and held only wrong views. Sunaksatra saw everything the Buddha did as deceitful, so one day he told the Buddha: “Apart from that light around your body six feet wide, never have I seen, in twenty-four years as your servant, even a

²²² Purnakasyapa (Pali: Pūraṇa Kassapa) was an Indian ascetic teacher who lived around the 6th century BCE, contemporaneous with Mahavira and the Buddha.

²²³ Longchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2006, page 184.

sesame seed's worth of special qualities in you. As for the Dharma, I know as much as you—and I will no longer be your servant!”

After saying this, Sunaksatra left the Buddha. Seven days later, he ended up being reborn as a hungry ghost in a flower garden.

The thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa have told, and will tell, Sunaksatra's story. Only after all the thousand buddhas have appeared in the world will Sunaksatra take rebirth in the hell realms and eventually be reborn as a human again. As you see, the consequences of wrong views are very serious, and those with wrong views have no opportunity to practice the Dharma. Now that we are free from wrong views, we should often pray to the guru and to the Three Jewels, wishing that right views always arise in our minds.

Birth in a dark kalpa

Being born in a dark kalpa refers to rebirth in a period when there is no Buddha. In a universe where no Buddha has appeared, nobody has even heard of the Three Jewels. As there is no Buddha's teaching, there is no opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Now we are born in a bright kalpa when the Buddha appeared and turned Dharma Wheels three times, and the Dharma still exists. In this bright kalpa, we have the opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Being born deaf and mute

Those who are born deaf and mute face challenges in effectively listening to the teachings, expounding them, reflecting on them, and putting them into practice. The term “deaf mute” usually refers to speech impairment. It becomes a condition that leads to a lack of opportunity for the Dharma when the usual human ability to use and understand language is absent. Consequently, this category also includes those whose cognitive impairments prevent them from understanding the teachings, thereby depriving them of the opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Some Dharma students think they are unintelligent, but if they try, they can still understand a bit, for example, how to chant the mantra of Avalokiteshvara or the name of Amitabha, or which virtuous things they should do. In these cases, they still have the opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Through the above analysis, I hope you have fully understood what the eight states without freedom are. This understanding is important to us practitioners. If a practitioner has no freedom and opportunity to practice the Dharma and spends their whole day on the eight worldly concerns, then they surely cannot attain realization in their short lifespan as a human.

Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

This supreme freedom of a human life,
So long awaited, now at last attained!
Reflecting always thus, maintain your mind
As steady as Sumeru, king of mountains.²²⁴

Longchenpa also says in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*:

My friends, your human form endowed with precious freedoms
and advantages
Of all the six migrations is the one most difficult to find.
Like blind men who have chanced upon a treasure of great price,
With joy achieve your benefit and happiness.²²⁵

Therefore, we should have a strong sense of self-discipline. Since it takes innumerable lives and kalpas to finally obtain a human form, we must appreciate this precious human life as much as possible and use it to gain benefits for our liberation.

Now that we have a precious human life, we should earnestly seek Dharma teachings, in the same way, a patient seeks treatment when they finally meet a good doctor. The Buddha says:

Like a patient meets a good doctor,
One should listen to the authentic Dharma wholeheartedly.

Even if you only attend one Dharma class every day, the merit is already incredible. The opportunity to hear the teachings may not last long. Everyone has their own affinity with the Dharma. Those with insufficient merits may only

²²⁴ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

²²⁵ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

have the chance to listen to teachings for one or two years instead of twenty or thirty years. Therefore, for the sake of benefiting this life and future lives, we must appreciate the opportunity and try to overcome all difficulties and obstacles.

The biggest enemy of one's Dharma study is slackness—a state of laziness. *Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma* states:

To attain happiness for the present and the future,
One must avoid slackness;
Those lazy and lax people
Are no different from a dog.

I always remain cautious about slackness, so I am willing to give more teachings, regardless of fatigue or sickness. Thus, I persist in giving teachings almost every day. During my teaching sessions, I also try to arrange other virtuous practices, such as reciting the *Sadhana of Buddha Shakyamuni*,²²⁶ and *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's Aspiration to Excellent Conduct*. After my oral teaching is over, I do prostrations with sangha members. I feel content after doing all these things.

During my teaching sessions, I am obliged to do wholesome deeds. On the days when I am not teaching, I practice by myself at home; but it takes stronger willpower to recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's Aspiration to Excellent Conduct* and to prostrate on my own. Therefore, I always wish I could at least give one teaching per day so that we can conduct wholesome deeds all together. How delightful it is!

²²⁶ The formal title is: *The Treasury of Blessings—A Practice of Buddha Shakyamuni*.



Lesson 16

“Under this heading are ... the Dharma in its totality.”
[page 21–22]

We continue to study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Previously, we studied the eight states without freedom and understood that the nature of “freedom” is to have the opportunity to practice Dharma. Now we are going to reflect on the particular advantages related to Dharma.

2.1.1.2. Reflecting on the Particular Advantages Related to Dharma

This section includes two parts: the five individual advantages and the five circumstantial advantages.

2.1.1.2.1. The Five Individual Advantages

Nagarjuna summarized the five individual advantages as the following:

Born as a human, in a central place, with all one’s faculties,
Without a conflicting lifestyle and with faith in the Dharma.²²⁷

1) The advantage of support

²²⁷ The translation of this version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 22.

“Support” refers to human life. Without a human life, it would be impossible to encounter the Dharma. Therefore, this human life is the advantage of support.

While entrapped in the boundless ocean of suffering in samsara, it is of foremost importance to have a human life that enables Dharma practice. Otherwise, even if the Buddha has appeared, the Dharma still exists, and qualified teachers are giving teachings; without a human body, it is not possible to encounter the Dharma, receive the profound pith instructions, and understand the meaning of doctrines. It is extremely difficult to get a human life, so now that we are free from the eight states without freedom and have the ten particular advantages related to Dharma, we should feel fortunate from the bottom of our hearts.

This human body is essential for Dharma practices. If one is reborn in the god realm, the hedonistic indulgences there far surpass those of the human realm. Some millionaires may believe their wealth allows them to enjoy heavenly pleasures, but this is not true. The pleasures of the god realm are vast and hardly exhaustible, unlike in the human realm, where everything is subject to deterioration. Moreover, whatever gods or devas in the god realm desire will instantly manifest through visualization. When they want to eat, gourmet food appears; when they want to dress, heavenly clothing arises; when they wish to meditate, they can easily enter a meditative state. Therefore, they live a much happier life than humans.

In comparison, we humans experience unceasing suffering due to our attachment to this human body. For example, sometimes we struggle with insomnia and lie in bed trying to force ourselves to sleep, but we only become more awake. However, when we sit up straight trying to meditate, we become drowsy.

Beings in the god realm don’t experience the same afflictions as humans. They enjoy far more pleasure than we do. However, they lack access to the Dharma. This is why all the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa attain Buddhahood in human form. The following cases are never encountered: “This buddha attained Buddhahood in the form of Indra,” or “That buddha attained Buddhahood in the form of Brahma,” or “That buddha attained Buddhahood in the form of Vishnu.”

Having a human form provides a favorable condition for practicing the Dharma. Very few gods, with supreme affinity, occasionally encounter the Dharma. Yet, they simply hear the teachings but hardly generate renunciation toward samsara, or bodhicitta toward sentient beings.

Therefore, you must acknowledge the great merits of human being: In this

life, not only do you have a human form, but you have also encountered Mahayana Buddhism, attended hundreds of Dharma classes, and received numerous transmissions. Is this possible for beings in other realms? Not at all.

Hungry ghosts and other non-humans sometimes wish to find a qualified teacher and listen to teachings; but when they finally have the opportunity, they may attend the first class but then get distracted during the second. Their illusory bodies move faster than human bodies, so once they succumb to external temptations, they follow along. They can barely remain in the same place long enough to listen to teachings, so they rarely receive all the transmissions.

In fact, non-humans like hungry ghosts often come to listen to teachings in front of a qualified teacher; it's just that we cannot see them. Such things happened during the Buddha's time and continue to this day. Even when an ordinary Dharma teacher or tutor is giving teachings, without doubt, some non-humans are listening. However, non-humans lack the support needed to receive the complete transmissions as humans do. A human form is the most suitable for listening to teachings, which is why the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa all attain enlightenment in human form. This is an extraordinary interdependence.

As stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, obtaining a human life is beyond our expectations, even in a dream, so we should feel very fortunate. The human body, when used properly as a vessel for the Dharma, is far more precious than vessels made of gold, silver, or jade. It is a great pity if we fail to use our human life properly, and even worse, if we use it for wrongdoing. Unfortunately, people in this degenerate age don't appreciate the preciousness of human life; they are unwilling to follow a sequential order and practice the Dharma properly.

Even worse, some teachers do not teach the Dharma properly. Recently, a rumor has been circulating among Buddhists in Northeast China about a so-called teacher's "assertion": "You don't have to practice preliminaries; just give me 600 yuan and you are exempted."

This rumor surfaced two years ago. When I heard it again recently, I was a bit surprised. On the one hand, given the rising inflation, how could this "exemption fee" remain unchanged? On the other hand, I was quite concerned—not because some ngöndro practitioners left for that teacher, but because, upon hearing the "ngöndro exemption," many Buddhists began earnestly persuading others, saying, "You don't have to practice preliminaries! That is too tiring! That guru offers a

shortcut. Just pay 600 yuan, and without making any tiresome effort, you can achieve realization in the snap of a finger! If you don't have money, I will pay for you!"

They even encouraged some monastics, saying, "You should follow his method too! I can offer you the money. That teacher is so kind; he said that doing one hundred thousand prostrations is too much work, so he can exempt us from all the ngöndro practices if we pay 600 yuan."

Alas! How ignorant they are! What is more pitiful is that many people listen to them and flock to that teacher. Some of them used to follow the proper sequence and aspired to complete their ngöndro practices, but now they have abandoned the ngöndro practices.

Many people do whatever it takes to make money. It is understandable if they want to become rich, but their advocacy creates great obstacles for others and negatively impacts Tibetan Buddhism. Eminent masters of Tibetan Buddhism, such as Padmasambhava, Lama Tsongkhapa, Sakya Pandita, Longchenpa, Mipham Rinpoche, and the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, all advocated following the proper practice sequence and encouraged disciples to first complete preliminaries.

It is stated in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* that lineage disciples of Jigme Lingpa and Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu should complete one hundred thousand prostrations and recite the mantra of Padmasambhava ten million times. One practitioner at Larung Gar has been diligently practicing for years and has completed ten million prostrations.

Discouraging others from practicing ngöndro for the sake of collecting money for yourself brings very negative consequences for Buddhism. It's no surprise that in the degenerate age, both lay practitioners and monastics have their own methods of collecting alms or money. But it is incomprehensible when a teacher refutes systematic practice simply for personal gain.

I initially wanted to speak to that teacher on behalf of Larung Gar or even just myself. After all, the idea of charging a "ngöndro exemption fee" has never been heard of. If this teacher were a great accomplished master, I could understand why he might exempt his disciples from ngöndro and give them direct pointing-out instructions. This has happened in the past when a teacher with superior capacities met a disciple with extraordinary faculties, and the disciple skipped ngöndro and attained realization just through the teacher's pointing-out instructions. This was

Tibetan Buddhism,²³² *The Ornament Covering All Jambudvīpa*,²³³ and the sections introducing lineage masters in the texts of *Longchen Nyīngtik* and *Vima Nyīngtik*. In all of these, I have never read any instruction saying ngöndro practices can be replaced by an “exemption fee.”

Therefore, while benefiting from having a human life—the advantage of support—we must pay attention to how we practice the Dharma. I hope you will follow the appropriate sequence and practice steadily. For example, when meditating on the “precious human life,” don’t simply pay lip service; instead, from the bottom of your heart, you should believe, “This human life of mine is so precious. I must use this human form to practice the Dharma!” *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

For like the supreme substance of the alchemists,
It takes our impure flesh and makes of it
The body of a Buddha, jewel beyond all price.²³⁴

Human life is priceless. It is a great pity if you use your human body to commit wrongdoings, especially actions that bring harm to yourself and to Buddhism. It would be even more unfortunate if the long-standing great traditions of Buddhism were damaged by certain individuals.

The power of Mara²³⁵ is very strong in the degenerate age. Authentic Dharma taught by one hundred qualified teachers might not be accepted by people, whereas “worldly dharma” preached by one person could attract a large crowd of followers. The deluded minds of worldly people resonate very well with Mara, so “worldly dharma” endorsed by Mara aligns with ordinary people’s mindsets.

Consider the present reality: Upon hearing the name of Amitabha, many

²³² Written by a great modern Nyingma master, Dudjom Rinpoche’s *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* covers in detail and depth both the fundamental teachings and the history of Tibetan Buddhism’s oldest school.

²³³ The full title is *Narrative History of the Precious Collected Tantras of the Ancient Translation School—The Ornament Covering All Jambudvīpa*, written by Jigme Lingpa (1730–1798).

²³⁴ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, published by Shambhala, 2011, chapter 1, verse 10.

²³⁵ Mara (Skt. Māra; Tib. བླ་མ་, Dü, Wyl. bdud) — mythologically said to be a powerful god who dwells in Tushita, some distance from the city where the main gods dwell. Although he is a god from the form realm, because of his attachment to objects of desire, he dwells in one of the six heavens of the desire realm. He is also the master of illusion who attempted to prevent the Buddha from attaining enlightenment at Bodhgaya. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

may generate no faith, while after hearing a pop song about lust or anger, they quickly become fervent fans. When a Dharma master announces plans to teach the *Amitabha Sutra* in a city, it is already impressive if a few thousand people show up. But when a superstar announces a concert, the venue is packed with an enthusiastic audience, and some even faint from excitement. Sometimes, when I see such scenes on television, I think, “Alas! How ignorant these people are! The world we live in is like a dream or an illusion. If they continue in this way, their hallucinations will lead them nowhere.” It is truly sad that many people don’t realize this. So please, be cautious of Mara’s power.

I’m not particularly concerned about any consequences of expressing this. It is okay if others criticize me because an ordinary person like me is not free of wrongdoing, so it makes sense to be criticized by others. However, when I see or hear a misdeed, I must point it out to protect the Dharma when absolutely necessary. It is not right if I only give sweet talk. We would not be Mahayanists if we contribute nothing to the propagation of the Dharma during our relatively short lifespan.

Many monastics at Larung Gar will one day become abbots or give teachings. I am somewhat concerned about whether you will behave in ways inappropriate to the Dharma and whether your tainted thoughts will pollute the lineage transmission, which is as pure as gold. So please, be extra cautious!

Meanwhile, I wish for you to apply your wisdom to discern what to do and what not to do when you hear pseudo-Dharma teachings. Some people lack discernment; when they overhear someone saying, “This is very good,” they simply conform to the group. Such behavior is truly pathetic. It is not easy for you to finally embark on the bright path, but if you lose your direction at this juncture, you may experience a significant setback.

2) The advantage of place

Had you been born in a remote place without access to the Dharma, you would not have encountered it. However, you were born in a central region where the Dharma flourishes, giving you the advantage of *place*.

If a person lives in a border area devoid of the Dharma, they may never even have the opportunity to take refuge, let alone receive the Buddha’s teachings. Now that you are living in a central region where the Dharma exists and thrives, you should feel very fortunate.

Moreover, you are living in a favorable era. If you had lived in the 1960s or 1970s in China, whether in the Han region or the Tibetan region, you would have faced a time when Buddhism was under severe threat. Many of you wouldn't have had the opportunity to encounter the Dharma then.

Khenpo Kyiwang, who imparted many Dharma teachings to me, once shared stories of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and Khenpo Chochya of Sertar, both of whom were exceptional practitioners. During the Cultural Revolution, when Dharma practice was forbidden, many were too frightened to even recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra. Yet, Khenpo Chochya continued to read at least twenty pages of Buddhist texts each day, and Phuntsok Rinpoche not only read but also taught at great personal risk. While herding yaks, his disciples would follow him high into the mountains, where he secretly gave teachings in a cave. The disciples took turns standing guard outside the cave. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught in many such caves near Larung Gar during those perilous times.

