

STEP BY STEP — TO — THE — SUMMIT

A Comprehensive Commentary on
The Words of My Perfect Teacher

2

KHENPO SODARGYE

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TRANSLATED BY
*The Wisdom and Compassion
Translation Group*



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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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Lesson 20

“Suppose that a Buddha had come ... having the Dharma in its entirety.” [page 26-28]

Now we move onto the second one of the five circumstantial advantages.

2.1.1.2.2.2. A Buddha Has Preached the Dharma

Imagine a buddha had come but remained in meditation without teaching the Dharma. Then, despite his presence in this world, the light of his teachings had not appeared. As a result, beings would still not know what to do and what not to do. It would be just as if the buddha had never come at all.

Some buddhas appear in the world, but because beings of that time do not have enough merit, those buddhas remain in a long meditative state or choose not to teach. Under such a scenario, beings could not directly receive real benefits. For example, our fundamental teacher, Buddha Shakyamuni, accumulated vast merit and wisdom during three countless great kalpas in his causal stage, and in the end, he engaged in six years of ascetic practice by the Nairanjana River and finally attained perfect enlightenment upon the Vajra Seat. However, after attaining Buddhahood, the Buddha exclaimed:

I have found a Dharma like ambrosia,
Deep, peaceful, simple, uncompounded, radiant.
If I explain it, no one will understand,

So I shall stay here silent in the forest.¹

The state of the Buddha's enlightenment has five characteristics: 1) deep—the essence is formlessness; 2) peaceful—the nature is devoid of thought; 3) simple—non-conceptual, free of any eternalist views; 4) uncompounded—free of any extreme of existence and nonexistence; 5) radiant—free of any nihilist views.

The Buddha attained the ambrosia-like state with these five characteristics that can cure the 84,000 afflictions. However, the state seemed too profound to be understood by any being, so the Buddha abode silently in the forest at Bodh Gaya. Accordingly, for forty-nine days he did not teach.

Nagarjuna says in the *Precious Garland*:

Because the Dharma is so profound
That it is hard for beings to understand,
So after the Buddha attained enlightenment,
He remained silent and taught no Dharma.²

If we had happened to be born in the period when the Buddha appeared but didn't teach the Dharma, even if we had the advantage of support—the human form—would the Dharma have been of benefit to us? The answer is no.

Later, because of their supreme aspirations in previous lives, Brahma and Indra beseeched the Buddha to turn the Wheel of the Dharma. Brahma offered the Buddha a one-thousand-spoked golden wheel, and Indra offered turquoise, a mandala, and a white right-turning conch shell. The Buddha then started to give teachings to his first five disciples, and to beings who had an affinity with him. The Buddha turned the Wheel of the Dharma three times in Sarnath (the Deer Park), Gādhraḥkūta (the Vulture Peak), and Vaishali, respectively. Therefore, we should know that even though the Buddha had come, if he had not taught the Dharma, beings would not have received the benefits of the Dharma.

¹ 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, 2011, page 27. This verse is also in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*.

² This verse is also translated as:

Realizing that because of its profundity
This doctrine is difficult for beings to understand,
The Subduer, having become enlightened
[At first] turned away from teaching doctrine.

Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, verse 118.

In our daily chanting prayer, one verse goes like this: “To the unsurpassable protector, the precious authentic Dharma...” What is the “precious authentic Dharma”? It is the Dharma that saves and protects all beings. To benefit all beings, we shall cultivate Dharma wisdom so that we can dispel the darkness of ignorance and expel the afflictions of ourselves and others. To cultivate Dharma wisdom, we must practice the Dharma from now on.

Of course, practicing the Dharma should not be as what some Dharma centers have promoted: going directly to the highest teachings without any ngöndro practice. The highest teachings include tantric practices such as trekchö (thoroughly cutting through) and tögal (direct crossing), which are the pinnacle of all paths. However, until you are fully capable, no matter how high the teaching is, it will not be of great benefit to you.

Therefore, we should contemplate, again and again, each instruction in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. For example, the teaching “Although the Buddha has appeared, if he does not preach the Dharma, his appearance would make no difference to us” may seem simple on the surface, but it is not easy at all to truly generate conviction about its meaning. When we have a deep understanding about the teaching, gradually our mind gets tamed and pacified.

This is like planting crops in spring. Only when the land is well plowed can the seeds of barley or wheat sprout and grow in a timely manner. If, on the other hand, the land is not leveled, plowed, and watered, even if you plant the best seeds, hardly any sprouts will emerge.

It is the same with our Dharma practice. We have to first plow the “land” of our minds, putting the basic teachings into practice again and again, until we have the “feeling.” Regarding the higher level of practices, such as perceptionless absorption,³ the inner yoga of channels, energies, and essences, the visualization of the subtle channels,⁴ as we are not yet ready, we can put them aside for now.

³ Perceptionless absorption (Skt. *asamjñi-samāpatti*;) is one of the fourteen non-concurrent formations mentioned in the Treasury of Abhidharma. It is a state of meditative absorption in which the six sense consciousnesses are temporarily brought to a halt, ultimately resulting in rebirth as a perceptionless god. The Treasury of Abhidharma describes the absorption as a trap that is to be avoided by buddhist meditators, although it is cultivated by some non-buddhist traditions of yoga, where it is mistaken for a form of liberation. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁴ Subtle channels (Skt. *nāḍi*; Tib. རྩ་, *tsa*, Wyl. *rtsa*) — There are seventy-two thousand subtle channels in the body, but the three principal ones are:

- the central channel (Skt. *avadhūti*; Tib. རྩ་མཐོག་, *uma*, Wyl. *dbu ma*), running parallel to the spine,

Then what should we practice now? The answer is the very basic teaching on “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages.” We should truly feel this way: “Impermanence may arrive at any moment, and my human life is so rare and precious; therefore, I must practice the Dharma!” You cannot simply “talk the talk” here. Your conviction should arise from the depths of your mind at any time. Only by doing so can you have a successful practice in this life.

The White Lotus of Compassion Sutra says:

Being born as a human is very rare,
 Living in the time when the Buddha has appeared is very rare,
 Going after the virtuous Dharma with bliss,
 And generating virtuous aspirations are also very rare.

I really like this verse. We must all remember this: The four occurrences—being born as a human, living in the time when the Buddha has appeared, going after the Dharma with bliss, and generating virtuous aspirations—are very rare and precious. Everyone can pay lip service, but it is worth checking whether we indeed feel this in our hearts. How incredibly rare is it that we can be reborn in the bright kalpa in which a buddha has appeared, after we have experienced so many dark kalpas! Even if the Buddha has appeared in this bright kalpa, the duration of his teachings in this world is very brief. Thus, it is even rarer that we were born at the right time when the Dharma still exists in this kalpa. If we think this way, it means we are starting to understand the ngöndro teachings well.

If a buddha does not teach, the Dharma cannot bring any direct and real benefit to beings. This also applies to eminent masters. If those holders of authentic teachings do not teach, it is difficult for the Dharma to be of any true benefit to beings. Therefore, to help and benefit beings, someone must give the teachings.

Many Tibetan and Han Chinese Dharma masters, who lived in the same period as the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, achieved high levels of realization. However, for some reason, some of them neither taught on a large scale nor took

-
- the right channel (Skt. rasanā; Tib. རྩམ་, roma, Wyl. ro ma),
 - the left channel (Skt. lalanā; Tib. རྩམ་, kyangma, Wyl. rkyang ma), which run on either side of the central channel.

The right and left channels coil around the central one at a number of points to form a series of “knots.” Along the central channel are situated a number of “channel wheels,” the chakras or energy-centers, from which channels branch off like the ribs of an umbrella. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

many disciples. The presence of such great enlightened masters in this world, even just for one day, can bring everyone peace, happiness, and great benefits. But if we observe whether they have directly benefited others, we may find that some close followers of those masters do not seem to fully understand the masters' states of realization, and they seem not to have achieved realization yet. Therefore, if eminent masters do not benefit beings through the teachings of the Dharma, to all sentient beings, it is no different from the Buddha not expounding the Dharma.

The Dharma still exists today, but without a qualified teacher giving teachings and guiding us, we may not understand the meaning of the Dharma. It is like the Minister of Education allowing schools to be established in many rural places, but if there are no teachers, even if village children attend the school, they will remain illiterate. Why? Because without a teacher, it is impossible for the children to learn by themselves. Even when we are learning how to drive or draw, without guidance from a teacher, we hardly know what to do properly, not to mention learning the profound Dharma. Therefore, temples and Buddhist centers should invite competent teachers with strong altruistic intentions to give teachings. Without such teachers, these places can only bring slight benefit to beings.