Even amid the turmoil, these great masters never ceased their studies of the Dharma. From childhood until their passing, they lived fulfilling lives by hearing, contemplating, practicing, and teaching the Dharma. Khenpo Kyiwang used to say, "While I dare not compare myself to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and Khenpo Chochya, I never once gave up the Dharma during those perilous times."

In contrast, some contemporary Buddhists become overly cautious at the mere hint of danger. For example, when a staff member from the local police station asked some practitioners to fill out a questionnaire, many became so frightened that they stopped their group study. I heard that last year, during a group study session, someone knocked on the door, causing panic, and many practitioners fled. It turned out to be just a property manager coming to collect utility payments. Even if the visitor had been a policeman making a routine inquiry, what is there to fear?

We are fortunate to study the Dharma in such a favorable era, dedicating ourselves to study every day without worries. We have been studying *The Way of the Bodhisattvas* together for a long time, and nothing unfavorable has occurred, except for a few timid individuals who were startled by minor "challenges."

Such individuals tend to regress at the slightest obstacle, let alone during the ten-year upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. Thus, while we have the advantage of place, we must also rely on our own effort and strength to study the Dharma. We

should introspect to understand our true capabilities and reflect on how we would treat the Dharma if the political or social environment were to change.

I particularly admire the stories of past practitioners who lived for the Dharma, disregarded the eight worldly concerns, and remained undeterred by social, political, and economic turmoil. They were wholeheartedly devoted to the Dharma and sentient beings. Many senior laypeople in Tibetan and Han areas of China exemplify this; their lives are focused solely on the Dharma.

Sadly, many practitioners of the new generation are busy pursuing wealth and fame on a daily basis. Although they have taken refuge and identified as Buddhists, they don't truly dedicate themselves to the Dharma, so their study and practice are only superficial, lacking a solid understanding.

Therefore, you should reflect again and again, "What is the role of Dharma in my mind?" Eminent masters of the past went through countless hardships in their pursuit of the Dharma. We are deeply moved by their determination, and at the same time, feel a sense of embarrassment about our own efforts. Now that we have such a great opportunity and favorable conditions, as long as we are willing to study the Dharma, we can always access the teachings.

3) The advantage of possessing the sense faculties

Lacking full sense faculties would impede your ability to practice the Dharma. If you are free from such impairments, you have the advantage of possessing all five sense faculties intact.

In this world, many individuals face disabilities such as paralysis, visual or auditory impairments, or muteness. Over eighty million people in China are physically challenged. Many of these limitations prevent them from studying the Dharma, so they cannot fully receive the teachings. We are very fortunate to have all five sense faculties intact. Have you ever reflected on this?

I myself often think this way: "The Buddha said that a practitioner should have all the sense faculties intact. This is indeed true. If a person intends to study the Dharma, but their incomplete faculties do not allow them to do so, then they cannot engage in studying and practicing the Dharma. Thanks to the merit we accumulated from previous lives, we have intact faculties. Even though some of you may not see or hear well, you are still able to receive the Dharma, unlike severely disabled persons who are incapable of receiving and practicing the Dharma."

Therefore, each of us should appreciate the advantage of possessing functioning sense faculties.

4) The advantage of intention

If you had a conflicting lifestyle, you would be constantly engaged in negative actions and in conflict with the Dharma. However, because you are now aspiring to do positive actions, this is the advantage of intention.

Some people who were once diligent practitioners later encountered negative influences from misguided teachers, so their minds became polluted by wrong views, and they began to commit wrongdoings. Some individuals were once diligent monastics who received empowerments, upheld precepts, and conducted ascetic practices. But later, they were defeated by bad karmic forces surfacing in their mindstreams, and they disrobed and committed innumerable negative actions, such as killing and stealing to make a living.

These are cases of “a conflicting lifestyle.” We can only feel deeply sorry for such individuals, thinking, “Nothing can help them, not even if the Buddha appears in front of them, for they don’t regret their actions.”

Some lay practitioners had great faith in the guru and the Three Jewels at the very beginning, but later, they abandoned everything. They even claim, “So be it if I fall into the lower realms! Whatever happens, I will never study the Dharma anymore! I will burn all my Dharma books!”

Such statements are quite disturbing. These people are so ignorant that they completely disregard the law of karma, in the same way a robber disregards criminal law.

Therefore, we should always pray to the guru and the Three Jewels, wishing we will never generate such wrong views. We should think we would rather die sooner than have such views arise in us.

I often think, “As long as my mind is not controlled by the terrifying Mara, my faith in the Three Jewels won’t regress in this life.” Why do I think this way? Because my faith is not just lip service; it comes from the bottom of my heart. Just as I am convinced that fire is hot, I deeply believe that the Buddha is omniscient and that the Dharma is unparalleled. I will never regress in my faith.

There are Buddhists who have not studied the Dharma for long. Even if they have taken ordination, simply becoming a monastic may not help them overcome

their wrong views and intentions. If they don't have a solid understanding of the teachings, even if they have shaved their heads, the hair will grow back again, and they can return to secular life in no time. If they disrobe, it only takes three months for the hair to grow to a length no different from that of a non-monastic. The ordination scars on the heads of monastics of Chinese Buddhism can also be removed, thanks to science and technology. Therefore, the monastic appearance and the ordination scars cannot define a person's life.

What really matters is whether a practitioner has uncontrived faith. It is only with such faith that their practice in this life is assured. This also applies to lay practitioners. Many people easily convert to Buddhism and also easily leave the path. Why? It is because the Dharma hasn't penetrated their minds.

Presently, the most important task for Buddhists, including monastics and lay practitioners, is to spread the Dharma. Some monasteries don't undertake this task well—although many tourists visit the monasteries, no Dharma teaching is offered there. Except for offering incense and worshiping the Buddha, many believer visitors don't pursue the Dharma; they are merely able to establish a good affinity. As such, there is no way that the Dharma can merge into their minds.

Therefore, monasteries should build more Dharma halls where teachings can be given. Of course, it is a great pity if there is a nice Dharma hall but no one teaches, or at most someone teaches once a month. If I were the abbot, I would first build a Dharma hall where teachings are offered every day. If I were able, I would teach every day; if not, I would invite capable teachers to give teachings on a daily basis. Thus, visitors from everywhere would have the opportunity to study and understand the Dharma.

Many people are not knowledgeable about the Buddha's basic teachings, let alone the profound ones. Recently, I watched a video of a famous Dharma teacher giving a teaching, during which he struggled to explain scriptural evidence concerning "the refutation of production from four extremes," one of the great logical arguments of the Middle Way. He offered explanations for more than ten minutes but didn't explain it correctly, so I stopped the video.

In the video, that Dharma teacher commented, "This is too profound. It is hard to understand." In fact, this logical argument is not so difficult. With a clear explanation, educated lay practitioners and university students could easily understand how to refute production by means of one of the following four

extremes: self, other, both, or neither. It is a pity that the Dharma teacher gave the wrong explanations, so this logical argument didn't make sense to many audience members.

It is unfortunate that even a Dharma teacher doesn't really understand the Dharma. Of course, this is not the case for all Dharma teachers; many are knowledgeable and insightful.

Without receiving an education in the Dharma, some people think their understanding is right, yet their knowledge doesn't capture the true meaning of the Buddha's teachings. It is very important to have a "Dharma professional" to give teachings on topics including karma and emptiness.

Of course, simply wearing a monastic robe does not qualify a teacher to be a "professional." They should have received systematic training from a formal Buddhist group or institute. Otherwise, such a teacher may not be very well-versed in Dharma but happens to be famous, and people are attracted by his fame and feel very lucky to have encountered him or even just to take a photo with him. These people believe his teachings are perfect, so they listen to him attentively, but... well, I'd better stop here.

The above is about the advantage of intention. As long as we have a thorough understanding of the Buddha's teachings, such intention will not easily regress.

5) The advantage of faith

If you lack faith in the Buddha's teachings, you will not be drawn to the Dharma. Now that you have the ability to turn your mind to the Dharma, you have the advantage of faith.

Once we understand the supreme qualities of the Dharma, our veneration and faith will surely arise. This basic rule also applies to a worldly person. For example, between two college students, one is a distinguished student with great qualities, and the other is inferior; therefore, the second student will naturally respect the first one unless the latter refuses to do so. Similarly, among all the explanations of the truth of everything, the doctrines of Buddhism are unparalleled. If we deeply resonate with this, we will have faith in the Dharma.

Of course, the prerequisite for faith to arise is your affinity with Buddhism in previous lives. Without such affinity, even if the Dharma is absolutely true and cannot be refuted by any reasoning, some people nevertheless generate no faith.

For example, some university students and intellectuals have good character and manners, but whenever they encounter the Dharma, they simply say, “I don’t believe it!” When asked why, they answer, “Because I don’t believe it!” Such an attitude is not uncommon these days. Therefore, a good affinity established from previous lives is indispensable for the arising of faith.

The Dharma is supreme, but one cannot turn one’s mind to it without faith. Everyone present here must have faith; otherwise, you would not have come to Larung Gar in pursuit of Dharma. Sometimes I think that many of you must have a great karmic affinity to have become monastics at Larung Gar; otherwise, given your worldly education and the influence from your parents, family, neighbors, and friends, it would be hardly possible for you to be studying the Dharma.

Almost all Tibetans are Buddhists, so it is easier for a newborn Tibetan to believe in Buddhism in their course of development. Although most of you were not born in such a Buddhist environment, now your ripened merit has driven you to become a monastic or receive layperson’s precepts. It is all due to your affinity and faith. Otherwise, you would not have entered the doorway of Buddhism.

Of course, having faith alone is not enough. Based on faith, we are equipped with human form to practice Dharma. Rongton Choje, a great enlightened master of Tibetan Buddhism, offered a twofold instruction to his disciples right before his parinirvana, saying, “From now on, I hope you will sincerely hear and contemplate the Dharma during the daytime and diligently practice the Dharma at night.”

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted this instruction, telling us, “During the day, you must debate, discuss, listen, and give teachings. You should discuss the Buddha’s teachings with peers and disclose and analyze your doubts in front of a wise person—this will help you dispel all your wrong views and doubts. During the night, when everything is quiet, you should meditate on the content of the teachings you received.” This is the instruction from our lineage master, and we should follow it and apply it throughout our whole life accordingly.

To summarize, because these five advantages—of support, place, possessing the sense faculties, intention, and faith—need to be complete with regard to one’s own makeup, they are referred to as the *five individual advantages*. You should examine whether you have all five advantages. Dharma students who are listening to this teaching should have all of them. Why? Because if any of the five advantages were missing, it would be impossible for you to attend this teaching. For example, if you

didn't have the advantage of faith, you wouldn't feel any inclination toward the Dharma; if you were born in a border place, you wouldn't encounter the Dharma in this life, and so you would have no opportunity to understand the Dharma.

As far as place is concerned, as I said, the place in the current time is the best for studying the Dharma. As for me, I started my study at a fairly young age when the Cultural Revolution was over. Over the past twenty years,²³⁶ religious policies and the political atmosphere have been quite stable with no major upheaval, so my Dharma study has been quite smooth and fulfilling. Although once in a while I encountered challenges such as emotional turbulence, physical discomfort, cold, cough, or diarrhea, these things were all minor. Overall, everything had been fine. You should know that it is very rare to have the opportunity to study the Dharma for so long; even just studying it for five or ten years in one's lifetime is already very precious. Sadly, many people these days don't pursue the Dharma.

The above briefly covers the five individual advantages. We now study each of them in greater depth:

2.1.1.2.1.1. The Advantage of Support

It is absolutely indispensable to be human in order to practice the Dharma. Imagine, instead, that you were not in human form but took on the highest form of life in the three lower realms—an animal, even the most beautiful and highly prized one known to man. If someone told you, “Recite ‘*Om Mani Padme Hum*’ once, and you will attain Buddhahood,” you would be completely unable to understand the instruction or grasp its meaning, nor would you be able to articulate a response.

Of course, the Dharma itself has incredible blessing power, so when an animal hears the teachings, even if it doesn't understand them, the merit of hearing the Dharma may bring it to a better rebirth. There are many cases in the history of Chinese Buddhism in which animals were reborn as humans due to hearing the Dharma. For example, in the late Eastern Tsin dynasty, Master Datong from Xingguo Monastery in Jinan recited the *Lotus Sutra* every day. The master had been reciting the sutra, and a white-necked earthworm near the courtyard in front of his retreat cabin had been hearing the recitation for three years. One day, a novice monk was weeding with a hoe and accidentally cut the earthworm's body into two pieces. The monk felt very sorry and buried the earthworm.

The earthworm was reborn as a human due to the merit of hearing the *Lotus*

²³⁶ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche started to give teachings in the 1980s.

Sutra and later took ordination in a monastery. Although he was illiterate, he could fluently recite the *Lotus Sutra*. Whenever he was free, he would recite the sutra, and this recitation continued for more than thirty years. Later, when he heard that Master Datong had passed into parinirvana, he thought it was time for him to leave the world as well. Then he entered parinirvana, and many auspicious signs appeared.

There are also some animals that are manifestations of buddhas or bodhisattvas. In the Ming dynasty, a scholar had a white parrot that recited the name of Avalokiteshvara and the mantra of the white Avalokiteshvara every morning. The parrot could also recite poems, such as *Come Away Home* by Tao Yuanming (365–427), *Ode on the Red Cliffs* by Su Shi (1037–1101), and poetic works by Li Bai (701–762). One day, the parrot told the scholar, “I came from the west; now I am going back to the west.” That night, the bird died in peace and took rebirth in a pure realm.

There are many similar stories in *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*. For example, the horse king Bhalaha was a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara; the fish Rohita was a manifestation of the Buddha in his causal stage. Those animals are buddhas and bodhisattvas in animal forms to benefit sentient beings.

In the Tang dynasty, there was a parrot that refused to take any food after midday. If the food was served after midday, the bird wouldn’t even take a look at it from afternoon till evening.

[Once, a lay practitioner told me, “It is such a challenge to take the one-day precept. I almost starve to death!” He just had to skip dinner, so it shouldn’t have been so intolerable! Maybe he was used to eating regularly, so he felt hungry. I told him, “A hungry ghost eats nothing for twelve years. You may reflect on this.” The man complained, “I am not able to visualize anything! I am so starved!”]

When that parrot heard that Buddha Amitabha also manifested as a parrot in the Pure Land, as recorded in the *Amitabha Sutra*, it became even more motivated and diligently recited the name of Amitabha all day. One day, the parrot appeared unwell, and the owner realized it was about to die, so he struck a Buddhist chime to help the parrot chant the name of Amitabha. Each time the owner hit the chime, the parrot would chant the name once. After ten recitations, the parrot died peacefully and took rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land.

There was once a Chinese starling in the Song dynasty that took rebirth in the Pure Land after chanting the name of the Buddha. There were many similar stories in Tibetan regions as well.

The above-mentioned animals must have had extraordinary connections with the Dharma. But here Patrul Rinpoche's point is that animals are usually quite dull-witted, so they cannot intentionally do anything virtuous, such as practicing the Dharma or going on retreat.

We humans, even the worst of us, have no problem with taking a one-day precept, even though upholding the long-term precept is hard for us. We can always recite the Vajrasattva mantra ten thousand times, even if lifelong recitation is hard for us. Humans have such an advantage in these capabilities, which animals don't have. Even the most beautiful and highly prized animal known to man cannot recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara even once, such as the Tibetan mastiff that is worth up to \$5 or 6 million, the dog a Japanese bought from America that is worth \$10 million, and the panda couple that an American zoo bought at the cost of \$250,000. These animals, however pricey they are, lack the ability to recite even a single mantra of Avalokiteshvara, intentionally perform a virtuous act, or come up with a solution when faced with imminent death, like freezing. They simply lower their heads and endure, resigned to their fate. In contrast, a human, no matter how frail, would at least know how to seek shelter under a tree or in a cave, gather wood, and make a fire to stay warm. If animals don't even have this basic capability, how could they possibly think of practicing the Dharma?

Despite their superior physical forms, gods and other celestial beings do not meet the requirements for taking the *pratimoksa* vows, or the precepts of individual liberation. As a result, they cannot assimilate the Dharma in its totality.



Lesson 17

“As to what is meant by... is a central country.” [page 22–24]

I don’t cover too much content from *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in my everyday teachings. This allows you enough time to reflect on it. The text is different from those that are heavy in theory and require analysis, discussion, and debate to be understood. As long as you reflect on it carefully and put it into practice accordingly, you can experience its true meaning.

It may take me a bit longer to complete the entire teaching. This way, you will have enough time to contemplate the content. Without contemplation, it is hard to receive the real benefits.

While listening to the teaching, I hope you won’t get bored. Ordinary people tend to favor new things over old ones. If each Dharma class focuses on a new text or topic, they remain curious. However, if the teaching of the same text or topic continues for too many classes, they may become reluctant to attend. It’s something you should take note of.

Another point worth noting: This is a rare opportunity to study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, so please try to commit yourself to this teaching wholeheartedly. The way I am teaching the text this time is different from before. In the past, when I taught this text, due to time constraints, I simply read the root text as if giving a transmission, so I wasn’t able to elaborate on the profound meanings embedded in the text. In fact, both the teacher and the listener should spend more time with the text. For example, when encountering a piece of scriptural evidence,

one should carefully read it and reflect on it repeatedly until the meaning is deeply instilled in the mind. Then, one can further put it into practice.

We are so fortunate to have a human life now. When encountering such a great text, we should study it very well from beginning to end. As a teacher, I began my teaching with this aspiration and hope to keep the aspiration until the end. Otherwise, if in the beginning I spend two classes just explaining a few lines of the root text, and then in the end, give reading transmissions to cover many pages in one class, this would not be a responsible approach.

In fact, we don't need to rush. As long as we spend every day hearing, contemplating, and meditating, this in itself is a kind of happiness in life. There are many ways to be happy, but I think the happiest thing is to hear and teach the Dharma. Any other worldly conduct brings no genuine meaning to life. You are here to practice the Dharma, so you should give top priority to hearing and studying the Dharma and listen wholeheartedly and earnestly.

Today's teaching is about the advantage of place: being reborn in a "central region." Here is a detailed explanation of what a central region is.

2.1.1.2.1.2. The Advantage of Place

When discussing a "central region," it is important to differentiate between a geographically central region and a place that is central in terms of the Dharma.

1) A geographically central region

The geographically central region is commonly referred to as the Vajra Seat at Bodh Gaya, India, which is located at the center of Jambudvipa, the continent situated to the south of Mount Meru. It is said that all thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa attain enlightenment at this sacred place. Even during the universal destruction at the end of the kalpa, the four elements are unable to harm it, and it remains intact as if suspended in space. At its center grows the Tree of Enlightenment. This place, with all the towns of India surrounding it, is therefore considered the geographically central region.

There are different interpretations of *Jambudvipa* in historical records: sometimes Jambudvipa refers to the whole world, sometimes all of Asia, sometimes just India. Here in the text, Jambudvipa refers to India. Regarding the exact location of the Vajra Seat, historians hold divergent opinions, but the general consensus is

that it is located at Bodh Gaya, at the center of India, where the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa attain Buddhahood.

Why is this place called “the Vajra Seat”? According to *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*,²³⁷ the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa all sat on this spot to enter vajra samadhi.²³⁸ Having relinquished both afflictive obscurations and cognitive obscurations, they attained full enlightenment. Because the meditative absorption they enter is called the vajra samadhi, this spot is called the “Vajra Seat.”

Here is another explanation of the name of the “Vajra Seat”: even during the universal destruction at the end of the kalpa, the spot will remain undestroyed, suspended in space in the shape of a barrel. This place is as indestructible as a diamond (or vajra), so it is called the “Vajra Seat.”

Why is the Vajra Seat indestructible at the end of the kalpa? According to Jigme Lingpa’s teaching:

In the middle of Mount Meru, there once lived a sage called Dadhichi who always practiced virtues and made an aspiration before death: “May my bones become as indestructible as a diamond!” Due to the power of his virtues and meditation, his whole body indeed became indestructible diamonds. Therefore, the devas, or benevolent celestial beings, brought his body to the god realm and made weapons from his bones. Dadhichi’s foot bones were made into swords by Indra; his ribs were made into short spears by Ishvara; his hip bones were made into wheels by Vishnu. In the process of making the weapons, a large amount of diamond powder fell down and landed in the center of India, turning the place into a barrel-shaped diamond.

²³⁷ *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions* is a narrative of Xuanzang’s nineteen-year journey from Chang’an in central China to the Western Regions of Chinese historiography. The Buddhist scholar traveled through the Silk Road regions of what is today Xinjiang in northwest China, as well as neighboring areas in Central Asia and South China. Beyond these Chinese locations, Xuanzang also traveled around the perimeter of India, as far south as Kanchipuram. Xuanzang’s travels demarcate not only an important place in cross-cultural studies of China and India, but also cross-cultural studies throughout the globe. The text is set up as both an account of Xuanzang’s religious pilgrimage as well as his report of the surrounding towns and provinces of Tang China.

²³⁸ It refers to the final meditative absorption a bodhisattva engages in before entering full Buddhahood.

Here is the description of the Vajra Seat in *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*:

Right under the Bodhi Tree, there is a Vajra Seat that came into being in an early kalpa and was formed together with the earth. The Vajra Seat is situated at the heart of the three thousand worlds, its bottom touching the gold wheel and its top pushing the borders of the earth. Made of vajra, it has a circumference of a hundred steps.

When I was studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* many years ago, I also wondered, “During the universal destruction at the end of the kalpa, how is it possible that the Vajra Seat remains suspended in space?”

There are two reasons for this. First, the Vajra Seat is made of the indestructible vajra, which the devas used to make weapons to defeat the asuras; the deva’s weapons can destroy all the asuras’ armors and cannot be destroyed by anything else. Second, it is due to Dadhichi’s inconceivable aspiration. The bardo teachings say that intermediate beings can wander anywhere and go through anything—mountains, rivers, and any other materials—but not their mother’s womb or the Vajra Seat. It is due to their karmas that they cannot go through their mother’s womb, so once they enter the womb, they remain there. The fact that they cannot go through the Vajra Seat is attributed to Dadhichi’s aspiration.

Some may wonder, “Since the Vajra Seat remains indestructible at the end of the kalpa, does it mean it becomes permanent?” The answer is no. It doesn’t mean the Vajra Seat will always remain undamaged; it just takes a much longer time, like many kalpas, before it collapses, so it is not permanent. If it were permanent, then it couldn’t be formed due to causes and conditions at the very beginning, and it would always remain the same in the end.

Of course, the Vajra Seat is much more solid than all other hard objects in the world, so it won’t fall apart within hundreds or thousands of years. In comparison, Dharma halls made of cement may only stand for fifty or one hundred years. No construction contractor dares to promise the building will last two hundred years. In addition, many construction materials are not sturdy enough; when unfavorable conditions arise concerning the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—the buildings will disintegrate in no time.

The thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa all attain enlightenment at the Vajra Seat in India. The first four buddhas, including Buddha Shakyamuni, have

already attained Buddhahood there. Starting with the future Buddha Maitreya, 996 buddhas will attain enlightenment there. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche composed an aspiration prayer, *The Quintessence of Oceanic Prayers of Aspiration*, at the Vajra Seat. It says:

In the future, when nine hundred ninety-six great guides
Display the attainment of awakening in this very realm,
May I serve them constantly as the best of their attendants,
And gain the power to contribute to their magnificent activity.²³⁹

Therefore, when making everyday aspirations, we should also aspire to attain Buddhahood at the Vajra Seat. Even if we attain the fruition of a sublime being one day, we should still aspire to listen to teachings in front of buddhas and to be their attendants.

Every year in the twelfth month of the Tibetan calendar, eminent masters of Tibetan Buddhism, especially those of the Nyingma lineage, organize a large-scale prayer assembly at the Vajra Seat. If you go to India, make sure you remember to pay respects to the Vajra Seat. Someone went there and brought me back leaves from the Bodhi Tree and told me, “I stole these leaves there, and I am offering them to you!” I don’t know how he managed to “steal” the leaves because the Indian government protects the Bodhi Tree and forbids picking up its leaves. Some people wait under the Tree all day, especially in autumn; when the wind blows, they try to grab the falling leaves from the ground.

The Bodhi Tree, or the Tree of Enlightenment, is large and leafy, but it is not the same tree under which Buddha Shakyamuni attained enlightenment. According to historical records, the Bodhi Tree has been damaged several times:

a. Before King Ashoka became a devotee of Buddhism, he believed in another religion and tried to destroy historical remains of the Buddha. Ashoka sent someone to cut down the Tree, and he ordered a brahmin to burn it down as a sacrifice to the gods. But a miracle happened halfway through the fire: two bodhi trees with lush green leaves appeared from the blaze. Ashoka witnessed the miracle and deeply repented his wrongdoing. He watered the root of the Bodhi Tree with milk right away, and the next day the Bodhi Tree was as good

²³⁹ Translated by Adam Pearcey and Sean Price, 2020.

as before. After that, Ashoka often took care of the Tree by himself and really enjoyed what he was doing.

b. Ashoka's concubine had always believed in another religion. She asked a minister where Ashoka went every day, and when told, she was so angry with the Bodhi Tree that she had it cut down at midnight. The next day Ashoka saw the Tree cut down and was very sad. He prayed again and again, watered the root with milk, and soon the Tree grew back.

c. Later, another king brought damage to Buddhism. He also had the Tree cut down and dug the root out until spring water emerged. But descendants of Ashoka again watered the Tree with milk, and overnight the Tree sprang back to life.

The present Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya comes from a branch cut from the original Tree. This branch was planted in Sri Lanka by Ashoka's daughter Theri Sangamitta. Later, after that branch grew into a tree, India was invaded by Islamic forces, and the original Bodhi Tree was destroyed. Subsequently, a branch was taken from the Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka and replanted successfully at the Vajra Seat in India.

So many things have happened to the Bodhi Tree. It has endured countless trials and tribulations, but its origin has been sustained. The benefits of this Bodhi Tree are described in the sutras and shastras, including generating bodhicitta upon seeing it, giving rise to great loving-kindness and compassion upon touching it, and many more.

In summary, this section states that the Vajra Seat in India is the geographically central region because the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa attain enlightenment there. Meanwhile, all the towns of India around the Vajra Seat, such as Sarnath, Vaishali, and Rajgir—the places mentioned in the *Vinaya*—are also considered parts of the central region in terms of geography. From this perspective, the Tibetan regions and Han regions are said to be peripheral.

2) The central region in terms of the Dharma

In terms of the Dharma, a central place is wherever the Dharma—the Buddha's teachings—exists. It is a place with teachings and realization of the Dharma. In particular, this is a place where someone is giving teachings, and someone is hearing, contemplating, and meditating, thus continuing the wisdom life of the Buddha.

Of course, there exist different specifications. Some believe a central place in terms of the Dharma is wherever copies of *The Infinite Life Sutra* (*The Amitāyus Sutra*) are, while others say a central place is wherever monasteries are. In fact, true Buddhism consists of hearing, contemplation, and meditation. It may not be valid to say a place is a central region simply because a copy of a certain sutra exists there. If nobody believes in Buddhism in a city, or if their faith is rather superficial even if they claim to be believers, but there are a few copies of *The Infinite Life Sutra* in that city, would this place be qualified to be a central place? I am afraid not. Only places with the Dharma of transmission and the Dharma of realization qualify as central places. Places without these two are said to be peripheral.

From the time the Buddha came into this world and as long as his teachings still existed in India, India was a central place for both geography and Dharma because it was the place where the Buddha attained enlightenment and where the Dharma existed. However, during the lifetime of Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1889), the Vajra Seat was occupied by tirthikas, and the Dharma had almost disappeared in India. Thus, as far as Dharma is concerned, even Bodh Gaya in India is a peripheral place.

When we visited India,²⁴⁰ the locals told us that Buddhism was destroyed by invading Muslim forces and disappeared from the land of its birth until after India achieved independence in 1947. It is a fact that most of India was once invaded and occupied by Muslims.

In his travelogue *Journey to Countries*, Gendün Chöphel (1903–1951) mentioned a lay practitioner named Dharmapala who, risking his life, protected the temples, statues, and stupas, including the Mahabodhi Temple, around the site of the Vajra Seat. Dharmapala also protected sacred sites such as Sarnath. Muslims who invaded India brought substantial damage to Buddhism there, as evidenced by the broken Buddha statues preserved in the Deer Park Museum.

The destruction that Muslim forces caused to Buddhism is equivalent to that brought by the Cultural Revolution in the Tibetan and Han regions of China. During the political upheaval in China, Buddhism suffered horrendous damage. Someone commented that the upheaval marked a good period of time. Whether it was good or bad, I believe all the seniors who experienced it in person have the right answer.

Take the Tibetan regions, for example: Several thousand monasteries were

²⁴⁰ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche accompanied the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche to India in the early 1990s.

demolished, Buddha statues were thrown into rivers, and scriptures were burned. In many Tibetan areas, my hometown included, monastics were forced to disrobe, Dharma halls were burned down, and nothing but ruins were left at the sites of prior monastic residences.

I was a kid during the upheaval. When herding yaks, I would go to a monastery site and dig under the walls. Occasionally I found some broken statues or scriptures. I remember once I dug out a thangka and was so excited that, while still at a distance from home, I cried out loud, “I found a buddha image! I found a buddha image!”

I brought the thangka home with great joy but was beaten by my parents. They scolded me, “The situation is so bad now! How dare you shout like this! Are you not afraid that our neighbors hear you?” They were so scared something bad would happen if someone heard me, so they punished me badly.

It was the same in India during the invasion of Muslim forces; Buddhism was almost wiped out. It is primarily thanks to immigrating Tibetan eminent masters that Buddhism has been rejuvenated in India. These masters went into exile to India in the 1950s and started to build monasteries and educate the sangha once they settled down. They fully devoted themselves to the spread of Dharma and made Mahayana Buddhism flourish again in India. Thus, Indians also acknowledge that Tibetan Buddhism brings glory to their land. Meanwhile, a few bhikkhus from Sri Lanka and Burma also went to India to promote Theravada Buddhism.

However, the original Buddhism has largely disappeared in India, and now Hinduism, Islam, and other religions dominate the land. Given the variety of religions in India, conflicts are inevitable. Religious violence and riots have periodically occurred in India, so media coverage often features such mishaps with headlines such as “XX temple was burned down” or “riots between X religion and Y religion.”

Therefore, there are not many local Indians who believe in Buddhism. The majority of those who do pilgrimage to sacred Buddhist sites such as the Vajra Seat and Sarnath are non-Indians. You would have noticed this if you had been there. The patrons of Tibetan masters are rarely Indians; most of them are Taiwanese and Americans.

We just discussed whether India should be considered the central region in terms of Dharma. Now, let’s analyze the historical evidence about Tibet, the Land of Snows, to understand the rise and fall of Buddhism in Tibet.

Some people may not pay much attention to the history of Tibet, but I think we Buddhists should know something about it. Presently, many introductions to Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan history are mixed with various elements. Although we do not engage in this discussion, it is very important that, as Buddhists, we know the history of Buddhism.

Take me for example: although I grew up in the Tibetan region, I also value the history of Chinese Buddhism and often read histories of the Pure Land school, Chan school, and Tiantai school. When I visit a Han Chinese Buddhist temple, I take time to ask the abbot about the history of the place, saying, “May I know who established this temple? How long has it been here?”

I am eager to know all these facts. Knowing others’ history and experience can greatly benefit me because I always find things worth learning about. Similarly, you should also know the history of Tibet, which will help you reflect on whether Tibet is a central or a peripheral region. Then, you will know that, geographically speaking, Tibet is a peripheral region, whereas in Dharma terms, Tibet is a central region.