An example is about the great Indian pandita Smṛtijñāna.⁵ Through his clairvoyance, Smṛtijñāna knew that his deceased mother had been reborn as a frog trapped in the stove stone of a Tibetan household and was undergoing excruciating suffering. Beings in the ephemeral hells, including his mother, experience different kinds of suffering due to the differences in their own karmas. For example, many such beings are reborn in the rocks of a cliff or in the sea. To guide his mother from the ephemeral hells, despite his old age and the need for an interpreter, Smṛtijñāna embarked on the arduous journey from India to Tibet. Besides his interpreter, Smṛtijñāna was also accompanied by another pandita.

When crossing the border between Nepal and Tibet, Smṛtijñāna's interpreter unfortunately died of a sudden illness (some said it was diarrhea). Both panditas were Indian and did not know Tibetan. The other pandita chose to practice *Drongjug*—transferring his consciousness into another body—and was reborn

⁵ Smṛtijñāna, or Smritijñanakirti was an exalted and renowned great Indian pandita. He traveled to Kham, where he translated several tantric texts, including some connected with *Chanting the Names of Manjushri*, and also composed several grammatical works. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

as Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (1012–1088).⁶ Smṛtijñāna then wandered around Kham until he finally found the Tibetan household with the stove stone.

Because of the language barrier, no one knew Smṛtijñāna was the most learned pandita in India, so he had to work as a servant for the Tibetan family. An old woman in that house made him herd sheep every day and do the hardest chores. Sometimes, the old woman even sat on him, instead of a cushion, to milk the cows. Smṛtijñāna lived in this situation for a long time.

The old woman believed in Buddhism and often traveled looking for teachers. Smṛtijñāna wrote down a few poems in her house, one of which went something like this: “The bright moon is in a person’s house, but that person is not aware of it; instead, he is looking for a water moon elsewhere.”⁷ This meant that Smṛtijñāna, a great Indian pandita who was like the bright moon, happened to be in her house, but she did not know. Instead, she was busy searching for substandard teachers who were like a water moon.

There are two accounts regarding what happened to Smṛtijñāna later.

1) The first is that he endured great hardship and eventually guided his mother safely to a pure realm. When he was about to leave the Tibetan family, through his clairvoyance he knew that a nearby mountain would fall, so he alerted the old woman and her neighbors with his broken Tibetan, asking them to flee as soon as possible.

The old woman, who had long ago noticed Smṛtijñāna’s exceptional manners and knew he was not just an ordinary vagabond, followed his advice. She took all her belongings on the back of a yak and left the village with Smṛtijñāna. Other villagers didn’t believe him, saying, “How can a mountain that high collapse to the ground? That person can barely speak Tibetan. He must be talking nonsense!”

However, on the next day a large landslide occurred just as Smṛtijñāna had predicted, and the whole village was buried. It is said that this incident occurred

⁶ Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo aka Rongzompa lived in the 11th century. His dates have been given as 1012–1088. He was born in Tsang rong and met Atisha in his youth. He mastered the teachings of both the Nyingma and Sarma traditions. He translated many works on secret mantra, some of which are preserved in the Tengyur and some of which did not survive. As well as his remarkable scholarship, he also manifested many signs of his deep realization. The historian GöLotsawa said of him: “In this snowland of Tibet no scholar has appeared who has been his equal.” Atisha recognized Rongzom as an emanation of the Indian mahasiddha Krishnacharya. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

⁷ This poem is included in the *Tibetan Grammar*.

somewhere called “Red Earth”⁸ near Sershul in the eastern Tibetan region. The crack where the mountain collapsed is still visible today.

2) The second account is that Chel Jungné Gyeltsen, a disciple of Smṛtijñāna, learned of his whereabouts and invited him to teach in a monastery. After offering this small-scale teaching, Smṛtijñāna passed into parinirvana.

Smṛtijñāna was born around the junction of the periods of the earlier dissemination and the later dissemination and was a renowned pandita. He was not only Atisha’s teacher, but according to historical accounts he was also the teacher of King Gesar. Smṛtijñāna also taught the *Treasury of Abhidharma* in Tibet. After his Tibetan became fluent, he also composed a text on grammar titled *The Weapon-like Introduction to Speech*. It is said that some of the scriptures he copied are still present today in the region.

Even though Smṛtijñāna was such a highly realized master, without him giving teachings, even the family he stayed with every day received little benefit, let alone all of Tibet.

It was also said that when he was about to leave, the family wanted to pay him a “wage” for his service, yet he asked for nothing but the stove stone.⁹ Smṛtijñāna took the stone to a place where he washed it, made a lamp offering, and chanted prayers. In the end, not only his mother, who was reborn as a frog, but also many other bugs tormenting the frog were transferred to a pure realm. He accomplished the mission of coming to Tibet to save his mother, but other than this, he did not benefit beings on a larger scale.

When Jowo Atisha later arrived in Tibet, he visited that same Tibetan household and noticed the poems in Sanskrit written in a similar style to those of his teacher Smṛtijñāna. Therefore, Atisha inquired around and learned that indeed his teacher had been there as a laborer herding sheep every day and had not been able to propagate the Dharma. Upon hearing what had happened, Atisha exclaimed with sadness, “How sad! Tibetans, your merit is weak! There was no pandita in India, be it from East or West, better than Smṛtijñāna.” With his palms joined together, Atisha shed tears. Such a great pandita was sat upon like a cushion for milking cows! No wonder Atisha cried.

⁸ Tib: sad mar

⁹ Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche commented, “The family must have been overjoyed since his payment was just a piece of stone!”

It is said that when Atisha was about to pass into parinirvana, he exclaimed, “Your merit is weak, Tibetans! If I were to die here, the land of Tibet may not be able to handle it. Therefore, I would better return to India.”

His disciples told him, “Tibet should be able to handle, for example, the fact that the great Shantarakshita passed away in Tibet.” Atisha replied, “Shantarakshita upheld pure precepts, but his wisdom was inferior to mine. Therefore, he is not equivalent to me.” Other disciples added, “It should be fine for you to pass away in Tibet. The incomparable Padmasambhava also manifested his disappearance in Tibet and went to the land of Oddiyana.” Atisha shook his head and said, “Padmasambhava had incredible achievements, but he did not surpass me in wisdom. No, I still do not want to die in Tibet.” Then some disciples said, “It should be fine. The great pandita Smṛtijñānac passed away in Tibet.” Hearing this, Atisha pondered for a moment and said, “Yes, Smṛtijñānac was indeed a great master. In that case, I will then die in Tibet.”

In fact, without the help of an interpreter, the language barrier can be quite challenging. Once a lay practitioner told me, “My guru is very kind. I am so touched whenever he smiles, but when he talks, I have no idea what he is saying.” So even if a master is very kind, sometimes it is hard for him to communicate with disciples.

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche first took on and taught Han Chinese monastics at Larung Gar, there was no simultaneous interpretation for his teachings. Occasionally when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche made a joke in class, Tibetan monastics laughed aloud while Han Chinese monastics just looked around and had no idea why people were laughing. It was not until the next day, when I translated the teaching into Chinese that they understood the laughter, but the joke did not seem too funny anymore. That’s why translators are considered the “eyes of the world.”

Without translators and teachers, even though the Dharma is supreme and the teacher’s secret meaning, and wisdom are profound, it is almost impossible for beings of the degenerate age to become learned on their own. Without giving teachings, even though they are eminent masters, it is very difficult for them to benefit beings.

Khenpo Lekshe is a great practitioner in his eighties from my home monastery—Dhomang Monastery. He traveled afar to follow many teachers when he was young. He is quite proficient in the Dharma, but sadly, people in the

monastery do not pay special attention to him. Last year, I asked several monastics to listen to Khenpo Lekshe's teaching on a brief ngöndro instruction of the Palyul lineage. Because there are very few holders of this Palyul instruction, in order to uphold the lineage, I actually required the monastics to attend the one-month teaching.

Khenpo Lekshe is so old that he could hardly see the text, so I asked someone to print it out in a bigger font size. Khenpo Lekshe read the text over and immediately started to teach with great certainty. During the teaching, he spontaneously quoted scriptural evidence. I listened to the audio tape later and was amazed—it is such a pity that such a great master was unknown for so long!

After he finished the teaching, he sent me a message, saying, "Thank you very much for offering me such a great opportunity to teach the Dharma! I would have liked to give the foundational teachings such as *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* or *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, but I could not find anyone to listen to me. Sometimes I noticed the young monks in the monastery did not behave properly, so I thought it might be of help to give them some instructions; however, they did not want to listen. I also told some sangha members, 'Although I cannot teach you anything very profound, I can give you teachings related to Dharma practice and bodhicitta if you are interested,' as I have been practicing these for my whole life and I do have some experience. But those young monks were not interested."

Hearing this, I felt a bit emotional. There may still be many such great senior practitioners in this world whose minds are filled with compassion and loving-kindness and who have attained high levels of realization. Sadly, many people do not appreciate them.

What do these people go after? They seek those eloquent teachers who, however, offer nothing substantial and have no states of realization. Ironically, such teachers often attract as many disciples as a large school of fish, whereas great practitioners with true realization have only a very few followers asking for teachings. If no one asks for teachings, their inner realization will remain unrevealed, as those eminent practitioners will simply appear as ordinary people.

Ordinary people at the age of seventy or eighty may have forgotten many teachings they learned in the past. In comparison, some senior practitioners are truly amazing. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, for example, could constantly quote a great number of scriptural evidence and speak eloquently and fluently

while teaching in his seventies, the later stage of his life. Some non-Buddhist civil servants heard the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's teachings and were in great awe, saying, "It is marvelous that the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche can memorize all these verses by heart!"

In contrast to those great practitioners of the last generation, we are doing worse. Every day we see too much, hear too much, and think too much. Very often we do not concentrate on studying the Dharma, but instead we waste time on meaningless trivialities. As a result, our minds are cluttered with a mess of things, including pop songs that are often on the tip of our tongues, while the profound meaning of the Dharma can hardly appear in our minds.

Therefore, it is very important to meet a true Dharma master. If there is only the Dharma but no teacher to explain it, our practice cannot embark on the right path. Of course, if language is an issue, then translators are needed. I usually like to translate Dharma texts. Some people say I have translated too much, but I have thought about this, and here is what I think: During this degenerate age, if the translation of a good Dharma text can benefit beings of later generations, even just a little bit, I am willing to work as much as possible.

My translation is driven by a quite pure aspiration, so no matter what others say, I will try my very best to translate as much as possible. My life is not in vain if I can contribute more to the Dharma in my short lifespan.

Thus, it is very important that a buddha has preached the Dharma. For us, Buddha Shakyamuni has turned the Wheel of the Dharma three times¹⁰ and manifested inconceivable forms according to the needs and capacities of those in need. He has led disciples through the nine vehicles¹¹ of his teachings to maturity and liberation.

Now, not only the Buddha but also qualified teachers have taught, so we all have the second advantage of the teaching of the Dharma. For this, we should feel joyful.

¹⁰ As previously taught by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, 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.

¹¹ Within the Nyingma tradition, the full spectrum of spiritual paths is divided into nine vehicles, or nine *yanas*, including the *shravaka yana*, the *pratyekabuddha yana*, and the *bodhisattva yana* of *Sutrayana*, the *yana* of *kriya tantra*, the *yana* of *charya tantra*, and the *yana* of *yoga tantra*, the *yana* of *mahayoga*, the *yana* of *anuyoga*, and the *yana* of *atiyoga*.

2.1.1.2.2.3. His Teachings Still Exist

Even if a buddha has appeared and imparted teachings in a specific kalpa, once the time for those teachings to last has ended and the authentic Dharma he has taught disappears, it is just like a dark kalpa. The period between the disappearance of one buddha's teachings and the next buddha's teachings being imparted is referred to as an era "devoid of Dharma." For example, the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni will vanish in a few thousand years, and before Buddha Maitreya comes to this world, there will be an extremely long "devoid of Dharma" period. Beings who are born in a bright kalpa but happen to be in the period "devoid of Dharma" receive no benefit from the Dharma. We must contemplate again and again that it is very difficult to have a human form in this life. When seeing big crowds in the street and knowing that most of them do not necessarily engage in positive actions, we will truly generate great compassion toward them. Now we have such a great opportunity to study the teachings! The Dharma door has always been wide open for all, and those with affinity can enter at any time. If we do not study well and miss the opportunity, we may not have it again in the future.

As you should know, during the "devoid of Dharma" period, except in fortunate places with adequate merit where pratyekabuddhas may occasionally appear, there is essentially no teaching and practice of the Dharma. Nagarjuna says in *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*:

When the perfect buddhas do not manifest,
And even when the shravakas have disappeared,
The primal wisdom of pratyekabuddhas,
Though there be no teacher, manifests completely.¹²

Without following qualified teachers, pratyekabuddhas rely on the merits accumulated through practicing the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination in previous lives and attain fruition in one session of meditation. Then, by manifesting supernatural deeds such as emitting fire and radiance from their bodies, they benefit a small group of beings who have an affinity with them. If we are born in a period "devoid of Dharma" with only pratyekabuddhas, will we be the fortunate ones liberated by them? Given the size of the group that may have this affinity, it is really hard to say.

¹² Nagarjuna, *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* (*The Mulamadhyamakarikā*), translated from the Tibetan by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2016.

The Dharma does not exist for too long. If we are born in the period “devoid of Dharma” in a good kalpa, or in one of the many dark kalpas, we cannot even hear the name of the Three Jewels. After careful contemplation, each of us should generate this conviction: “It is so precious to have this opportunity in this life, so I must practice the Dharma!” This conviction itself is a state of practice.

For example, some of you practice *tummo*, a meditation practice for yogic heat, and notice your navel area is getting hot. I do not think such a state of practice is necessarily important, though. You may experience signs during the practice, such as feeling hot or cold, or having steam or light above the head, but all these are nothing to celebrate about because a light bulb can also glow and a mirage in summer can also steam, so these are not signs of achievement.

In current times, some practitioners are particularly confused. They insist on attaining an external sign, which they think proves their achievement. As for generating conviction about “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” they do not think it is a supreme state of practice at all. Therefore, I urge them to change their mindset and recognize that real practice is to gain conviction from ngöndro practices. This is very important.

How long does the Dharma survive? *The Moon Treasure Sutra* says the teachings last two thousand five hundred years; *The Fortunate Aeon Sutra* says one thousand five hundred years, of which the age of the right Dharma lasts for five hundred years and the age of the semblance Dharma lasts one thousand years. Some Han Chinese Dharma masters believe the age of the right Dharma lasts for one thousand years, the semblance Dharma one thousand years, and the degenerate age ten thousand years. Traditions in Tibetan Buddhism, including Phugpa, Sakya, and Gelugpa, hold different opinions, but the viewpoint of the Phugpa tradition is well-accepted in the Tibetan region.

Despite the various opinions, the commonly accepted opinion is that of the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, which states that the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni last for five thousand years. According to the calculations of the World Buddhist Federation,¹³ this year (2010) is the Buddhist calendar year 2553. This is based on the Theravada Buddhist calendar, which is consistent with the Treasury of Abhidharma.

The teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni are also called “the teachings of the heart

¹³ A Buddhist association founded by Master Tai Xu of China in 1924.

of Samantabhadra.” Why is this? It is because inside the alms bowl that Vairocana, the sambhogakaya of Buddha Samantabhadra, holds in his hands are twenty-five lotus flowers tiered one above the other, the thirteenth (counting from below) of which is called the Saha world, where Buddha Shakyamuni has manifested. The Saha world is exactly at the level of Vairocana’s heart, so the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni also have the name corresponding to Samantabhadra.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, the teachings of the heart of Samantabhadra also last for five thousand years. Specifically, it goes through the following sequence:

First, the *fruit* stage, which lasts fifteen hundred years. During the first five hundred years, the attainment of Arhathood was most prevalent; during the second five hundred years, the attainment of the stage of anāgāmin (non-returning) was most prevalent; during the third five hundred years, the attainment of the stage of sotāpanna (stream-enterer) was most prevalent.

Second, the *accomplishment* stage, which lasts fifteen hundred years. During the first five hundred years, most practitioners take the training on higher virtue; during the second five hundred years, most practitioners take the training on higher mind; during the third five hundred years, most practitioners take the training on higher wisdom.

Third, the *transmission* stage, which lasts fifteen hundred years. During the first five hundred years, most practitioners study the sutras; during the second five hundred years, most practitioners study the *Vinaya*; during the third five hundred years, most practitioners study the *Abhidhamma*.

Fourth, the *symbol* stage, which lasts five hundred years. During this period, monastics only retain the look of monastics, and no one upholds pure precepts or practices the Dharma. There are no longer the teachings and realization of the Dharma. At the very end, even the appearance of a monastic cannot be sustained. Because beings’ merits are exhausted, when a monastic shaves their head, the razor does not work; when someone dyes kasayas, or monastic robes, the pigment cannot color the robes saffron or burgundy red.

[Some Dharma masters think the present is the period with only the symbols left, which is not reasonable. According to our analysis, the opinion in the *Abhidharmakośa* makes sense.]

At the very beginning of the *fruit* stage, which is when the Buddha was alive and shortly after his parinirvana, there was a great number of Buddhists who

attained fruition. As those who have read the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions* and the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* already know, people at that time swiftly attained one of the four stages of enlightenment,¹⁴ after listening to teachings.