In the days of the Buddha, Tibet, the Land of Snows, was a sparsely populated land to which the Dharma had not yet spread. The Buddha prophesied:

In the land of red-faced Rakshasas,
Lakes will gradually recede in the future,
Humans will come into being,
Then the Dharma will widely spread there.

During the Buddha’s time, there were very few human inhabitants, and Dharma didn’t exist in Tibet, so the land was called “a border country,” as mentioned in many texts such as the biography of Atisha and the biographies of Padmasambhava.

Years later, Tibet was populated by a human tribe descended from an ape, who was believed to be an incarnation of the noble Avalokiteshvara, and a crag-demoness, who was believed to be an incarnation of Tara. Over time, the population grew, and many kings and ministers, who were seen as emanations of sublime beings, came into the Land of Snows. These emanations started to propagate the Dharma throughout the Land of Snows and to bring benefits to all sentient beings.

There are other accounts regarding the birth of the first Tibetans. But, since we are not having a history class today, I won’t expand on it. Actually, I have good

knowledge of Tibetan history because my concentration at the normal school I attended before my ordination was Tibetan language, so I went through many books on Tibetan history. I especially read literature on human history in Tibet, so I am quite familiar with this topic. I used to have a great interest in history, Buddhist logic, and poetics, but as I grow older, I want to spend more time on Buddhist practice.

Nevertheless, it is still necessary to know a bit about the history of humankind. There are many videos and books covering the history of Tibet, but some interpretations are too twisted. Not having an in-depth understanding of Buddhism, some scholars and journalists simply fabricate an explanation when encountering something profound, which inevitably distorts the true reality.

When I happen to see such a video or book, I am often a bit speechless. “It doesn’t make sense”—this is often the reaction of a Buddhist who reads a non-Buddhist’s account of the history of Tibetan Buddhism.

If you read through the long history of Tibet, you will find that the historical evolution of Tibet differs significantly from other places. Although Tibet doesn’t differ too much in the evolution of politics, military affairs, technology, culture, and so on, Tibet truly stands out from the perspective of benefiting beings and propagating the Dharma. One shouldn’t hold a narrow-minded understanding about those Tibetan emperors, for example, with some people thinking King Songtsen Gampo was cruel because he was featured killing yaks in some films. Looking back in history, these emperors contributed immensely to the propagation of the Dharma, for which we should feel truly grateful.

There are various accounts regarding the list of the early emperors of Tibet, but the consensus list consists of seven Heavenly Tris,²⁴¹ two Middle Kings,²⁴² six Lek Kings,²⁴³ eight De Kings,²⁴⁴ five Later Tsen Kings,²⁴⁵ and more. The last king of the five Later Tsen Kings is Lha-Thothori Nyantsen, the twenty-eighth king of Tibet

²⁴¹ The Seven Heavenly Tris include Nyatri Tsenpo, Mutri Tsenpo, Dingtri Tsenpo, Sotri Tsenpo, Mertri Tsenpo, Dakrri Tsenpo, Siptri Tsenpo, and Drigum Tsenpo.

²⁴² The Two Middle Kings consist of Drigum Tsenpo and Chatri Tsenpo.

²⁴³ The Six Lek Kings are Esho Lek, Desho Lek, Tisho Lek, Guru Lek, Trongzhi Lek, and Isho Lek.

²⁴⁴ The Eight De Kings are Zanam Zindé, Detrul Namshungtsen, Senöl Namdé, Senöl Podé, Senöl Nam, Senöl Po, Degyel Po, and Detrin Tsen.

²⁴⁵ The Five Later Tsen Kings include Tori Longtsen, Tritsen Nam, Tridra Pungtsen, Tritog Jetsen, and Lha Thothori Nyantsen.

and the emanation of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, according to historical records. The Dharma first appeared in Tibet during the reign of Lha-Thothori Nyantsen, marked by the fall of the *Sutra of a Hundred Invocations and Prostrations*, a *tsa-tsa* mold, and other objects onto the roof of the palace.

However, the description of this occasion varies across different Tibetan historical records. For example, according to the *Red Annals*, the representations of the Three Jewels fell onto the palace roof along the rays of sunlight, which surprised the king and the ministers. Nobody knew what the objects were, but then a melodious voice was heard from above, saying, “You don’t know what they are now, but as long as you venerate the objects with pure perception, five generations later someone will understand.”

Upon receiving this prophecy, Lha-Thothori Nyantsen treated the objects as sacred and made offerings to them reverently.

Other historical books, including *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History* by Dudjom Rinpoche (1904–1987), argue that the above account—the sacred objects falling onto the palace roof—is from Bön, the indigenous religion of Tibet, and is not consistent with what truly happened. The historical truth is as follows: two panditas and a translator from India visited the king, handed him *The Sutra Designed like a Jewel Chest*, *The Sutra of the Six Syllables*, and a golden stupa, and told him, “Five generations later, a person who understands them will appear in this world.”

Despite the differing accounts, the period of Lha-Thothori Nyantsen is generally considered the start of Buddhism in Tibet when the representations of the Three Jewels appeared in the palace.

The period of Lha-Thothori Nyantsen is dated around the Eastern Jin dynasty (c. 317–420), but some historians hold different opinions. For example, in his *History of Buddhism in India*, Taranatha (1575–1634) of the Jonang School states that Lha-Thothori Nyantsen lived around the same time as Vasubandhu (fourth–fifth century CE), while in his *White Annals*, Gendün Chöphel writes that Dignaga (c. 480–540 CE), the close disciple of Vasubandhu, lived around the same time as Songtsen Gampo (c. 605–650 CE). Therefore, there are significant differences of opinion regarding the date of Lha-Thothori Nyantsen’s rule. There are also other accounts of this period in other Tibetan historical records. Nevertheless, the period of Lha-Thothori Nyantsen must be before the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

Lha-Thothori Nyantsen was a great Tibetan king. He was enthroned at thirteen years old and received the representations of the Three Jewels at sixty. He made offerings to the sacred objects reverently and was rejuvenated into the body of a sixteen-year-old boy and lived another sixty years with the blessings of the Three Jewels. He thus lived a total of 120 years.

Five generations later, there appeared King Songtsen Gampo, an emanation of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. During Songtsen Gampo's reign, he had two great ministers, one of whom was Thönmi Sambhota (b. seventh century CE), and the other was Gartongtsen (590–667 CE). Thönmi Sambhota was sent to India to study its language and scripts at the age of thirteen. Of the students sent to India, when reaching Nepal, many either died or ran away due to difficulties in adapting to the local climate, and Thönmi Sambhota was the only one left. While in India, he studied Sanskrit and Buddhist logic under the top Indian pandita Devavit Simha.

On his return, Thönmi Sambhota followed Songtsen Gampo's instructions, and based on the Sanskrit alphabet, he introduced an alphabet to Tibet for the first time, thereby bringing an end to the history of lacking a written language in Tibet. Because of this, he is traditionally regarded as the inventor of the Tibetan script. It is said that he was an emanation of Manjushri.

At present, because of the curriculum at school, many young Tibetans do not recognize Buddha Shakyamuni, Manjushri, or Avalokiteshvara, but they do have faith in Thönmi Sambhota and know he is the author of the classical Tibetan grammar masterpiece—*The Thirty Verses*. Some teachers and intellectuals in Tibet even regard Thönmi Sambhota as Buddha Shakyamuni.

A while ago, there was a proposal that schools display no Buddhist images because children shouldn't be exposed to religious beliefs. But some teachers argued that the image of Thönmi Sambhota should be allowed. So, the two parties had a heated debate.

Some higher-ranking administrator said, "The image of Thönmi Sambhota isn't allowed because he was an emanation of the Buddha." The subordinate argued, "Then images of Confucius and Mencius shouldn't be allowed either, because they were also emanations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas." After several rounds of debate, they reached a final decision: The image of Thönmi Sambhota is allowed in schools, as are images of Confucius and Mencius.

Currently, many young Tibetans put a pendant with an image of Thönmi

Sambhota around their necks. Some middle school teachers and university professors place an image above their beds and make daily incense offerings, very similar to how people in South China worship Avalokiteshvara. Indeed, had Thönmi Sambhota not invented the Tibetan script, Tibetans might have remained illiterate.

When Thönmi Sambhota went to India, he experienced great hardships. But finally, he lived up to the expectations of Tibetans and ended the period of the Tibet being without its own written language. After returning from India, Thönmi Sambhota sang proudly before the king, “You are the king like a sun, and many ministers are like stars, but no one excels me in terms of contribution.”

Songtsen Gampo sincerely thanked him. Thönmi Sambhota not only invented the Tibetan script but also brought Dharma teachings back from India. Even King Songtsen Gampo listened to his teachings with great veneration.

Thönmi Sambhota translated twenty-one sutras and tantras of Avalokiteshvara into Tibetan, including the *Sutra of Eleven-faced Avalokiteshvara*, the *Lotus Sutra*, *The White Lotus Sutra*, and the *Great Compassion Dharani Sutra*. He also translated the *Powerful Secret*—the sacred objects that fell onto the palace roof during the time of Lha-Thothori Nyantsen, including the *Sutra Designed like a Jewel Chest*, *The Sutra of the Six Syllables*, and various other texts.

Later, King Songtsen Gampo himself displayed multiple forms, and along with his minister Gartongtsen—the emanation of Bodhisattva Vajrapani—he employed miraculous means to defend the country. He took two princesses to be his queens: the Chinese Princess Wen-Ch’eng of the Tang dynasty and the princess Tritsun, the daughter of the Nepalese king Amsuvarman.

When relaying the marriage proposals, Gartongtsen encountered many difficulties created by Emperor T’ai-tsung and King Amsuvarman, but he managed to solve all the issues with his intelligence and wisdom. Gartongtsen displayed great competence, so Songtsen Gampo valued him very much. At that time, Gartongtsen was involved in many national affairs, including military, economic, and national security and defense.

Therefore, in terms of Buddhism, Thönmi Sambhota’s contribution excelled others, whereas, in terms of worldly affairs, Gartongtsen was second to none.

The two princesses were emanations of Tara: Tritsun was the wrathful Tara, and Wen-Ch’eng was the peaceful Tara. Both princesses brought numerous

representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, including the two statues of Buddha Shakyamuni—which were the actual representatives of the Buddha.

[Initially, the statue of Jowo Shakyamuni, or the famous Jowo Rinpoche, was presented to the Chinese emperor by a Buddhist king of Bengal and became the representative of the Three Jewels in the Chinese palace. Gartongtsen was so clever that he managed to persuade Princess Wen-Ch'eng to bring the statue with her to Tibet. It was also said that the marriage proposal was made because Gartongtsen knew the princess was a faithful Buddhist and she could bring the statue to Tibet.]

At that time, many eminent masters (others said it was Princess Wen-Ch'eng instead) checked the terrain in Tibet and noticed that the whole place looked like a demoness lying on her back, with a large lake located at her chest. The masters said if the lake was not covered up, Buddhism in Tibet would encounter various setbacks and difficulties in the future. They said the lake should be filled up with the dirt carried by a white goat, said to be an emanation of a bodhisattva.

Gartongtsen led the goat to carry dirt from afar and passed through many places along the way. There was a place in my hometown, Trango County, where Gartongtsen stayed overnight with the goat. The spring from which Gartongtsen and the goat drank has become a miracle spring. Drinking it can help prevent illness, and if one does fall ill, it can aid in a swift recovery. In certain cases, it can even cure cancer.

For instance, my mother told me a story about the spring. When I was a toddler, I was once very sick, but my family couldn't afford to send me to a doctor. In order to save my life, my mother carried me to the spring, traveling day and night. It took her a few days to finally arrive and give me the spring water, and I indeed recovered. So, whenever I pass by the spring in Trango County, I think gratefully, "It was because of this spring that I am able to live up to now."

Gartongtsen's footprints were left in many places, including Lhagang—a small town in Garze, and Mount Jizu—a holy mountain in Yunnan Province. Such places are full of blessing power, marked as indelible historical symbols for later generations.

The lake was filled with dirt carried by the white goat, and then the Rasa Trulnang (i.e., Jokhang Temple) was constructed on the very spot to subdue the demoness at her chest. Meanwhile, at the points of the demoness's four limbs, eight temples, including the Thadul and Yangdul, were built. All the temples were

constructed at precise points to subdue the demoness, so she couldn't stand up, and thus the Dharma can always thrive in Tibet. Later, the king built a considerable number of temples, large and small, and since then Buddhism has been formally established in Tibet.

I often think, "The dependent arising is so incredible! The wisdom eyes of the eminent masters are also so incredible!"

It is not because I am Tibetan that I praise in this way; it is due to the facts of what truly happened. Despite the ups and downs of the past many years, Tibetan Buddhism has been surviving and thriving, with monastics devoted to hearing, contemplating, and meditating, and Tibetan householders as faithful believers who live according to the Dharma. Buddhism has been bringing great benefit to monastics, Tibetan householders, and to people across the world. All these occurrences attest to the accuracy of those eminent masters' perspectives, going back to the time of Songtsen Gampo.

Moreover, many constructions built during that period are also incredible, especially the Potala Palace. The buildings we construct today may only last a few decades, even if they are made from steel and cement. The Potala Palace, however, was constructed only with rock and dirt, yet this tall building is not only magnificent in terms of appearance but also sturdy in terms of structure. It has never tilted or crumbled, which is truly marvelous.

In comparison, when a carpenter built a retreat cabin at Larung Gar, he promised it would be strong and sturdy; however, two years later, the cabin was already in poor condition. The occupant worried the cabin would collapse, so very soon he had to have the cabin renovated.

Therefore, the aspirations and blessings of all buddhas and bodhisattvas are incredible. We should contemplate this.

In summary, during the reign of Songtsen Gampo, there were Buddha statues and temples in Tibet, but no monastics. Compared to the time of Lha-Tho-thori Nyantsen, Buddhism thrived more during the time of Songtsen Gampo, but the atmosphere of eminent masters giving teachings and people engaging in virtues was not strong enough.

Another five generations later was the reign of King Trisong Detsen, roughly the time of the Tang dynasty (c. 618–907). From the perspective of time, the reign of King Trisong Detsen and the Tang dynasty don't completely overlap, but from

the perspective of the prosperity of Buddhism, they were quite similar. Many emperors of the Tang dynasty believed in Buddhism, so under their influence, many people also had strong faith in Buddhism, a historical period worthy of true rejoicing. Similarly, the most prosperous period of Buddhism was during the reign of King Trisong Detsen.

King Trisong Detsen invited 108 panditas to Tibet, including Padmasambhava—the greatest mantra-holder who is unequaled throughout the three worlds. At that time, countries were not open to each other, and communication and transportation were not easy, so this occurrence marked a large-scale international exchange. Had the invitation come from another country, it might have been very hard to invite that many sublime beings from India. Therefore, we can say that Trisong Detsen was indeed quite open-minded when it came to cultural exchange.

To uphold representations of the Buddha's form, King Trisong Detsen commissioned the construction of temples, including the “unchanging, spontaneously arisen” Samye. Samye is the first temple built in Tibet, much like the White Horse Temple in Luoyang is the first temple built in China.

The frescoes at Samye are marvelous. They vividly depict Padmasambhava's and Shantarakshita's²⁴⁶ travels to Tibet, as well as Trisong Detsen's roles in propagating the Dharma and ruling Tibet. The design of Samye includes three styles—Chinese, Indian, and Tibetan, respectively—and the construction process is recorded in the biography of Padmasambhava.

Those who have been to Samye know the temple is not very large, yet its blessings and historical significance are extraordinary. At Samye, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche remembered the experiences of his past life when he was Nanam Dorje Dudjom,²⁴⁷ one of Padmasambhava's main twenty-five disciples.