Recently, a Dharma student asked me, “How admirable it is that people at that time attained enlightenment so fast! Will you teach me the Four Noble Truths so that I can attain Arhathood very soon too?” I answered, “It is definitely not possible now because we are not in the *fruit* stage.”

After the time of *fruit* stage that lasts for fifteen hundred years comes the stage of *accomplishment* when the Threefold Training is the primary practice. During this period in history, there were many great enlightened masters in the Chan school and the Pure Land school of Chinese Buddhism. There were also many enlightened practitioners of various lineages of Tibetan Buddhism who attained the rainbow body or went to the Buddha-fields.

Now we are approaching the time of *symbols* stage, so there are far fewer practitioners who attain enlightenment. Although the time of *symbols* stage has not yet arrived—after all, the Dharma still exists, people can still study and uphold the Tripitaka and generate compassion and bodhicitta—we are doing much worse compared to practitioners during the Buddha’s time.

Altogether, the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni last for five thousand years. According to the Phugpa calendar, over thirty-five hundred years have passed, and we are approaching the four-thousandth year. That means we are currently in the stage of *transmission*. In another five hundred years, Buddhism will not be anything like what it is today. During the endless cycles of samsara, it is so rare and precious that we encounter the Dharma in this life.

Although we currently live in an age of five degenerations, the doctrine of transmission and the realization of the Dharma still exist. Thus, we still possess the advantage of *having the Dharma in its entirety*.

What are the five degenerations?

1) *The degeneration of time*: This refers to the time of bad fortune when disasters occur very often. Take the economic situation, for example: world economic crises and financial storms alternate constantly. People’s wealth

¹⁴ The four stages of enlightenment in Early Buddhism and Theravada are four progressive stages culminating in full enlightenment as an Arahant. These four stages are Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmi, Anāgāmi, and Arahant.

is as unstable as water bubbles—one can be a billionaire today and penniless tomorrow.

2) *The degeneration of beings*: This refers to the fact that beings have inferior mental and physical states, less merit and happiness, and more suffering. Before and during the Buddha's time, humans had supreme height and strength, which has since deteriorated year by year. Some Dharma students used to spend the whole winter at Larung Gar without having any problems; now they can hardly walk a few steps without becoming heavily winded. When winter comes, they cannot wait to leave Larung Gar because of its lack of oxygen due to high altitude. This also shows that the degeneration is intensifying.

3) *The degeneration of lifespan*: This refers to the fact that beings' lifespans are getting shorter due to their negative karmas. During the Buddha's time, it was common for humans to live up to one hundred years. In comparison, now if someone becomes a centenarian, many journalists will take photos or videos of this person, regarding them as exceptional. When people reach their fifties or sixties, they think it might be time to die soon, so they want to get things arranged. Humans used to live up to twenty thousand to eighty thousand years in other periods of this great kalpa, but unfortunately, we are now experiencing the degeneration of lifespan.

4) *The degeneration of beliefs*: Monastics are gradually deteriorating, and their wrong views are proliferating. In the past, monastics conscientiously upheld the precepts and were always engaged in the Threefold Training of ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. Today's situation is as the Buddha prophesied in *The Sutra of Resolving Doubts During the Age of the Semblance Dharma*:

One thousand years after my parinirvana,
The unwholesome dharma will start to expand.

The Sutra also lists the following occurrences during this period: some monastics, who are non-meditators, boast that they have mastered meditation; some monastics, who do not grasp the true meaning of the Dharma, teach the twelve divisions of sutra arbitrarily and even think they teach well; some monastics, who practice no virtue, pursue wealth and do business every day, which causes

worldly people to hold the Three Jewels in contempt. All these belong to the degeneration of beliefs.

5) *The degeneration of disturbing emotions*: This refers to fewer householders practicing the Dharma and householders practicing less of the Dharma.

[Of course, there are other ways to explain the “degeneration of beliefs” and “degeneration of disturbing emotions,” but here I distinguish between the monastic and the householder and offer explanations accordingly.]

Although the five degenerations are rampant in today’s world, the Dharma of transmission and realization does still exist, so we must practice while we still can. In fact, we can all practice the Dharma as we wish, provided we manage our time well.

Today around noon, a seventy-nine-year-old Tibetan lama visited me. He used to be a worldly friend of my father and took his ordination later. He told me what he had practiced in the past twenty years and said, “Up to yesterday, I’ve recited the mantra of Avalokiteshvara three hundred million times.” He made a vow in front of me today, saying he will recite the mantra another one hundred million times.

I asked how long it took him to finish the three hundred million recitations. “Seventeen years,” he replied, “Sometimes I recited more, like one hundred thousand times a day; sometimes I recited less, like when I was on a pilgrimage to Lhasa and other places I did less. I rarely socialize. I also recited ten thousand times of *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra’s Aspiration of Good Actions*.

This lama used to be quite notorious in my hometown Luhuo county. My father often told me how he scuffled, killed yaks, and stole, so I remembered him. He also admitted that when he was young, he did not believe in the law of karma, so he committed a lot of wrongdoings.

Twenty years ago, he encountered a guru, and later he met the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, who asked him to repent whole-heartedly by chanting the mantra of Avalokiteshvara. Now he had finished chanting the mantra three hundred million times, and today he vowed to accomplish another one hundred million times. I do feel that people differ in mental strength. When a person has great mental strength, even if he has committed many wrongdoings, it is never too late for him to practice diligently from now on.

All in all, I hope that through the above analysis, you truly realize that it is very

rare for a Buddha to teach, and it is even rarer for the Dharma to remain extant. Now that we have all the advantages, what a great blessing!

Sometimes, when people experience unpleasant things in life, such as the intended grocery item being sold out, running out of gas while cooking, having nowhere to purchase a needed product, or encountering family incidents, they feel they are in great trouble.

In fact, it is not worth making a big fuss about such things. The real great trouble is the disappearance of the Dharma. When this happens, the whole world will be in great darkness, and our rebirth as a human will no longer be meaningful.

This has not happened yet, so we still have the light of the Dharma. The key is whether we accept the Buddha's teachings. For the rest of our lives, if we not only listen and contemplate, but also meditate on the Dharma, our human life is indeed very valuable.



Lesson 21

“That the Doctrine is ... human life endowed with the eighteen freedoms and advantages.” [page 28-29]

We are learning about the five circumstantial advantages in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and the fourth one is:

2.1.1.2.2.4. The Buddha’s Teachings have been Followed

Although we now have the advantages—a buddha has appeared and has expounded the Dharma, and his teachings still exist—the key is the fourth advantage: we must follow the buddha’s teachings. If you have enough renunciation and other favorable conditions, you may take ordination; if you do not, you should uphold all or at least part of the five lay precepts. On this basis, you hear, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma, which qualifies you as a Buddhist.

If you do not enter the Dharma, even if the Dharma still exists, you cannot receive the transmission and realization. If you do not receive the teachings, the immense wisdom and great compassion in the Dharma have no possibility of infiltrating you.

The problem is similar to this: There is a good neighborhood school where teachers teach every day, and an orphan wanting to go to this school will be admitted. However, it is possible the orphan does not want education and prefers to always wander outside. A learned person might feel sorry for the orphan’s lack of education, whereas the orphan might think the opposite—that he is living a free and happy life. Similarly, if you do not follow the Dharma, even if Buddhism is flourishing, you gain no benefit from it.

There are many non-Buddhists around monastics and lay practitioners. Compared to this enormously big crowd of people who are lost in life, we are indeed very fortunate to have the opportunity, in this very life, to know what to do and what not to do. If we do not embark on the path of the Dharma, no matter how thriving the Dharma may be, it will not bring us any benefit. This is just as the rising sun can hardly have any impact on a blind man, even though it illuminates the entire world, and just as the waters of a large lake cannot quench the thirst of a traveler who has reached its shore but chooses not to drink from it.

Although we have the opportunity in this life to have entered the Dharma, millions of people around us, despite their high education, social status, and wealth, are still aimlessly wandering in samsara life after life. Therefore, we should generate great aspiration and try our very best to help them. Even if helping one person to generate compassion or renunciation for just one second, we should still devote all our effort to doing it.

Of course, such an aspiration is not something we do only once; it requires a long-term commitment. With such an aspiration, sometimes favorable conditions that allow us to benefit others may unexpectedly arise. Thus, wherever you go or live, you can always help beings with the wisdom of the Dharma and bring fortunate beings to enter the Dharma through various methods.

For these beings, the benefits of bringing the Dharma to others are inconceivable. Bringing status and wealth to them is not a true benefit, whereas bringing Dharma to them so they can avoid vices and engage in virtue is of great meaning for their present and future lives. Therefore, it is very important to lead ourselves and others to enter the Dharma.

There are two kinds of Buddhists: one kind is the pseudo-Buddhist, and the other is the true Buddhist.