²⁴⁶ Shantarakshita (Skt. Śāntarakṣita; Tib. ཞི་འཕགས་པ་, Shyiwa Tsho, Wyl. zhi ba 'tsho) (725–788), also called Khenpo Bodhisattva, 'Bodhisattva Abbot.' This great Indian pandita of the Mahayana school was abbot of the Buddhist University of Nalanda. He was invited to Tibet by King Trisong Detsen, where he founded the temple and monastery of Samyé and ordained the first seven Tibetan monks, thus establishing the Tibetan Sangha, according to Nagarjuna's Sarvastivadin tradition. He worked extensively to uphold and maintain the Buddhist teachings and began to establish the Buddhадharma in Tibet. However, indigenous forces that opposed and were hostile to the Dharma were increasing in strength. Neither the might of the king, Trisong Detsen, nor the power of the great abbot Shantarakshita could subdue them, so they invited Guru Rinpoche to come to Tibet. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

²⁴⁷ Nanam Dorje Dudjom (Tib. སྤྲུམ་འཕྲུལ་འཇུག་པ་, Wyl. sna nam rdo rje bdud 'joms) (8th-9th cent.) was one of King Trisong Detsen's ministers sent to Nepal to invite Padmasambhava to Tibet. He became one of Guru Rinpoche's main twenty-five disciples. When receiving

To uphold the Buddha's speech, the authentic Dharma, one hundred and eight translators, including the great Vairotsana, mastered the art of translation and thereby translated all the main sutras, tantras, and shastras that were widely known in India at that time.

Later, when Venerable Atisha came to Tibet, he praised the work, saying, "There are far more sutras, tantras, and shastras in Tibet than in India!" Indeed, the scale of translating Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan was unprecedented back then. All the Sutras and part of the Abhidharma in the Tripitaka were translated into Tibetan.

Meanwhile, after rounds of discussions, the king and the ministers decided that no Tibetan works were to be put into the 218 volumes of Abhidharma to prevent unauthentic Dharma from being included. This is different from the Tripitaka in the Chinese language. Therefore, in the Tibetan Tripitaka, the sutra section comprises the teachings of the Buddha, while the Abhidharma section includes only the explanations of the Buddha's profound meaning commented on by eminent Indian masters.

You should know that back then in India, only authentic and rigorous Buddhist scholars were qualified to present and compose shastras because the standard of Abhidharma works was very high. Translating the Dharma into Tibetan was very arduous back then, but the benefit it brought to Buddhism and sentient beings is incredible.

In addition, to test whether Tibetans could uphold the monastic precepts, Trisong Detsen asked "Seven Men for Testing"²⁴⁸ to be ordained as monks, thus forming the sangha to uphold the Buddha's mind. The test was a great success.

From that time up to the present day, the teaching of the Buddha has shone brightly in Tibet, like the sun. Despite challenges such as Langdarma's persecution of Buddhism, the Buddha's teaching has never been lost in either of its aspects,

empowerment from Guru Rinpoche, his flower fell on the mandala of Vajrakilaya. Through the practice, he became an accomplished mantrika who could fly with the speed of the wind and pass through solid rock. The name Dorje Dudjom means 'Indestructible Subduer of Mara.' (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

²⁴⁸ The "Seven Men for Testing" refer to the first seven monks ordained in Tibet by Shantarakshita. They are: Ba Trizik (འབྲི་གཞིགས་, sba khri gzigs), ordained as Shrighosha (Skt. Śrighoṣa; Tib. Palyang), Ba Salnang, Ba Trisher (འབྲི་བཞེད་གཞིགས་ or འབྲི་བཞེད་ལྷིགས་, sba khri bzher or sba khri bzher gzhir), Pagor Vairotsana, Ma Rinchen Chok, Gyalwa Chokyang, and Khön Nagendrarakshita. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

transmission or realization. Thus Tibet, as far as the Dharma is concerned, is a central region.

Some Dharma students, although not born in the Tibetan region, come to study here. Thus, for them, there is little difference from being born here in the Tibetan region from the perspective of the advantage of place. Or, although you were not born into a Buddhist family, you visit temples often after becoming a Buddhist, which can also be considered as being born in a central region—you have the advantage of place. Otherwise, if having a family that doesn't believe in or even rejects Buddhism is considered being born in a border region, then most people won't have the ten advantages.

Some monastics received their ordination years ago but kept it a secret from their families. Some family members found out later and even sent letters to a government office, reporting that the monastic is a person with misconduct.

Alas! Some people are truly pitiful. They don't believe in Buddhism, and they even try to destroy their children's monastic life and pull down some Buddhist groups. Recently, I read a letter from a monastic's parent that was mailed to a government office. People like this are truly pitiful! However, there is nothing we can do because they are entangled by their own karmas, and they cannot help doing things like that.

To summarize, we should all carefully examine whether we are in a border region or a central region. It is very important to always live in a place where the Dharma thrives. Although some people have already taken ordination or received precepts as lay practitioners, they may gradually disrobe or discard Buddhism due to the insidious influence of their families or cultural background.

Therefore, it is crucial for us to choose the right place and the right Dharma friends. Monastics at Larung Gar sometimes take a leave to visit their families, which makes sense, but I always worry whether you will return. I worry because the residents in your hometowns are non-Buddhists, and some of them even slander Buddhism, and you have not developed a strong sense of confidence in the Dharma through practice yet. Although you have generated a bit of renunciation thanks to the blessings of the Three Jewels, such a virtuous mind may just be temporary, so it can be easily veiled by the "dark clouds" of non-virtuous thoughts. Life at Larung Gar is not easy, and sometimes you are not in good physical shape; nevertheless, here is a place where the Dharma thrives.

Therefore, if you don't have anything particularly important to do elsewhere, you should stay at Larung Gar as long as possible.



Lesson 18

“A person lacking any of ... the five individual advantages.”
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We must put the teachings in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* into practice. When studying “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” we should carefully contemplate each meditative instruction and truly feel that having a human life is very rare, and having the human life to practice the Dharma, in particular, is even rarer than the morning star.

In our daily endeavors, we should often reflect on this: “Now that I’ve encountered the Dharma and the teacher, I clearly know what to do and what not to do. If I don’t practice the Dharma now, I risk being reborn in a lower realm or the god realm, which means I will never have such a precious opportunity to practice.”

In the past, many great masters of the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Kadampa schools placed great importance on the practice of “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages” and made it their lifelong practice. With the help of such practice, they eventually manifested auspicious signs of achievement at their deaths. Today’s practitioners also need to establish the foundation through ngöndro practices. I have been repeating this since the very beginning, and I will keep mentioning this in the future. It is only through repetitive reminders that this will eventually sink into your mind.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was still alive, he would teach *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* almost every year, so many senior disciples who had been following Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche for years had conviction and faith in the Dharma that is incomparable to today’s practitioners. Some young practitioners

at Larung Gar never met the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche; others met him but never stayed close to Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche for long periods. When I chat with them or interact with them, I can tell that their devotion to the Dharma is not as strong as that of senior disciples. Why? It is because the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche placed great emphasis on ngöndro, and his disciples devoted themselves greatly to the preliminary practices, and thus those disciples were and are assured about their Dharma practice.

As you should know, the state of realization doesn't arise without any cause. All sentient beings, especially those in this degenerate age, commit many wrongdoings in this lifespan, not to mention during the innumerable lives since beginningless time. For too long, we have been submerged in the afflictions of the five poisons, including desire, anger, and ignorance; so, it is very unlikely we will immediately uproot habitual tendencies just by occasionally reflecting on the Dharma or by receiving a bit of the guru's blessings and teachings.

An ordinary person's mind can only be tamed and changed step by step, instead of instantly. Except for a very few great enlightened masters from the Tibetan region, the Han Chinese region, and India, who, on account of great merit accumulated from previous lives, recognized the nature of the mind immediately after receiving pointing-out instructions from their destined teachers, most practitioners still need to make great efforts to study and practice the Dharma.

Thus, each practitioner, be they a monastic or a lay practitioner, must invest more effort and practice diligently; the more time the practitioner devotes to practice, the better. It's better to stay in a formal Buddhist institute or a Buddhist study group for an extended time. It is almost impossible to revamp a practitioner's mind by studying or practicing the Dharma for only a few days or months.

Now that you have the opportunity to study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, you should feel very happy. As for me, I am always happy each time I teach this text because this supreme text represents the words of lineage masters. Although I am not practicing it well, I have great confidence in it. I don't just talk the talk here. I have spent the time and effort of the first half of my life on it. Presently, many people long for spiritual liberation and genuine truth. If you can benefit from this text, even just a little bit, I am willing to give everything of myself to transmit the teaching to you.

I hope all Dharma students make the aspiration, "I shall devote the rest of

my life to hearing, contemplating, and meditating.” This will bring benefit to all sentient beings, as well as to you. A practitioner is meant to tame their mind and help all sentient beings. I also made such an aspiration two days ago: “In this life and in many lives yet to come, I vow to spend my life on hearing, contemplating, and meditating. I vow to tame my mind and to benefit all beings with the Dharma.”

Apart from the Dharma, we ordinary people may find joy in delicious food or fine clothing, but we should know that those worldly pursuits are not our ultimate goal. Such worldly things are just like a child’s playhouse; when the child grows up into an adult and reflects on their former pretend or imaginative play, they clearly realize that the play was not real. In today’s world, people are very attached to wealth and social status, but a few decades later when they look back, they will find such things of little meaning. Thus, we should all set up a meaningful goal for our lives. Otherwise, if we care for nothing but what to eat, drink, and play, we are no different from an animal. Therefore, we must consistently practice ngöndro.

Despite the cold weather, the sangha members should persevere in practicing ngöndro. It is minus twenty degrees Celsius at Larung Gar these days, but this is not as cold as Sershul, where the Buddhist institute attended by the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche is located. I had been to Sershul once in the summer, and the place was still bone-chillingly cold. I have never had a similar experience at Larung Gar in the summer, and even if I have, it was only during the early years of my stay here.

Conditions for studying the Dharma at Larung Gar back then were much worse than today. Every morning around 7 or 8 a.m., I would give tutoring sessions to my Dharma friends in the yard of my small cabin; we all sat on the frozen ground with thin layers of clothing. My yard was just a piece of flat land, and we didn’t have cushions to sit on. We all sat directly on the ground to study the Dharma together. It wasn’t until 10 a.m. that the sun finally came out. We would then continue for the second class, the third one, and so on. This was how we spent our whole morning.

At that time, meals were quite simple. For example, after getting up at 5 or 6 a.m., I would eat roasted barley flour called tsampa and boil water to fill up my thermos; I wouldn’t need to make a fire for the rest of the day. Around noon, I would have a bit of tsampa again and drink half the thermos of water, then around 1 or 2 p.m., I would attend the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s teaching. After class, sometimes Phuntsok Rinpoche would stay a bit longer to chat with disciples, so I would also stay for a while. Other times I would go back to my cabin in the

afternoon to give teachings; in the evening, I would finish the rest of the water. Basically, I only boiled water once a day.

This was my schedule for many years. Whenever I think about it now, I feel nostalgia in my heart—those days are gone forever.

Such a simple life is really good for one's practice. Some monastics at Larung Gar live a meager life, which, in fact, is of great help to their practice. Otherwise, if the conditions are too good, be it in a city or in a remote place, this may negatively influence one's Dharma practice.

The learning opportunity we have now is only transitional, and it is hard to say whether it will last long. Therefore, please take the teachings of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche seriously, have great joy toward the Dharma, and devote yourself wholeheartedly to the Dharma. There is no need to pay special attention to the weather, sickness, your family's comments, and other distractions. Just concentrate on the Dharma.

Only a pure and calm mind can fully accept the Buddha's teachings. It is just as only a crystal-clear mirror can clearly reflect an image; if the mirror is obscured by dust and grease, nothing can be reflected on it. Therefore, when listening to the profound Dharma, a Dharma student should concentrate on the teachings with faith and veneration. The longer you devote yourself to listening to the Dharma, the better. It is not sufficient to only listen to teachings for one year. If you just muddle through the teachings but have high demands for food and clothing, you are simply a worldly person, not a Buddhist practitioner seeking liberation.

The above talk may seem irrelevant to the content of the text, but I still want to remind you of this: although it is cold in winter, please make sure not to lose faith in the Dharma. You should retain solid faith in the Dharma; otherwise, you won't receive the true meaning of the teaching. Only when you grasp the meaning of the Dharma will you never regress in this life. Otherwise, no matter how many teachings you have attended and how long you have studied the Dharma, if your mind is not tamed, even if you are temporarily living in a Buddhist community, you will still regress when you encounter a difficult situation.

2.1.1.2.1.3. The Advantage of Possessing the Sense Faculties

Studying the Dharma requires the advantage of possessing the sense faculties. Here, the "sense faculties" exclude the mental faculty and refer to the five sense

faculties, including the visual (or eye) faculty, auditory (or ear) faculty, olfactory (or nose) faculty, gustatory (or tongue) faculty, and tactile (or body) faculty. A person lacking any of the five sense faculties cannot fulfill the criteria for taking monastic vows.

As known by monastics, Buddha Shakyamuni set the rule that people who want to become monastics should possess all five sense faculties; otherwise, they are not allowed to join the sangha. There are two reasons the Buddha set such a rule: first, it can prevent them from being mocked by thirtikas and non-Buddhists, which causes people not to generate faith in the Dharma; second, people lacking any of the five sense faculties cannot perfectly receive the Dharma. So, it is not because the Buddha lacks compassion that he doesn't allow such people to take the monastic vows. These days, such rules also apply to selecting a civil servant in China: an applicant has to go through a written test, in-person interviews, and a physical check-up; if he has a visual or hearing problem, he's unlikely to be selected.

1) Lacking the visual (or eye) faculty

When lacking the eye faculty, a person doesn't have the good fortune to see the teacher, the Buddha's image, the sutra, the shastra, and so on. A blind person has to face many challenges in life. The Chinese government is trying to help such people adapt to society, such as training them to become massage therapists so they can have a skill to make a living. Nevertheless, they still encounter many difficulties and inconveniences in life. As they cannot see, it's hard for them to distinguish days from nights, friends from foes, white from red, and more. Let alone hearing, contemplating, and meditating, they can hardly be self-reliant in daily endeavors.

2) Lacking the auditory (or ear) faculty

When lacking the auditory faculty, a person doesn't have the good fortune to listen to the teacher's teachings and pith instructions. As a result, he is not capable of hearing the Dharma. Let alone the extraordinary sound of reciting the Buddha's name, he cannot even hear the ordinary sound of singing or talking. A smart deaf person can read lips, but it is still hard for him to grasp the meaning like a normal person.

When I was a child, there lived an old lama near my family's tent. He had impaired hearing due to old age, so sometimes he would read lips. I often teased him by asking, "How are you?" He would answer, "Good!" To check whether he

could hear me, I would again say to him, “I will kill you!” He would nod and repeat, “Good, good, good!” I was such a bad boy back then!

Back in the Buddha’s time, if born deaf, a person might not be able to study the Dharma, due to his lack of access to hearing aids that were only available over two thousand years later.

3) Lacking the tactile (or body) faculty

When lacking the tactile faculty, like a patient in a vegetative state who can breathe but is unaware and unresponsive to touch, this person doesn’t have the good fortune to hear and contemplate the Dharma.

In 2005, a case concerning a woman in a vegetative state became viral. The so-called Terri Schiavo case involved Theresa Marie Schiavo, who was in an irreversible persistent vegetative state for nearly fifteen years and whose life was prolonged by artificial life support. In 1998, Theresa’s husband petitioned the court to remove her feeding tube and carry out euthanasia. This was opposed by Theresa’s parents. The two parties started a highly publicized and prolonged series of legal disputes. Theresa’s feeding tube was twice removed and reinserted several days later.

Her right-to-die case involved multiple appeals and numerous motions, petitions, and hearings, and spurred highly visible activism at both the national and international levels. When Theresa’s feeding tube was removed for the third time, her parents appealed, but the federal court upheld the original decision, so her feeding tube was not reinserted this time. This case ultimately involved state and federal politicians up to the level of President George W. Bush, who signed legislation moving the case to the federal courts.