1) The pseudo-Buddhist

a. Dharma as Protection Against Fears

Some of you may enter the Dharma not in pursuit of liberation but for the sake of alleviating negative life situations, such as a relationship breakup, severe illness, lack of basic necessities, disasters, or feeling utterly lost; or it may be out of fear of falling into the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, or animals in the next life after learning about the sufferings in the three lower realms through Buddhist scriptures.

In the first case, it is out of concern for present-life adversity, and in the second, it is out of fear of future suffering. Since your motivation is not for liberation, even if you have entered the Dharma and received a “refuge certificate” from a temple or a guru, the Dharma you receive is just used to protect you against fears, and you are not yet on the right path.

Some countries proclaim they have millions or tens of millions of Buddhist citizens, but I wonder whether some of these Buddhists took refuge only for the sake of seeking protection from fears. If such is the case, they can only be regarded as pseudo-Buddhists.

I have noticed many taxi drivers hang a pendant of Avalokiteshvara or Buddha Shakyamuni in their cars. Sometimes I ask the taxi driver, “Why are you hanging this?”

He often replies,

“Because I’m afraid of having a car accident; this pendant can protect me.”

Sometimes I also ask, “Are you Buddhist?”

“Yes,” he replies.

“Why did you take refuge in Buddhism?”

“Because a fortune teller told me I wouldn’t live long, so I took refuge to live longer.”

In the short run, this is, of course, a skillful way for him to enter the Dharma, but ultimately seeking protection is not the right reason for taking refuge.

b. Dharma as quest for excellence

The pursuit of the Dharma solely for the purpose of getting food, clothing, and so on in this life, or to secure a favorable rebirth as a celestial being or a human in the next life, is called “Dharma as quest for excellence.” As such, even if you have entered the Dharma, you are not yet on the right path.

Nevertheless, Buddha Shakyamuni was not against temporary quests for excellence, because for beings with strong desires, one can first fulfill their desires and then eventually guide them onto the path of liberation. *The Vimalakirti Sutra* says:

They intentionally become courtesans

In order to win men over,
And, having caught them with the hook of desire,
They establish them in the buddha.¹⁵

However, many people are hooked by desires but have not yet connected with the Buddha's wisdom¹⁶ throughout their entire lives. This phenomenon can be seen everywhere and is not uncommon at all.

Many people enter the Dharma for the sake of finding peace and safety. I know a person who always refuses to utilize the Dharma for liberation. He told me, "Dear teacher, I prioritize the peace and safety of my family. I have two kids. I hope the older one marries well and the younger one studies well at university. I hope I am safe and sound as well. I hope my wife, who is in bad shape, becomes healthier. I hope my parents-in-law stop their quarrels and that my parents are well. Other than these, I ask for nothing. Namo Amitabha..."

I told him, "It is fine that you wish for these things, but still, you have to think about liberation, which is much more important."

But he responded, "No, no, no, being safe and sound is enough for me. Liberation is beyond my quest."

People who share this same attitude of mind have not really taken refuge in Buddhism.

2) The true Buddhist

Only those who truly understand that the whole of samsara has no meaning and that the six realms are as terrifying as a burning house, a land of demons, or a forest of swords, and who strive to seek liberation for themselves and others by embracing Buddhism, are the true Buddhists. We should all reflect on this and check whether we are true Buddhists.

With the guru's blessing and kindness, many people have gained a good intellectual understanding, although their experiential understanding varies. Of the six realms, no one wants rebirth in the three lower realms (the hells, the preta realm, and the animal realm). Meanwhile, we should not pursue rebirth in the three higher realms (the human realm, the asura realm, and the god realm) either.

¹⁵ The Sutra is translated by Robert A. F. Thurman.

¹⁶ It refers to Buddha-gnosis.

A person once told me, “If I were to be reborn in the future, I would do so and so.” Hearing this, I got a bit annoyed and asked him, “You have been studying Dharma for many years; how can you still desire a better worldly life?” He immediately clarified, “No, no, I do not mean that. I definitely aspire to attain liberation. I just mean that, in case I cannot attain enlightenment in this life, what I wish to do in a future life is... It’s just an ‘in case.’”

Worldly people often say, “If there were to be a next life, I would...” The next life is merely an assumption for them. We practitioners should think this way: “If I fail to attain liberation in this life, I must continue my practice in my future life or lives.” *The Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati* says:

To attain the pure realm of Sukhavati
From the inescapable ocean of samsara
Is like being liberated from a prison of great evil,
May I not look back toward samsara.¹⁷

Those who think this way can be regarded as true Buddhists. Otherwise, if they only desire the eight worldly concerns but not liberation, then they are definitely not true Buddhists, even if they are monastics who wear *kasayas*, shave their heads, live in monasteries, and use the offerings of the faithful, let alone householders.

Of course, it is difficult for an ordinary person to always maintain renunciation and never let it regress, but we should at least occasionally wish for liberation and understand that there is nothing worth pursuing in samsara. If we have never thought about being liberated from samsara since we entered the Dharma, then we are definitely not true Buddhists.

How can a monastic who is not even a true Buddhist be considered a monastic? How can a lay practitioner who is not even a true Buddhist be considered a lay practitioner? Someone might regard themselves as not only a monastic but also a practitioner with a high state of realization. Let’s not talk about their state of realization for now; it is worth checking first whether this person is qualified as a Buddhist.

Therefore, it is of great significance to study the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. If we do not know what is been covered above, we may appear to be very diligent, but what we are doing is not “Buddhist” in essence. Therefore, we should

¹⁷ Translation by Jens Hansen, under the direction of Saljay Rinpoche.

not just glance over the text. Instead, we should ponder it and think it over—word by word, line by line—while reading the text, and examine ourselves accordingly. By doing so, we can not only pinpoint our own deficiencies but also understand what to do in the future and regard the text as a beacon guiding us on the path.

Some people wonder, “I have a higher education, so do I still need to study the basic teachings of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*?” In fact, a secular degree has little to do with attaining the states of practice described in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. If you have faith and diligence, the mentioned states will arise in your mind; if you do not have faith and diligence, however knowledgeable or prestigious you are, the Dharma can hardly resonate with your mind. Therefore, I suggest you carefully reflect on this. This text prompts you to examine your internal mind rather than the external world.

2.1.1.2.2.5. One has been Accepted by a Qualified Teacher

Some people have taken refuge and received a refuge certificate from a temple or have officially joined a Buddhist study group, so they claim their Buddhist identity by saying, for example, “I took refuge at 7 a.m. on June 25!” Perhaps so, but without being accepted by a qualified teacher, they still know little about the Dharma. In this case, however long it has been since they took refuge, they may still be the same as their previous selves because the Dharma has not substantially benefited them.

Therefore, the *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*¹⁸ says:

The Dharma depends upon the spiritual teacher.

Thus said the Buddha, the supreme embodiment of all good qualities.

It was Buddha Shakyamuni with perfect qualities and great compassion, not an ordinary person, who stressed the importance of being accepted by a qualified teacher.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines also says:

The bodhisattvas who stand on the stage of beginners,

Who with resolute intention have set out for the supreme enlightenment of a Buddha,

¹⁸ The title is also translated as “Verses on the Perfection of Wisdom.”

They, the discerning, should, as good pupils' intent on respect
for their Gurus,
Always tend their spiritual teachers [who are their 'good
friends'].¹⁹

The Flower Ornament Sutra says:

Without a teacher, even the wise cannot understand the
Dharma.

Why? Because the Buddha's teachings are vast, with numerous transmissions covering a wide range of topics. Without the guidance of a teacher's pith instructions, we would be unable to condense the essential points of all those teachings and put them into practice.

I have been to big bookstores in Hong Kong and New York, where there is a great variety of Buddhist books, including texts related to Mahayana, Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, and so on, and I easily got lost among the bookshelves! Each book looked very interesting to me, but I could not buy all of them, so it was really hard to choose which books to purchase.

Take the Tripitaka, for example. Many different versions of the canon exist throughout the world, containing an enormous variety of texts. The *Qianlong Tripitaka* contains an aggregate of 724 sets, which are divided into two parts: the main Tripitaka (485 sets) and the sequel (239 sets). The famous *Yongle South Tripitaka* and *Yongle North Tripitaka* each contain 636 volumes. The *Taishō Tripitaka*, which is now widely circulated, contains one hundred volumes, with fifty-five volumes belonging to the main Tripitaka, thirty volumes to the sequel, and fifteen volumes to the supplement. The *Tibetan Tripitaka* contains over one hundred volumes of sutras in the *Kangyur*²⁰ and over two hundred volumes of shastras in the *Tengyur*.²¹

¹⁹ Translated by Edward Conze.