Thirteen days after Theresa’s feeding tube was disconnected, she died. Regarding this case, some Christians argued that Theresa, even in her vegetative state, should have had the right to live since she was a living being. Some non-religious people favored carrying out euthanasia so her family would be freed from the “burden.”

Therefore, we should make an aspiration: “I wish I won’t be in a vegetative state before my death.” Otherwise, a vegetative patient not only brings trouble to family and friends but also lives a life worse than death—he may not even think of the Three Jewels.

There are many reasons causing a vegetative state or paralysis, including

diseases, car accidents, or earthquakes. For example, some people were injured and paralyzed during the Wenchuan earthquake; a Tibetan I know hurt his spine in a car accident and was paralyzed in the lower part of his body, although his upper body remains functional, similar to that of a normal person.

Some of you occasionally get sick and feel pain. In fact, you can still see, hear, and move; you can go wherever you want; you can do whatever you like. With such freedom, what do you complain about? If you can visualize yourself with other people's lack of sense faculties, you won't feel your life is so miserable anymore. If you were blind or paralyzed now, you would know how good your life used to be.

4) Lacking the olfactory (or nose) faculty and the gustatory (or tongue) faculty

Recent research has largely advanced our understanding and knowledge of the eye and ear faculties, but less research has been done on the nose and tongue faculties. In recent years, cases of smell and taste disorders have been rising across the world, so there is an urgent need to prioritize the related research. For example, a British college student suffers from ageusia and has lost his sense of taste, so he cannot distinguish the taste of salty water that of pure water, or barbecue ribs from mashed potatoes. An American patient has a "taste disorder," so for him, an apple tastes like rice, and fresh milk tastes like flat beer.

To taste something, in addition to using the tongue faculty, we also rely on the nose faculty. According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, a human tongue can discern six kinds of taste—sweet, sour, spicy, salty, astringent, and bitter—whereas a human nose can detect a few hundred odors. So, when a person cannot smell, he can hardly taste well.

Modern medicine believes that young people are more sensitive to smell and taste. Around the age of sixty, people start to experience a significant decline in their sense of taste and smell; at the age of eighty, around three-fourths of the population experience some loss of taste and smell. Many seniors at Larung Gar are like this: when young, they used to enjoy the variety of flavors, but now they have lost teeth, and everything tastes the same to them. They are fine with any food, as long as it is soft to chew.

If we have impaired ability to taste and smell, does it impact our Dharma study? Probably yes. Although the impact is not as noticeable as impaired vision

and hearing, it may still challenge people's ability to completely understand and grasp the Dharma.

Even if we are not so smart that we can clearly remember many Buddhist texts, we are fortunate to possess all our sense faculties, thanks to the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. When we have such a human form with intact sense faculties, we must practice diligently. On the one hand, we feel compassion toward beings who lack sense faculties. On the other hand, knowing how fortunate we are to have all the advantages related to Dharma, we must practice the authentic Dharma with great diligence.

2.1.1.2.1.4. The Advantage of Intention

If you don't have a conflicting lifestyle, you have the advantage of intention. "Conflicting lifestyle" specifically refers to the lifestyles of individuals born into communities engaged in negative activities such as hunting, prostitution, and so on, and who have been involved in these activities since their early youth. In ancient India, the caste system dictated almost every aspect of an Indian person's religious and social life. An Indian's caste identity was determined at birth; for example, if a person was born into the family of a *Kshatriyas* (warriors & rulers) caste, or a *Vaishyas* (traders & merchants) caste, their offspring would always have privilege over people in the lower caste.

In comparison, if a person was born into the family of a *Dalits* (outcastes) caste, their offspring would have to remain in the communities of hunters, butchers, or prostitutes. Their negative actions would inevitably lead them down a wrong path, resulting in bad consequences. The lifestyle they live is considered to be conflicting.

Butchers kill so many chickens, sheep, pigs, and cows at farmers' markets or slaughterhouses. They are very pitiful! There is a chicken butcher in the city of Chongqing, whose nickname is "The Quick Knife Li." He is very quick at slaughtering chickens. He charges two Yuan for killing a chicken. Every day, he kills dozens of chickens, sometimes even over two hundred. When mentioning his work, Mr. Li and his wife are very proud: "This is a good business. As long as we work hard, we can earn over one hundred Yuan every day." How very sad that people like this couple actually consider committing unwholesome deeds a worthy skill!

Many butchers in slaughterhouses spend their whole lives killing livestock. I used to chat with some of them when I organized life-releasing events. They said their job was to cut the necks of yaks at the slaughterhouse, from morning till

night, and sometimes they could kill up to four hundred yaks in a day. What they do is actually very cruel, yet in their minds, it is something worth boasting about to others.

Although we might not practice diligently and our progress may not be very satisfying, compared to them, at least we are not involved in negative activities as they are, so we are still doing well. A monk I know once told me, “I have not practiced diligently after taking my ordination, which I feel quite embarrassed about, but if I were still a lay person, given the lifestyle in my hometown, I would have killed many yaks.”

Generally speaking, it is unavoidable for some lay Tibetans to kill yaks. The same is true for some Han Chinese people, especially non-Buddhist Han Chinese, to kill chickens or fish. We are so fortunate to not be part of them, to avoid the “conflicting lifestyle.”

However, Patrul Rinpoche says:

But in fact, a conflicting lifestyle also includes anyone whose every thought, word, and deed is contrary to the Dharma.

It seems that Patrul Rinpoche sets a higher standard for “not living a conflicting lifestyle.” Thus, many of us cannot reach this high standard. But, according to my understanding, here Patrul Rinpoche refers to those whose thoughts, words, and deeds are involved only in wrongdoings and never in wholesome deeds, including prostitutes and butchers who always generate evil thoughts, speak evil words, and conduct evil deeds. Such people are considered to be “living a conflicting lifestyle.”

Generally speaking, the “conflicting lifestyle” mentioned in many teachers’ instructions refers to the following situations: a monastic disrobes and commits many wrongdoings, or a devout lay practitioner discards Buddhism, converts to another spiritual tradition, and gives up all their Dharma practice. Therefore, very often, Dharma masters urge their disciples, “Do not become a person with a conflicting lifestyle!” which implies “Do not disrobe, or do not forget the Dharma you’ve learned and commit wrongdoings!”

With the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, you, Dharma students who are present in class, have the great opportunity to receive the teachings. This is the result of the merits you have accumulated through virtuous actions in the past hundreds and thousands of kalpas. Grasp this opportunity tightly, like blind men

holding onto an elephant's tail, and do not let go of it. As the lyrics of a song say, "Wherever I am sent, I will never forget you, my dear mother." Similarly, wherever you stay or go, you should be willing to sacrifice your precious life rather than discard the precious Dharma and your efforts to benefit others. Each one of us should have such determination.

Remember that everything is impermanent. Although we gather happily here today, in a few years, we may be apart from each other. Recently, I looked at the photos that the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche took with us at the Vajra Seat in India. Several people in those photos have passed away, including Khenpo Chöpa, Tulku Palnor (1932–2009), and another senior lama. Those alive in the photos may also pass away in a few years.

Impermanence applies to everything and everyone. However, as long as you are truly determined, you can always radiate compassion and wisdom, dispelling the darkness of ignorance around you, no matter where you are. This is the power of the Dharma.

If you do not want to lead a conflicting lifestyle, you should frequently pray to the guru and the Three Jewels. When engaging in even the smallest virtuous acts, such as offering a butter lamp, a stick of incense, or a prostration, you should also aspire for all buddhas and bodhisattvas to bless you at every moment so that you will never be reborn as a person leading a conflicting lifestyle. Consequently, you can always perform wholesome deeds and benefit others in this life and future lives.

Such an aspiration has great power. When a person's mind is tamed in this way, their speech and actions will easily become gentle. After all, speech and actions are servants of the mind. It is similar to being on good terms with the CEO of a corporation, which makes it easier to get along with department managers.

Even if a person is not born into a community leading a conflicting lifestyle, they may become such a person in the future. Therefore, we must try our best to align our minds with the Dharma. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche emphasized this point:

With the blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, we now have a good intention, so we act in accordance with the Dharma when listening to teachings. We may even appear more noble than Bodhisattva Maitreya. However, external temptation is so strong, whereas internal mental strength is so weak. When unfavorable

causes and conditions arise, it is possible that today we are in monastic robes, but a few years later we disrobe, becoming a person who doesn't even accept the law of karma and who struggles to make a living.

In this world, a bad person may become good, and a good person may become bad. Such a change can happen rather quickly. Even if a monastic member studies and practices the Dharma diligently now, will they become a butcher or a prostitute later? If the person hasn't prayed well and made aspirations, it is hard to say what they will become.

To avoid regressing, we must not leave the Buddhist community. If you have taken ordination, you should stay in a monastery with monastics who possess pure conduct. Otherwise, if you often stay away from the sangha and associate with secular people, gradually you will regress into a secular person. If you are a lay practitioner, you should also stay close to a Buddhist group and engage in virtuous deeds together with like-minded peers, such as life-releasing, hearing, contemplating, and meditating. Otherwise, once your negative karma ripens, you may deviate from the right path. By then, even if someone wants to bring you back, it will be as difficult as trying to find a needle in the ocean.

We are living in a chaotic society. Day and night, people are busy with trivial worldly things. There are very few people who seek ultimate liberation. Given the macro-environment, we'd better not leave the pure Buddhist community. Meanwhile, we should often pray to the guru and to the Three Jewels.

2.1.1.2.1.5. The Advantage of Faith

If one lacks faith in the Dharma but trusts powerful gods, nagas, or other spiritual systems, then, no matter how much faith one might place in them, none of them can protect themselves from the sufferings of samsara or from rebirth in lower realms. When visiting the Karma Kagyu center in Malacca, Malaysia, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche gave a supreme instruction:

In my life, I always believe that the most important things in Buddhism are wisdom, compassion, and faith. Without faith, we will never realize the ultimate meaning of the Buddha's teaching. Without wisdom, we won't be able to distinguish and choose right from wrong amid the endless, intricate, and diverse things in this

fast-paced era, where science and technology develop rapidly and tirthikas become more rampant. Without compassion, we are not qualified as Mahayana Buddhists. These three things complement each other, and none is dispensable.

Later, I reflected on Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's words and felt that this instruction summarizes something very important. Indeed, an instruction from a realized master may have only a few words, but it sums up all the essential points a practitioner must know. It is impossible for a practitioner to attain realization if they don't have wisdom, compassion, and faith.

Among the three, faith is particularly important. Mipham Rinpoche says:

Faith is the root of the Dharma;
Faith amplifies all virtues and merits.

It is with faith that we have the opportunity to attain enlightenment. Many scholars study and research Buddhism assiduously, but their research output brings little benefit to themselves and others. Why? It is because they lack faith. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* says:

Those beings with little faith
Can hardly know the divine teachings on enlightenment.

Even if people without faith are very smart, and they study the Dharma day and night, it will be hard for them to grasp the profound meaning concerning enlightenment. Only through faith and diligent practice can one attain liberation.

Those monastics and lay practitioners at Larung Gar who have strong faith can quickly fulfill the most important aspects of life. The best way to develop faith in the Dharma is through knowing its great qualities. Otherwise, your faith is just superficial.

To know the great qualities of the Dharma, we must first know this: No matter how powerful tirthikas are, and how much worship gods and nagas receive, they themselves are still submerged in samsara. If they are not yet free from the ocean of sufferings, how can they help us solve our biggest issues pertaining to life and death?

Other doctrines provide no way to liberate us from samsara, since their views and conduct only offer temporary relief. The elixir that can free us from samsara can only be found in the doctrine of Buddha Shakyamuni. Therefore, we must

have irreversible faith in the Buddha's teaching and realization. It is then that we are considered fit vessels of the true Dharma.

Therefore, we should carefully contemplate this: It is rare to have encountered the Dharma, and, especially, to have faith in the Dharma. Shantideva also says:

The appearance of the buddhas in the world,
True faith and the attainment of a human form,
An aptitude for good: all these are rare.
When will they come to me again?²⁴⁹

Many Buddhists believe they come to believe in Buddhism by chance. But I don't think "by chance" is a valid explanation. It is because you have conducted innumerable virtuous deeds in the past, so you have the opportunity to study the Dharma in the present. Thus, we must seize the opportunity and generate extraordinary faith in the teachings of the Buddha and the realization of the Dharma that is as unwavering as the king of mountains. Moreover, we must not only practice the Dharma ourselves, but also try our very best to propagate the Dharma to other beings.

Benefiting oneself and others is not only the duty of monastics but also the duty of lay practitioners. Longchenpa says:

Beings who are utterly sublime are vessels for the stainless
Dharma.
Through learning and reflection, they attain its essence.
They discipline themselves, and others
They establish in the virtuous life.
Their practice, like the king of mountains, is unshakable.
They are the ensigns of the Sage's victory.
Householders or, better,
Those who have gone forth to homelessness,
The Teacher has declared them both to have a precious human
form.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

²⁵⁰ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

Please keep this verse in mind. What does it mean? Benefiting oneself and others is not a passionate conduct that only lasts for two or three days. If you make a bodhicitta vow to help others today but submit a “letter of resignation” a few days later and “quit” your vow, you are as unstable as the prayer flags blowing in the wind. You shouldn’t be like this. Instead, you should be as stable as the king of mountains. As such, even if you don’t appear as a Sage or a noble monastic but just an ordinary practitioner, you are still considered to have a precious human form.

Therefore, when studying the Dharma, it is very important to tame your own mind and help others.

Meanwhile, you should develop irreversible faith in the Buddha’s doctrine. Make sure you don’t blindly follow what others say. Let’s all give a check:

I have been studying the Dharma for many years; if someone promotes another spiritual tradition, saying it is better, and this endorser sounds eloquent and persuasive, will my faith in Buddhism stumble? Will I discard Buddhism and convert to his tradition?

If your answer is “yes,” it means you have not yet established solid conviction about Buddhism. But when conviction arises, even if tens of thousands of tirthikas come to persuade you, your faith in Buddhism won’t be shaken at all.

Every one of us should generate rational faith in Buddhism, as said in *Surpassing the Celestial Beings*:

I have no attachments to the Buddha,
Least I have hatred toward Samkhya²⁵¹ folks and other tirthikas.
Whoever possesses reasonable teachings,
I treat him as my master and learn from him.

After examining with wisdom and analyzing with reasoning, it is without a doubt that Buddha Shakyamuni is the only guide who discovered the ultimate truth. We can take refuge in the Buddha with confidence, knowing that he doesn’t and won’t deceive us. It is like when an employee finds a completely reliable employer who will never deceive his staff; this employee can finally rest assured.

²⁵¹ The Samkhya (Skt. sāmkhya; Tib. གྲངས་ཅན་པ།, drangchenpa, Wyl. grangs can pa), or ‘Enumerators,’ are non-Buddhist eternalists. They are followers of the sage Kapila (Skt.; Tib. མེར་སྐྱ།, Wyl. ser skya). They assert that all objects of knowledge can be classified into twenty-five principles. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

If our faith in the Buddha penetrates deep into the bones instead of just leaving an erasable mark on the skin surface, and we truly believe from the bottom of our hearts that “the Buddha is unparalleled,” then our faith will never waver.

To summarize, faith is the basis of the five individual advantages. It is not until a person generates uncontrived faith in the Buddha that he is finally an authentic Buddhist. With faith, everything is easy to attain; without faith, it is as if you cannot enter a house without the key—you are excluded from enjoying the beauty inside. Therefore, we should all strengthen our faith. We should feel blissful that we have encountered the precious Dharma in this very life.



Lesson 19

“A Buddha has appeared ... so it is a bright kalpa.” [page 25–26]

We are currently studying the section on “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages.” So far, we have covered the eight states without freedom and the five individual advantages. Today we move on to the five circumstantial advantages.

When studying the section on “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” it is not enough just to know the text content and the general interpretation. We must put the teachings into practice until this conviction arises:

It is rare to have a human form; now that I have it, I must appreciate it as much as possible, so that it won’t get squandered.

The desire for the Dharma is very important in the process of study.