²⁰ Kangyur (Wylie: bka'-gyur) or "Translated Words or Vacana," consists of works supposed to have been said by the Buddha himself. All texts presumably have a Sanskrit original, although in many cases the Tibetan text was translated from Chinese or other languages.

²¹ Tengyur (Wylie: bstan-gyur) or "Translated Treatises or Shastras," is the section that includes commentaries, treatises and abhidharma works (both Mahayana and non-Mahayana). The Tengyur contains 3626 texts in 224 Volumes.

In addition, there are also numerous works by great Tibetan masters, and some masters alone have written nearly one hundred volumes.

At first glance, a beginner may feel totally confused when looking at these Buddhist texts, not knowing which one to choose. Such a person might wonder, “Is it better to choose texts from the first turning of the Dharma Wheel, the second, or the third?” “Should I choose texts from Theravada Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, or Tibetan Buddhism?”

After receiving a teacher’s pith instructions, a Buddhist will know how to condense the essential points of all these Buddha’s teachings. Specifically, a Buddhist should first generate renunciation, then cultivate bodhicitta, and lastly realize non-duality or emptiness. [In Sutrayana, the wisdom of non-duality is described in the doctrine of the Middle Way, while in Vajrayana, it refers to the essence of the mind, with the mind being self-luminous and self-cognizing.] In a nutshell, a Mahayanist’s practice is to establish renunciation and bodhicitta as the foundation, and then to negate the self of the individual and the self of phenomena. This summarizes the essential points of all the Buddha’s teachings. If you follow these points on the path, you will have a perfect practice.

Therefore, the teacher’s instructions are very important. Without instructions, you may not even consider taking refuge. And even if you have already taken refuge, you may end up heading nowhere because it is extremely difficult to study Dharma on your own.

I often think like this: Had I not been accepted as a disciple by the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, I might not have taken ordination to be a monk. And even if I had otherwise become a monk, maybe I would be no different from those monastics whose appearance is noble but whose minds are no different from those worldly people who know nothing about the Dharma. Therefore, I am very grateful to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

Please understand that the teacher’s pith instructions are very important. As mentioned earlier, without those instructions, we will never know how to condense the essential points of all the Buddha’s teachings and integrate them into our practice. Therefore, neither having the Dharma nor taking refuge is sufficient in itself; we must also be accepted by a qualified teacher.

The Precious Garland of Precepts says:

Not knowing the doctrine,

A sixty-year-old is still a child.

This means that a sixty-year-old who has taken refuge but does not know the doctrine is no different from a child. To understand the doctrine, one must follow a teacher.

According to the *Vinaya*, a disciple who has not fully mastered the three Pitakas must follow a teacher for ten years. After that, if the disciple has mastered the teachings, they may leave the teacher and start propagating the Dharma elsewhere. If the disciple has not, they need to continue following the teacher.

But this is not the case anymore. Currently, it happens that as long as a teacher shaves a prospective monk's or nun's head and accepts them as a disciple, the person may be gone the next day. Many people are like this: they travel to Larung Gar from afar, insisting on having me as their guru. But after I give them ordination, they say, "Thank you! Bye-bye!" and leave the next day. They have never planned to follow a teacher to study Dharma. For them, following a teacher is simply a formality.

In fact, a disciple should follow the teacher for a long time. Within secular education, a Chinese student needs to participate in the nine-year compulsory education to finish primary and secondary education. In comparison, if a Dharma student does not participate in the nine-year Buddhist education, he cannot be qualified as a true Buddhist. Not only do we need basic education in the Dharma, but more importantly, we should not depart from the teacher prematurely.

Some steady practitioners at Larung Gar have been here for nearly twenty years, diligently engaging in hearing, contemplation, and meditation on a daily basis. I really rejoice in them! Without staying in a Dharmic environment for a long time, ordinary people's bad habits can easily surface. Thus, it is not a good idea to spend just a few days in a Dharma center or stay with a teacher briefly and then leave for somewhere else.

It is said that the Dzogchen lineage masters Vimalamitra and Jñānasutra reincarnated five hundred times as panditas. Nevertheless, they served and followed their guru for nine and twenty-one years, respectively. If great masters like these appeared to follow a teacher for so many years, then we ordinary people with heavy karmic burdens, who might have just been reborn from hell or the preta realm, must appreciate even more the rare and precious opportunity to follow a teacher. The process of following a teacher may be a bit challenging and tiring, but

we must know that studying the Dharma does not only include easy moments, so please be patient.

At Larung Gar, when a Dharma student with good grades, pure precepts, and virtuous character wants to leave, I will usually try to dissuade them. Someone thought I had a personal agenda, so he said to me, “Well, I can come back later to assist with your Dharma activities. Is it okay if I leave now?”

In fact, I wanted to keep him at Larung Gar not because I wanted him to work for me. I am only concerned that a beginner Buddhist like him, whether a householder or a monastic, cannot help but easily regress to the previous state of greed, anger, and ignorance once he returns to worldly life. Therefore, it is very important that you do not depart from a qualified teacher prematurely.

The Flower Ornament Sutra contains extensive instructions on how to follow a teacher, in the chapter called “Entry into the Realm of Reality.” These instructions are about the same as the pith instructions in the tantras.

For example, when Sudhana studied under Manjushri, he was told by the bodhisattva:

As to the skillful means employed by a qualified spiritual teacher,
Do not find faults.

This is exactly the same as the pure perception of the guru in Vajrayana.

In another example, when Sudhana visited Avalokiteshvara, he was thinking:

Qualified spiritual teachers are buddhas;
Qualified spiritual teachers are the clouds of all dharmas;
Qualified spiritual teachers are the treasury of all virtues.

This is also consistent with the tantric teaching of seeing the guru as a buddha, as the root of Dharma, and as the source of virtues. Therefore, it is not just Vajrayana that advocates that guru practice is everything in one’s Dharma practice.

To attain the highest state of enlightenment, following a guru is indispensable. Someone thinks, “After leaving my guru, I will be free and will have the chance to achieve something.” Such a thought is no different from that of a truant child, thinking, “After skipping school, I can buy a nice toy and have a wonderful time.”

In fact, such thinking is quite naive. A practitioner can only benefit from following a guru for a sufficiently long time.

Here is a story about Venerable Atisha, which explains the importance of receiving a guru's teaching and being taken under their care.

When Atisha was in India, Tara appeared to him vividly in a dream and told him, "I hope you can go to the Snow Land as soon as possible. Your three main disciples, who had an affinity with you from a previous life, are waiting for you there. They are emanations of the three main bodhisattvas."²² Accepting them as disciples will help with propagating the Dharma." The three disciples were known as Khu, Ngok, and Drom, or more formally Khutön Tsöndru Yungdrung (1011–1075), Ngok Lekpé Sherab, and Dromtönpa Gyalwé Jungné.

Later, Atisha came to Tibet to spread the Dharma. Dromtönpa asked him questions, and Atisha's answers were compiled into the text titled *The Dialogues with the Lineage Master*. Khutön and Ngok also asked questions, and the answers were compiled into *The Dialogues with the Disciples*. The two sets of texts, which are collectively known as *The Kadampa Dialogues*, contain pith instructions on mind training that are as supreme as those in Drakkar Lobzang Palden's *Precious Garland of Mountain Practices* and Chengawa Lodrö Gyaltzen's *Gateway to Training the Mind*. The Dialogues also explain the affinity between Atisha and his three main disciples—Khu, Ngok, and Drom—in their previous lives.

I meant to translate the *Dialogues* a long time ago but could not spare the time, so I have put this translation project aside for now. About twenty years ago, I visited Püingu Göñ Monastery in Barkam to teach the sangha of over twenty monks during the summer retreat. After finishing teaching for the entire morning, in the afternoons I would take the two *Dialogues* and go read in a nearby forest. Back then, I had only been a monk for a few years, and my renunciation was very strong. I had great confidence in the deeds of Atisha and Dromtönpa.

Now, whenever I pass by the monastery and the forest, I feel very joyful. The two sets of *Dialogues* are indeed very good. As some senior sangha members may remember, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted from the texts and told us inspiring stories about the wondrous affinity between Atisha and his three disciples.

Atisha had many disciples in the span of his life. When he came to Tibet, in

²² The three main bodhisattvas refer to Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani.

the area of Kham, his main disciples were Khu, Ngok, and Drom; in the area of Ü-Tsang, his main disciples included Lotsawa²³ Rinchen Zangpo, Lotsawa Naktso Lotsawa Tsultrim and Jangchub Ö. In Nepal, Atisha also had quite a few great disciples. In India, he had many panditas as his disciples. In Tibet, Atisha primarily propagated the Dharma with Dromtönpa and other main disciples, and their Dharma activities were very successful. Now, after so many years, their teachings and pith instructions, albeit short, still have a great effect on our minds. Here is the story Patrul Rinpoche shared in the text:

Once, three disciples of Jowo Atisha, Khu, Ngok and Drom, asked him, “When it comes to attaining liberation and complete omniscience, which is more important—the canonical scriptures and their commentaries or the teacher’s oral instructions?”

“The teacher’s instructions,” Atisha replied.

“Why?”

“Even if you can explain the entire Tripitaka from memory and possess all the knowledge of metaphysics, it is only through the teacher’s practical guidance that you can truly put the teachings into practice. Without this guidance, you will inevitably become separated from the path of the Dharma,” Atisha answered.

Academic scholars or debaters specializing in Buddhist logic can clearly explain Buddhist terms, including form, the five aggregates, and more. However, if they lack the teacher’s pith instructions, even if they speak eloquently, they have no idea where to start when it comes to practicing.

Recently, the Larung Gar sangha had a twenty-day retreat. For those members who had rarely meditated in the past, sitting at home alone every day was very challenging. A master of Buddhist philosophy told me, “Teaching is easy for me, but meditating is hard. I have no problem teaching the topic of Buddhist logic or the text of *Ornament of Clear Realization*, but when I was in retreat, I found myself incapable of practicing well. Alas! I have been teaching the Dharma for years, but I do not know how to practice well. How embarrassing!”

We should be learned in the Dharma, but when it comes to combining the doctrine with the mind, we must rely on the teacher’s instructions. Otherwise, given the vast number of canonical scriptures and their commentaries, it is impossible for a Buddhist to practice all of them one by one in this life. Without the

²³ Lotsawa is a Tibetan word meaning “translator.”

teacher's practical guidance, the Dharma and the practitioner will part company. With the teacher's guidance, the Dharma will permeate into the practitioner's mind, enabling them to know how to practice accordingly. For example, when the teaching in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* has permeated the practitioner, they will clearly know how to generate bodhicitta at the beginning, how to meditate, and how to dedicate the merit in the end. Therefore, the teacher's instructions are essential.

Let's now return to the dialogues between Atisha and his three disciples.

"So," they continued, "is it the essence of the teacher's instructions to uphold the three vows²⁴ and to strive to do good with body, speech, and mind at all times?"

"That is not a sufficient summary," Atisha replied.

"How can that be?" They exclaimed.

Atisha answered, "You may be able to perfectly uphold the three vows, but if you have not generated disenchantment with samsara, it just creates further causes for remaining in samsara. You may strive day and night to do good with your body, speech, and mind, but if you do not know how to dedicate the merit to perfect enlightenment, all your merit can be completely destroyed by your wrong thoughts."

[For example, someone may strive to do good with their body, speech, and mind. Such a person may prostrate and meditate every day and rarely leave the shrine room; they may constantly recite the names of buddhas, the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, and The Diamond Sutra; greed, anger, and ignorance may rarely arise in their mind.

Such a person may come to Larung Gar for a Dharma assembly and take a one-month retreat to recite the name of Buddha Amitabha one million times. In these ways, they have always been striving to do good. However, on the way back home, this person might become very angry and quarrel with their vajra brother, even resorting to physical violence. In this case, any previously undedicated merit, including what was accumulated through diligent practice during the one-month retreat, will be completely lost.

Many people do not comprehend that their positive actions should be guided by bodhicitta and that the merit should be dedicated in the end. Even if they have

²⁴ The three vows are the vows of pratimoksha or individual liberation, the bodhisattva vows, and the samayas.

been practicing diligently - retreating, meditating, and engaging in other ascetic practices - a burst of negative thoughts and emotions can destroy the yet-to-be-dedicated merit. Not only is the merit lost, but more negative actions are likely to be committed.

In comparison, when we have the teacher's practical guidance, we will engage in good deeds with bodhicitta as the motivation and dedicate the merit in the end. It is like when you finally make some money, you will lock the cash in a safe when you are away or deposit it in a bank. Similarly, if you dedicate the merit accumulated by your good deeds, it will not be exhausted until your attainment of enlightenment. This is very important, but sadly, many people do not know this.]

Atisha continued, "You may possess extraordinary intelligence, pure percepts, the ability to teach, meditative insights, and more, but if you have not renounced the eight worldly concerns, whatever you do will only be for this present life, and you will not find the path that helps for future lives."

[Why can some people succeed in their practice? It is primarily because they have renounced this life, placed little importance on fame and wealth, and single-mindedly pursued liberation. By contrast, some practitioners may seem to study the Dharma well but will fail miserably in their practice due to their attachment to worldly concerns. There are such Dharma teachers at Larung Gar as well. Well, no group can be one hundred percent perfect.]

The above analysis illustrates the importance of being taken under the care of a teacher. Without the teacher's pith instructions, we cannot generate true renunciation, which renders keeping the three vows of little use for our liberation. Without the teacher's pith instructions, we do not know how to practice within the context of bodhicitta, which renders striving to do good of little effect. Without the teacher's pith instructions, we do not know we should pursue liberation, which renders the results of our discipline and learning nothing but worldly blessings.

However, many people do not understand this. They spend their whole lives reading numerous Buddhist texts but remain confused at the end. For example, after reading many sutras, a leading figure of modern Chinese literature named Lu Xun felt that some sutras were so supreme that he donated money to print more copies. It is a great pity that Lu Xun did not have true pith instructions. Otherwise, with his intelligence, he would have gained a more profound understanding of the sutras.

I have even written articles describing the connections that renowned writers and celebrities have had with Buddhism. Many famous individuals lack a teacher's instructions, so they have simply established an affinity with Buddhism. We should know that the key to the profound pith instructions in Buddhism is only in a teacher's hands. Without the teacher opening the treasure door, you can only have a quick glance at the outside, without getting the essence inside.

As it is said in a shastra:

To achieve complete omniscience,
One must follow a qualified teacher;
If only studying diligently on one's own,
No one can attain Buddhahood;
It is like a blind person cannot climb
A high mountain all by himself.

Although there are self-taught individuals in the arenas of worldly knowledge and skills, becoming a self-taught practitioner is impossible in Buddhism, as the teacher's pith instructions are indispensable. Attaining realization through self-guided practice is as hard as scaling the blue sky!

Of course, a qualified teacher is not necessarily a person. Many people complain that they cannot find the right teacher to follow. One person even told me, "I have been searching for years, but I have not found a suitable teacher for me."

If you are unable to find a right person as your teacher, you can always consider *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* as your guide, as it is considered an imperturbable instructor.²⁵ While a teacher, whether of the past or the present, may occasionally become upset, making it difficult to follow them, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* will never be mad at you. Therefore, you can pray to it and consult its text at any time.

The above teaching has covered all the freedoms and advantages. We should carefully examine our own lives and circumstances to see which freedom or advantage is present and which of them is not. If we find that all of them are present, we have what is known as "human life endowed with the eighteen freedoms and

²⁵ In the conclusion of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche says, "This is why this text, condensed and easy to understand, a golden elixir to soak into minute openings in narrow winds, a lamp to light up the gloom of those of feeble wits, like an imperturbable instructor, imparts the right meaning clearly on its own."

advantages.” If we only possess some of them, we should appreciate what we already have and strive to attain what we do not yet have.



Lesson 22

“However, the Omniscient ... to continue practising the Dharma.” [page 29-30]

Please keep in mind two points when we listen to the teaching. First, the Dharma is rare, precious, and very hard to encounter even in millions of kalpas. Now that we are fortunate enough to encounter it in this life, we should strive to grasp the Tathagata’s true meaning, with the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Second, we attend this class not for our own benefit in this life or future lives, but for the purpose of liberating boundless sentient beings so that they can be freed from the samsara of life and death and attain the ocean-like great qualities mentioned in the Dharma.

This is the essence of bodhicitta, which should be kept in mind in every class.

Generally speaking, a practitioner with a higher capacity generates bodhicitta when heading to the Dharma hall for listening to the teaching; a practitioner with middling capacity generates bodhicitta when hearing the announcement sound of a conch shell or a drum; a practitioner with average capacity generates bodhicitta only when being reminded by the Dharma teacher at the beginning of the teaching. Whichever kind of practitioner you are, you should constantly practice arousing bodhicitta, and eventually, it will definitely arise.

After generating bodhicitta, we should start to meditate on “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages” and carefully examine whether we are endowed with the eighteen freedoms and advantages. If we have them all, we

should be joyful; if not, we should strive to have them all by all means. Now that we have the precious human life and the opportunity to practice Dharma, living in this world renders great and significant meaning, as said in Bhavaviveka's *Essence of the Middle Way*:

Relying on the luminous Dharma,
We know the eighteen freedoms and advantages.
Only through the true practice of the Dharma
Does human life become truly meaningful.