People enjoy onstage performances such as singing and dancing. When a celebrity is touring, tens of thousands of people rush to buy tickets to see the celebrity in person.

We should have the same level of desire for listening to Buddha’s teachings, and we should be willing to do whatever it takes to attend one Dharma lesson. Otherwise, if we are indifferent to the teachings—whether we listen or not doesn’t matter—and sometimes we listen just because we’re concerned about how others might judge us. Such motivation may not bring much benefit to ourselves.

It may easily cost a college student a few hundred thousand yuan to study

at a top-tier university outside of China. A person I know studied international accounting overseas, and his bachelor's study cost nearly 200,000 yuan. However, the value of the worldly knowledge he acquired pales significantly in comparison to that of the transcendent Dharma. If "tuition" were to be charged to learn and practice *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, it is absolutely worth spending 800,000 yuan to receive the whole teaching. Hearing this, some people may be dumbfounded, saying, "That is way too expensive! If it were true, I would rather not study it and enjoy the money on something else!"

Actually, we should reflect on this: "What can bring me the greatest benefit in this life and in many lives yet to come?" If you understand each instruction in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and properly put it into practice, you will gain something that is beneficial life after life. In contrast, the knowledge gained from a worldly degree may not be all useful. Many university graduates, postgraduates, and PhDs, including those returning from overseas, cannot find a job or end up doing a lower-level job that requires no specific training.

Of course, I am not self-promoting my teaching here; I am just expressing what I truly feel. Many people devote themselves completely to wealth, fame, or simply making a living, but what help does such devotion ultimately bring? It is worth reflecting on this.

The fact that you are able to receive the Dharma teachings in this life is because, on the one hand, the effect of your positive actions from previous lives has ripened, and on the other hand, you have seen through many worldly things. If you don't protect and cherish this opportunity well enough, it can be easily destroyed by various unfavorable conditions. It is like this: A person is safe and sound when penniless, but if they have a wish-fulfilling jewel, evil maras, tirthikas, humans, and non-humans will take it, causing them harm. Likewise, when you are studying the Dharma, someone may say to you, "Such study is of little meaning. I have another idea, and you should follow me!" Some lay practitioners used to recite prayers and study the Dharma every day, but later on, someone kept on telling them misleading words, and eventually, many of those lay practitioners gave up their daily study and practice. What a great pity!

However, practitioners with wisdom can't be disturbed by negative forces like maras. It is said in *The Prajnaparamita Sutras*:

Some bodhisattvas are possessed by maras;

Some bodhisattvas are not under the control of maras.

Longchenpa quoted the scriptural evidence from the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* and explained the verse in this way:

Bodhisattvas with both wisdom and diligence remain in the state of no-self because they have realized emptiness, so the maras cannot hurt them;

As for bodhisattvas without wisdom but with diligence, since they have not realized emptiness, although they may appear diligent on the surface, they actually are in pursuit of self-benefit. So, the maras can disturb their minds and bring harm to them.

As for bodhisattvas with neither diligence nor wisdom, they are the type most favored by the maras, so the maras don't bother harming them as they are already under control.

Therefore, lazy practitioners without wisdom may accomplish worldly tasks smoothly, without encountering any difficulty. However, once they start practicing diligently, difficulties and obstacles start to arise one after another. This indicates that they have diligence but lack wisdom. But if they wear the armor of no-self, then the maras can do nothing to them.

Thus, we'd better not listen to teachings in the same reluctant manner as when we have to work for a living. Instead, we should be so blissful, just like a critically ill patient drinking deathless ambrosia for a certain cure. With this right attitude and the blessings of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, gurus, and Dharma protectors, we can definitely receive the benefits of the Dharma.

When listening to teachings, be it in front of the teacher or through videos, we should first have great joy and respect. With such an attitude, the Dharma will invisibly bring real benefit to us. Otherwise, if we are indifferent when listening to teachings, the Dharma won't be of great benefit to us. Therefore, when we receive the Dharma, make sure we always have respect and joy.

2.1.1.2.2. The Five Circumstantial Advantages

Let's first briefly summarize the five circumstantial advantages.

Nagarjuna says:

A Buddha has appeared and has preached the Dharma,
 His teachings still exist and can be followed,
 There are those who are kind-hearted toward others.²⁵²

The five circumstantial advantages include the advantage of the presence of a particular teacher, the advantage of the teaching of the Dharma, the advantage of the time, the advantage of our own good fortune, and the advantage of the teacher's extraordinary compassion.

When studying these five factors, we should carefully contemplate to see whether the content makes sense and whether human life is indeed very precious.

1) The advantage of the presence of the particular teacher

If we were born in a dark kalpa instead of a bright kalpa in which a buddha has appeared, we would not even hear the names of the guru, the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, and the like. Now that we are born in a good kalpa where the Buddha has come, so we possess the advantage of the presence of the particular teacher.

If we were born in a dark kalpa, we wouldn't have even heard the names of the sublime Dharma terms such as the teacher, the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, or the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. Now that we are so fortunate to be born in a bright kalpa when Buddha Shakyamuni has appeared, we have the fundamental teacher providing us guidance. Otherwise, no matter how many cycles of birth and death we go through life after life, we are unable to attain liberation. Therefore, the advantage of the presence of the particular teacher is the first of the five circumstantial advantages we should appreciate.

2) The advantage of the teaching of the Dharma

Although a Buddha has come, if he had not taught the true Dharma, we would not have benefited. Now, since the Buddha has turned the Wheel of Dharma three times, we have the advantage of the *teaching of the Dharma*. Specifically, the first turning is about the Four Noble Truths, the second is about the *Prajnaparamita* (the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom), and the third is about Yogācāra and Buddha-nature.

²⁵² The translation of the version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2010, page 25.

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha remained silent. Later, upon the requests of Brahma and Indra, the Buddha started to teach the Dharma. The Buddha didn't only rely on miraculous displays to benefit beings, as in the case of a pratyekabuddha. Instead, the Buddha benefits beings through the extensive propagation of the Dharma. As we should know, the goal of the Buddha appearing in this world is to benefit beings through turning the Dharma wheel. Hence, Dharma teachers of later generations ought to carry on the same legacy.

Of course, there isn't only one specific way to turn the Dharma wheel. Sometimes asking someone to carry representations of the Dharma with them or having them recite a Dharma text is also considered a way to turn the Dharma wheel. For example, I suggest you often carry with you a copy of *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*.²⁵³ Had I not explained it clearly, you might not have understood its meaning and might not have considered it turning the Dharma wheel. Now that I've told you, you know it well. Similarly, many of you have started to use a prayer wheel, but if I hadn't mentioned the meaning of doing so, you might not have known. Therefore, it is extremely important that the teacher gives us authentic teachings so that we know how to behave in accordance with the principle of cause and effect.

3) The advantage of the time

Although the Buddha turned the Three Dharma Wheels, had the Dharma disappeared after going through the fruit period, the transmission period, and the symbols period respectively, it would no longer bring any benefit to sentient beings. It would be similar to a school that stops offering classes but continues recruiting students; the students won't get any education at all. But now the Dharma still exists in this world, so we have the advantage of time.

4) The advantage of our own good fortune

Although the Buddha has come and taught the Dharma, and his teachings still exist, unless we take the Dharma path, the Dharma can be of no benefit to us. But since we have entered the door of Dharma, we possess the advantage of *our own good fortune*. Many people around us refuse to embark on the Dharma path. Such people are like those who die of thirst on the bank of a running river. However supreme the Dharma is, it can bring no help to them.

²⁵³ Also translated as *Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom*.

As Buddhists, we are driven by various motives to enter the Dharma door: some have developed faith in the Buddha, some turned to Buddhism due to family conflicts, and some wish for a better life, including becoming wealthy. Whatever the initial motivation is, we all end up knowing what the Dharma is really about. This is considered the advantage of our own good fortune, or the advantage of following the teachings.

Some may wonder, “If this is about our own good fortune, should it be counted as part of individual advantages instead?” It is not. Here it is from the perspective of following the Buddha’s teachings after taking refuge. It’s because the Dharma exists that we are able to follow it, so this is considered one of the circumstantial advantages.

5) The advantage of the teacher’s extraordinary compassion

Even if we have the above-mentioned four types of advantage, without the favorable circumstance of being accepted by a qualified teacher, we would never come to know about the true Dharma.

Some took ordination over twenty years ago but know little of the basic monastic precepts; some took refuge years ago but know little about basic practices such as taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, or meditation on “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages.” This is because they are not accepted by a qualified teacher who has both knowledge and realization of the Dharma. Even if they have the first four circumstantial advantages, they won’t really understand the Dharma. But since a qualified teacher has accepted us, we possess the advantage of his extraordinary compassion.

These five factors are referred to as the five circumstantial advantages because they need to be fulfilled in relation to circumstances other than one’s own.

Now, let’s study each advantage in greater detail by following Nagarjuna’s verse mentioned at the beginning of this class.

2.1.1.2.2.1. A Buddha Has Appeared

Some people think the birth of the Buddha happens easily, which is not true. The *Lotus Sutra* says:

All the buddhas appear in worlds far away
And are difficult to meet.

Even if they appear in this world
It is difficult to hear their teaching.
Even in immeasurable, innumerable kalpas
It is difficult to hear this Dharma,
And those who are able to hear this Dharma
Buddhas are also hard to find.²⁵⁴

The Commentary of The Mahaparinirvana Sutra says:

First, it is difficult that a Buddha appears;
Second, it is difficult to obtain a human form.

Why and how is it difficult? We will get the answers very soon. After studying this section of the text, I believe any wise person will understand why it is so rare and difficult that a Buddha appears in this world.

As said in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, the time it takes for the universe to form, to stay in existence, to be destroyed and to remain in a state of emptiness is called a great kalpa. Therefore, a great kalpa consists of the four periods of formation, continuance, decline, and disintegration. Each of the four periods consists of twenty medium kalpas. That means that a great kalpa is the equivalent of eighty medium kalpas.

The length of a kalpa is very long; it is much longer than just five thousand years, a few hundred thousand years, or a few million years. Many people are not aware of the concept of time in Buddhism, so it is hard for them to accept the notion of “kalpa.” Nevertheless, we should still introduce it to them. They may be a little skeptical at first, but gradually their doubts will transform into right views.

It is important that we don’t carelessly slander or reject something we don’t understand. Whenever I teach Buddhist concepts like the “three-thousand-fold universe” or “a great kalpa,” I am concerned that someone may make careless remarks. A mosquito only lives a few days or weeks, so if someone tells a mosquito that a human can live up to one hundred years, it has no idea what that means. Similarly, some people are bound to be doubtful of the concept of “a great kalpa”

²⁵⁴ The *Lotus Sutra* (Taisho Volume 9, Number 262), translated from the Chinese of Kumarajiva by Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007.

that may last over a trillion years, but this is understandable because the time expanse of a kalpa is so far beyond the understanding of ordinary people.

A great kalpa in which buddhas appear in the world is called a “bright kalpa,” whereas a kalpa in which a buddha does not appear is called a “dark kalpa.” Here, the key words “bright” and “dark” refer to whether the world is “bright” or not in terms of Dharma, instead of sunshine. Now let’s check the number of dark kalpas and bright kalpas in the past, present, and future.

1) In the past:

In the past, during the Great Kalpa of Manifest Joy, thirty-three thousand buddhas appeared. After that, a hundred dark kalpas followed. Then, during the Perfect Kalpa, eight hundred million buddhas appeared. This was followed by a hundred dark kalpas. Then, eight hundred and forty million buddhas appeared during the Excellent Kalpa, which was followed by five hundred dark kalpas. In the Kalpa Delightful to See, eight hundred million buddhas came into the world, and then there were seven hundred dark kalpas afterward. Then, in the following Joyous Kalpa, sixty thousand buddhas appeared.

In total, there were five bright kalpas and 1,400 dark kalpas. Although many buddhas appeared during the bright kalpas, not a single buddha was born during the many dark kalpas. Imagine the extremely large number of lifetimes beings had to endure without encountering the Dharma when they were born in a dark kalpa. Therefore, it’s indeed very precious that we have a human form during a bright kalpa.

2) In the present:

One thousand four hundred dark kalpas later, the sixth bright kalpa, the Good Kalpa, appeared. Before our current kalpa began, this cosmos of a billion universes was an immense ocean, upon which appeared a thousand thousand-petaled lotuses. The gods of the Brahma-world, perplexed by this phenomenon, utilized their clairvoyance and understood that this signified that one thousand buddhas would appear during this kalpa. “This will be a good kalpa,” they said, and “Good” became the name of this bright kalpa. This is also recorded in *The Sutra of Great Compassion*.

From the time when humans’ lifespan was eighty thousand years and the

Buddha Destroyer-of-Samsara²⁵⁵ appeared, and up to the time when humans will live indefinitely long and the Buddha Infinite-Aspiration²⁵⁶ will come, a total of one thousand buddhas will have come to this world on the Vajra Seat at the center of Jambudvīpa. Each buddha will have attained perfect Buddhahood there and turned the Wheel of Dharma. Thus, our present kalpa is considered a bright kalpa.

According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*,²⁵⁷ the period in which the lifespan of human beings decreases from incalculable years to ten years, and then increases to eighty thousand years, is considered a medium kalpa. There are a total of twenty medium kalpas in the kalpa of continuance. In general, buddhas appear in the period when the human lifespan is diminishing, during the kalpa of continuance.

Then, how do the thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa appear in the world one by one?

From the first to the eighth medium kalpa:

- ♦ No buddha appeared.

During the ninth medium kalpa:

- ♦ When humans' lifespan was eighty thousand years, Buddha Krakucchanda, the very first buddha of the Good Kalpa, appeared.
- ♦ When humans' lifespan was forty thousand years, Buddha Kanakamuni, the second buddha of the Good Kalpa, appeared.
- ♦ When humans' lifespan was twenty thousand years, Buddha Kassapa, the third buddha of the Good Kalpa, appeared.

²⁵⁵ Buddha Krakucchanda

²⁵⁶ Buddha Adhimukta

²⁵⁷ The corresponding root text in the *Treasury of Abhidharma* is:

91. An intermediate aeon lasts
From when life is incalculable
Till it is ten years. Then another
Eighteen increasing and decreasing,

92. Then one increasing. During those,
Lives are as long as eighty thousand.
In this way this world that is formed
Lasts twenty intermediate aeons.

Vasubandhu, Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje, and David Karma Choephel, *Jewels from the Treasury: Vasubandhu's Verses on the Treasury of Abhidharma and Its Commentary Youthful Play by the Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje*, KTD Publications, 2012, page 282–283.

- ◆ When humans' lifespan had dropped to one hundred years, Buddha Shakyamuni, the fourth buddha of the Good Kalpa, appeared.

During the tenth medium kalpa:

- ◆ When humans' lifespan is eighty-four thousand years, Buddha Maitreya, the fifth buddha of the Good Kalpa, will appear.

From the eleventh to the fourteenth medium kalpa:

- ◆ No buddha will appear.

During the fifteenth medium kalpa:

- ◆ 994 buddhas will appear one after another.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth medium kalpa:

- ◆ No buddha will appear.

During the twentieth medium kalpa:

- ◆ Buddha Adhimukta, the last buddha of the Good Kalpa, will appear.

By then, all the one thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa will have appeared. More detailed information on the thousand buddhas can be found in *The Sutra on the Thousand Buddhas' Names in the Good Kalpa* and *The Fortunate Aeon Sutra (Bhadrakalpika Sutra)*.

Presently, we are in the ninth medium kalpa when human lifespan is about one hundred years. The teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni still exist. We are now living in this world and have encountered such supreme Dharma. Have you ever reflected on this? If not, you should do so. Very often I think, "We must have accumulated great merit in previous lives; otherwise, how could we be so fortunate as to enter the Dharma door, while many others are still wandering? How incredibly fortunate we are!"

3) In the future:

What will happen after the Good Kalpa? It will be followed by sixty peripheral, bad kalpas, and after that, in the Kalpa of Vast Numbers, ten thousand buddhas will appear, followed by another ten thousand bad kalpas.

To sum up everything, there are a total of over eleven thousand dark kalpas

and only seven bright kalpas. The difference in numbers is enormous. So, isn't it a rare occurrence for us to be born in a bright kalpa when a buddha comes to this world? We should reflect on this carefully.

As stated, I am not going to rush through the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, so you are not required to finish studying the text in a short period of time. As long as you keep in mind the teachings you receive every day and carefully and repeatedly contemplate the meaning, this will definitely benefit your practice greatly.

During the alternating cycles of bright and dark kalpas, if we happen to be born in a dark kalpa, we can never even come to know about the Three Jewels, let alone practice the Dharma, circumambulate a stupa, put our palms together, and prostrate. Some of you belittle yourselves, thinking you are unintelligent and lazy. In fact, however lazy you are, you can still manage to conduct wholesome deeds on a daily basis; however unintelligent you are, you have no problem chanting "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" or reciting the name of Amitabha. Compared to those beings who live in the endless dark kalpas, you are already extremely fortunate.

Moreover, the supreme Vajrayana, in particular, is taught only rarely. Now that we have encountered Vajrayana, we are indeed very fortunate. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is the Vajrayana or Mantrayana teaching, also known as the tantric teaching. Some people ask me, "When are you going to offer Vajrayana teaching?" Alas! I am teaching you Vajrayana right now! Do you really think this text is not a tantric teaching?

Some other people request, "Could you give a Vajrayana teaching this year?" *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* encompasses the quintessence of all the Sutrayana and Vajrayana teachings. It is both a Sutrayana teaching and a Vajrayana teaching. It consists of both theory and practice guidance. Eminent masters, including the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, unanimously praised this text. Such an extraordinary text, like a precious wish-fulfilling jewel, is very rare to find in the entire history of humanity.

Of course, if you were to ask me, "When are you going to give the main teachings of Vajrayana?" I will answer you differently. Otherwise, if your question is about when I will teach you Vajrayana, well, you'd better think again.

Someone even asked me, "May you please tell me whether I have the fortune to study and practice Vajrayana one day?" Well, aren't you currently practicing

ngöndro? Do you actually think there is another kind of Vajrayana for you to practice (*the audience laughs*)? So, you do have the opportunity!

As I have told you, if you have faith in Vajrayana among all the Buddha's teachings, or if you have faith in the doctrine of Prajnaparamita or the teachings of the Middle Way on emptiness, it means you have an affinity with Vajrayana. In *The Chariot of Surpassing Purity*, the commentary on *Finding Rest in Meditation*, Longchenpa says:

Although the vision of this fundamental nature of the mind is called by many names—Prajnaparamita (the Perfection of Wisdom), Madhyamaka (the Middle Way), Pacification or Stilling, Mahamudra (The Great Seal), Mahasandhi (the Great Perfection), and so on—the meaning is always the same: awareness, the all-creating enlightened mind, which is similar to space.²⁵⁸

Thus, Prajnaparamita or the Middle Way is the Great Perfection. Although they are not identical insofar as they differ in pith instructions, the fact that we have encountered such profound teachings with faith means we have all the fortune and merit to encounter Vajrayana teachings.

You should know that although Buddhism thrives during bright kalpas, it is very rare that Vajrayana teaching is offered, so we have been extremely fortunate to have encountered Vajrayana teaching, including *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. As Padmasambhava says:

Long ago, during the very first kalpa, called the Kalpa of the Complete Array, the Vajrayana teachings were propagated by the Buddha known as Once-Come-King and became greatly renowned. Buddha Shakyamuni also gave Vajrayana teachings.

During the Buddha's time, Buddha Shakyamuni gave Vajrayana teachings including *Kalacakra* (*Wheel of Time*) and *Chanting the Names of Manjushri* (*Skt. Mañjuśrī-namasamgiti*). The Buddha also prophesied that after his parinirvana, Rigdzin Kumaradza, King Indrabhuti, and others would propagate Vajrayana. Now Vajrayana is flourishing all over the world like the sun shining everywhere. Fortunate and faithful Vajrayana practitioners must put the Vajrayana teachings

²⁵⁸ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in Meditation, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 2, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2018.

into practice. During the degenerate age, when other teachings and practices may not necessarily tame our minds, Vajrayana has extraordinary power. Today I chatted with a khenpo, and we all shared the same feeling: For beings of the degeneration age, the tantric teaching of trekchö (thoroughly cutting through) and other supreme instructions, such as those in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, can directly cut through their conceptual fabrications. Longchenpa listed many great qualities of Vajrayana, saying that the conceptual thoughts and afflictions of beings in the degenerate age are hard to tame and eliminate, but through the pith instructions and skillful means of Vajrayana, these beings can quickly attain realization, just like a long-haul task getting done within a second.

Padmasambhava continues:

In the Kalpa of the Array of Flowers, ten million kalpas from now, the Buddha Manjushri will appear, just like how I have come now, to impart the Vajrayana teachings on a vast scale. This is because beings in these three kalpas are suitable recipients for Vajrayana. The reason why the Vajrayana teachings do not appear at other times is that beings of those times are unable to benefit from the teachings.

Please be sure we all keep Padmasambhava's this teaching in mind.

Sutrayana is rare and precious, and the Vajrayana is even rarer and more precious. Throughout the numerous kalpas and among so many buddhas, only three buddhas propagate the Vajrayana teachings. Now we are in the era when Buddha Shakyamuni's Vajrayana teachings are extant, and we have the rare opportunity to study and practice those teachings. I hereby put my palms together and sincerely plead that you do not discard Vajrayana. Even if you are unable to generate strong faith, you shouldn't abandon or slander Vajrayana teachings. Instead, you must think in this way:

The Vajrayana teachings are extremely profound. An ordinary person like me may not practice Vajrayana well, but Vajrayana teachings are definitely the object of my veneration, prostration, and offerings.

If you uphold such an attitude of veneration, according to some tantras, you also have the opportunity for liberation from samsara.

Recently, I was reading the commentary of *The All-Creating King Tantra*

(*Kulayaraja Tantra*),²⁵⁹ the latter part of which covers many great qualities of Vajrayana teachings. After reading this part, one can definitely generate great faith in Vajrayana. It can be difficult to fully understand the meaning of “natural rigpa” in the tantras, but just establishing a virtuous affinity with Vajrayana can already render great benefits.

The All-Creating King Tantra quoted scriptural evidence from *The Great Treasures Collection Tantra*, saying:

The practitioner who carries a tantric text with them is no different from an emanation of Vajradhara; the practitioner who chants mantras and reads tantric texts can experience the true meanings; the practitioner who handwrites about tantras enjoys the teachings of tathagatas.

The views, meditations, actions, and fruitions in Vajrayana are extremely profound. Even if you cannot realize and experience them completely, as long as you have generated faith and always accept tantric texts and Vajrayana sadhanas with veneration, this in itself can bring you incredible benefits. *The Definite Meaning Tantra* says:

If one generates faith in (Vajrayana) and upholds it,
All buddhas will bless him,
He will attain an endless treasury of fortune and merits,
And achieve the fruition of the future in this lifetime.

For example, originally it would take hundreds and thousands of kalpas for you to attain liberation. However, with the blessing power of Vajrayana, you may achieve fruition much sooner.

It also says in *The Sky-like Vast Space Tantra*:

Anyone who develops faith in the ultimate Vajrayana and grasps the meaning of tantric teachings can attain the fruition of Buddhahood, even if they have not practiced to the scale of a speck of dust.

²⁵⁹ *Kulayaraja Tantra* (Tib. ཀུལ་རྒྱལ་རྒྱལ་པོ་, künjé gyalpo, Wyl. kun byed rgyal po) or ‘*The All-Creating King Tantra*,’ is the main tantra of the Mind category of the Dzogchen teachings. It is contained in the ancient tantras section of the Dergé Kangyur and is the very first text in the Nyingma Gyübum. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

Therefore, even if some people are quite lazy, as long as they hear the doctrine of Vajrayana and receive the empowerment, they can already receive immeasurable benefits and merits. Why do many lay practitioners look forward to receiving empowerment? This could be the reason.

Of course, not every teacher is qualified to give an empowerment, so we must carefully examine the teacher. Yesterday, a Dharma master told me, “I am about to give tantric teachings this year. Now I truly understand that it is hard for one who attends an empowerment ceremony to truly receive the empowerment.” I teased him, “You have been studying tantras for so many years, and now you finally understand that it is hard to really get the empowerment?”

What he said makes sense. It is very hard to truly receive a qualified empowerment because successful empowerment depends on the guru and the disciples meeting many requirements. If a guru simply pours water on your crown from a vase, you can receive the water, but it is hard to say whether you can receive the samaya vow. When you study the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* in the future, you may wonder, “I’ve attended many empowerment ceremonies, but I didn’t have the required causes and conditions back then. Does it mean that I didn’t receive the empowerment?”

It is very important that we have faith in Vajrayana no matter what! We must not carelessly slander Vajrayana. As ordinary people, we don’t have the qualifications or capacities to do so. Some people know nothing about the supreme doctrine of Vajrayana and its history; they just blindly follow others’ wrong opinions. When hearing of a tantric practitioner’s faults, they attribute the faults to the tantric practice and condemn Vajrayana. If such a commentator is a Dharma teacher, then all his disciples may also hold a prejudice against Vajrayana.

Nevertheless, things are much better now. Many Dharma masters who used to bad-mouth Vajrayana have changed their comments due to various reasons. Now they praise how supreme Vajrayana is. Of course, it is wonderful if a Dharma master can help promote Vajrayana, but even if the master cannot, we should nevertheless have veneration toward Vajrayana.

Vajrayana is very profound, which you will know after studying it. If some of you still have difficulties believing it, you are welcome to discuss the question with us Vajrayana practitioners. I have been studying tantras for over twenty years. Although I dare not claim I have achieved very high realization, I should have no

problem discussing the doctrines with those who have never studied Vajrayana teachings or who have studied for only a few years. As long as a person has solid evidence, that person may come face-to-face with us, saying, “The doctrine of Vajrayana doesn’t make sense,” or “The sadhana, the way of practice, the Buddha’s image, the subjugation, or the union practice doesn’t make sense.”

Throughout the ages, many learned masters have clarified doubts about Vajrayana with clear explanations. Except for a very few unreasonable holders of wrong views, people who accept the right reasoning, be they Indians, Han Chinese, or others, can eventually generate genuine faith in Vajrayana.

As we should know, at the ultimate level, Sutrayana and Vajrayana embrace the same views and focus on the same goal. Knowing this, we will understand that various Buddhist schools and lineages do not contradict each other. As a result, no matter what we are studying and practicing, be it Sutrayana or Vajrayana, we will be very happy and will get along well with other practitioners.

If we have the affinity, we can study and practice the most supreme doctrine of Vajrayana and its pith instructions. Many eminent masters are like this. Those who truly have the wisdom, master the practice, and have attained realization will never reject Vajrayana. By contrast, unlearned ordinary people often cannot accept Buddhism or other Buddhist lineages. To prevent committing wrongdoings due to ignorance, we should develop a sufficient understanding of the Dharma.

All in all, please contemplate the above content on the bright kalpa and dark kalpa again and again. Studying the Dharma is not just paying lip service. Only when you have the “feeling” can it become easy for you to put it into your everyday practice and to explain it to others.

Without such a “feeling,” Dharma can be very exhausting and painful for you to practice. For example, as a Larung Gar sangha member, you are asked to practice in a solo retreat, so you have to sit at home because you are afraid of being caught by the monastery’s overseer if wandering outside. Meanwhile, you find it very challenging to stay at home; you try to meditate, but really cannot concentrate, let alone have any experience. Alas! What a torture!

In comparison, if we concentrate on the meaning of the Dharma, time will fly. A two-hour meditation session will be over in the blink of an eye. As such, we will gain great benefits, and our conviction about the Dharma won’t regress, even twenty years later, because the Dharma has truly merged into our mind. Otherwise,

if we meditate in a superficial manner today, we may not even remember what we have meditated on by tomorrow. This is not good practice, so we should reflect deeply on the teachings during our practice.

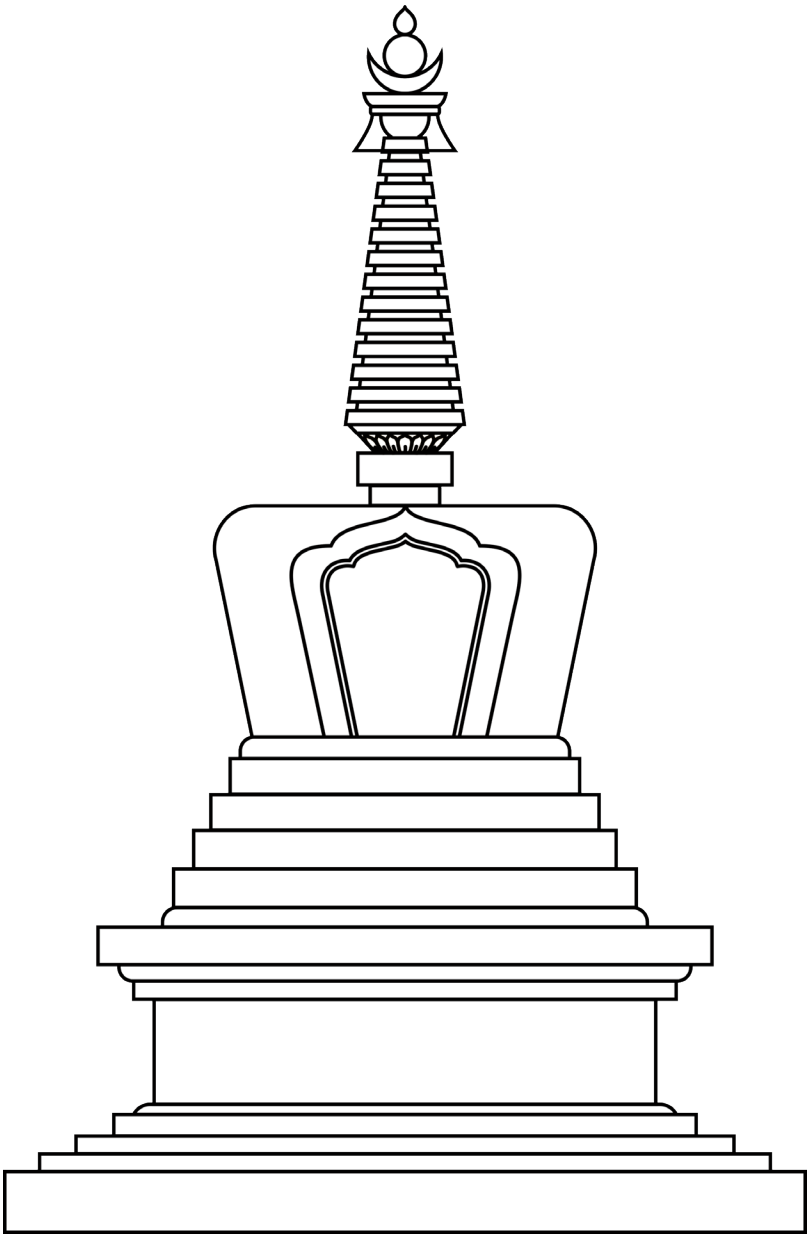


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KHENPO SODARGYE was born in 1962 into a nomadic family in a small valley of the Tibetan region of Kham. He was ordained in 1985 and went on to become a lineage holder of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition, as well as a preeminent practitioner and scholar at Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in Sertar. Khenpo Sodargye was the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's chief Tibetan-to-Chinese translator. He has traveled extensively in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia to offer teachings at Dharma centers and universities. For more information, please visit www.khenposodargye.org.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

The Wisdom and Compassion Translation Group, under the guidance of Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, is dedicated to translating authentic Buddhist teachings into languages that resonate with individuals from all walks of life. Comprised of Buddhist practitioners and scholars, the translation team is committed to bringing Dharma students teachings that empower them to engage in the systematic study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism.





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