Of all the beings in the six realms, only very few obtain a human form; among all those who were reborn as humans, very few of them have the opportunity to practice the Dharma; among all Dharma practitioners, very few of them have the eighteen freedoms and advantages. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to find the freedoms and advantages for the Dharma.

To avoid spending our precious human life in vain, we must practice ngöndro well; otherwise, it will be very difficult to proceed to other practices. Therefore, please do not hasten to higher teachings; make sure you establish a solid foundation through ngöndro practice.

Of course, such a foundation cannot be established overnight; it requires long-term sustained practice. When I was a beginner, I heard my gurus emphasizing the importance of ngöndro, but I did not have an in-depth understanding of it.

As I advanced in my Dharma study and practiced over the years, I witnessed many people give up their practice halfway, and some even fail miserably. Their failure was due to their lack of a solid foundation established through ngöndro. So please place great importance on your ngöndro practice and make sure you practice it long enough.

We should know that the Dharma is so profound that one cannot master it easily with little effort. It can take up to thirty years to attain the highest academic degree in the secular world: three years of kindergarten, one year of preschool, six years of primary school, six years of secondary school, four to five years of undergraduate university education, two to three years of master's studies, and four to six years of doctoral studies. Then, after all these years of study, one might finally have the scholarly qualification. In comparison, the Dharma is much more

profound, so it takes much longer to attain experiential understanding or to fully master its essence.

Many lay practitioners and monastics believe that taking refuge is all one needs to be a Buddhist and that there is nothing else to do or learn. That is not true. The Dharma is far more profound than worldly knowledge. If acquiring worldly knowledge, which is easier and simpler, requires so many years of study, it is no surprise that the profound Dharma would require even more years. Many Dharma students at Larung Gar hold a master's or doctorate degree. When they first arrived, they showed me their degree certificates, saying, "This is my master's certificate," or "This is my doctoral certificate." Later, when they began to study Buddhist logic or the Middle Way, they became so lost that they could hardly understand anything. Realizing they understand little about the Dharma, they dare not show off their certificates anymore. Therefore, you should not think the Dharma is easy.

It is because the Dharma is so profound that people cannot help but admire and appreciate the untainted wisdom of the Buddha. Nagarjuna says in the *Praise of Prajnaparamita*:

Your body is faultless,
Only being seen by faultless persons.
You are beyond cognizing and free of conceptualization,
To you, Prajnaparamita, I pray with veneration.

That is, the faultless prajnaparamita—the mother of all the buddhas—can only be perceived by faultless beings such as bodhisattvas. Indeed, the ultimate state of non-self and emptiness in Buddhism is beyond the reach of ordinary people who are deluded by greed, anger, and ignorance. The ultimate state can be attained only by those who have tamed the worldly mind, become immune to rambling thoughts, eradicated obscurations in the mind, and attained supreme wisdom.

Nowadays, there are more and more academic researchers who are immersing themselves in the study of the Dharma, including the doctrine of emptiness.

This is good, but one should know that a true study of the Dharma also requires actual practice and realization. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for a person to antidote afflictions by merely engaging in theoretical and academic research without applying the Dharma in practice. Therefore, whoever a person is,

they must attach importance to the texts of practical guidance, such as *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Recently, a diligent practitioner who used to study at Larung Gar told me, “For more than a decade, I’ve never parted from the texts of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*.” Indeed, upon closer inspection, her books did appear well-worn. It is true that if a person has received the blessing and benefit from the teachings in a text, they are unwilling to part with it, and the benefit they get is beyond words.

Especially in regard to Padmasambhava’s teachings, it is crucial for us to cultivate faith. By doing so, we will be greatly blessed. Westerners are also greatly intrigued by the teachings of Padmasambhava, and many of them show great faith when hearing the name of Padmasambhava. The start of this is mainly attributed to the fact that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*²⁶ was translated and introduced to the West in the 1920s, which became renowned. Subsequently, Sogyal Rinpoche’s *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and other books or texts based on Padmasambhava’s teachings enable many people to benefit from the tantric teachings. But unfortunately, some lay practitioners and monastics have not yet experienced the supreme blessings of Padmasambhava.

As for me, I have been reciting the Padmasambhava mantra and praying to him since my childhood. At any time when I had a nightmare or encountered danger when herding yaks, I only prayed to Padmasambhava. To this day, I have never stopped praying to Padmasambhava.

In the current degenerate age, when negative forces and obstacles are rampant, praying to other buddhas and bodhisattvas can be of help, but due to Padmasambhava’s special aspiration and blessings in connection with the degenerate age, praying to him can put an end to the turbulent waves of difficulties and hardships.

When the great master Shantarakshita first came to Tibet, his Dharma activities encountered all kinds of obstacles imposed by humans and non-humans. He appeared to rely solely on the power of Padmasambhava to overcome all the obstacles.

In the future, when the opportunity arises, I would very much like to teach Mipham Rinpoche’s *The White Lotus: An Explanation of the Seven-line Prayer to Guru Padmasambhava*. This commentary comprises the generation and perfection

²⁶ *Bardo Thödol*

stages, as well as the Great Perfection. When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited Namdroling Monastery in India in 1990, he taught the text at the request of the sangha. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche also gave us the teaching, during the pilgrimage to Mount Wutai.

This text is quite extensive. In another year or two when causes and conditions ripen, I would like to teach this text so you will understand the great importance of the *Seven-Line Prayer*. If Buddhists across the world pray to Padmasambhava, this will definitely dispel obstacles and difficulties for Dharma propagation, as well as for personal practice, and thus the Dharma will live long in the world.

Buddhism is increasingly facing challenges from various directions: non-Buddhists intentionally bringing up challenges to Buddhism, and followers of other spiritual traditions encroaching upon the space of Buddhism. According to reports in western media, Christianity may become the predominant religion in China in the near future. There are many such forecasts. Although these are just predictions, they may be supported by solid reasoning. The population of Christians in China is surging, adding a few million to a dozen million believers each year.

In comparison, the population of Buddhists is not growing at the same pace. Most Buddhists only focus on their own practice, and rarely consider propagating the Dharma. For example, they don't think, "How will the Dharma survive and thrive?" or "How will the Dharma be passed on from generation to generation?"

Some eminent masters are planning the future of the Dharma, but the number of such masters is limited. Many Buddhists are busy collecting alms to build solemn temples in remote places. Such initiatives are worthy of applause, but more importantly, we should think about how to spread the Dharma widely throughout the world.

Therefore, whenever we meet someone in our daily life, if possible, we should pass on the supreme teachings of Buddhism and eventually help them accept it. We should not only understand the Dharma ourselves but also try our best to help the people around us accept the wish-fulfilling jewel of the Dharma and truly experience the incredible and sublime teachings of the Buddha. I think this is the responsibility of each disciple of the Three Jewels.

Now let's continue the teaching on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages.

In *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, Longchenpa specifies eight intrusive

circumstances and eight incompatible propensities. Unlike the earlier eighteen freedoms and advantages, which are generally recognized in sutras and shastras, these sixteen additional conditions do not appear often in Buddhist texts. Nevertheless, they come from Longchenpa's wisdom and compassion. It is equally vital that a person who aspires to truly practice the Dharma does not get swayed by these sixteen additional conditions.

It is important for us to reflect on our freedoms and advantages. For example, after knowing the eighteen freedoms and advantages, we should examine carefully to see whether we have them all and whether we are controlled by unfavorable conditions. If we are so controlled, we lose freedoms and advantages. Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang used the following simile in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

The eighteen freedoms and advantages can be compared to eighteen sheep, and the intrusive circumstances to a wolf that suddenly appears and kills one or two of the sheep, with only seventeen or sixteen sheep left.²⁷

If the wolf kills all the sheep, we will have no sheep left. Similarly, even if we have all the eighteen freedoms and advantages now, when unfavorable conditions arise, we will lose certain freedoms and advantages. Therefore, we must check whether we have all eighteen freedoms and advantages. If we are missing one of them, it may seem all right on the surface, but if the missing one is very important, it can negate all the other freedoms and advantages. For example, if we do not enter the Dharma, even if all the other factors are present, we will not have the opportunity to practice.

Without understanding this, even if you consider yourself a great practitioner and believe that you have descended from the Pure Land or Lotus Realm, which may fill you with overweening pride, you are at most a Buddhist by name. Therefore, when studying and practicing the Dharma, it is of utmost importance to follow the sequence instead of dreaming of reaching the summit in one single step.

The sixteen additional conditions are described in *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* as the following:

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

Turmoil from the five emotions, stupidity, being dominated by
evil influences,

Laziness, being inundated by the effect of past evil actions,

Enslavement to others, seeking protection from dangers, and
hypocritical practice:

These are the eight intrusive circumstances that leave no
freedom.

Being bound by one's ties, flagrant depravity,

Lack of dissatisfaction with samsara, complete absence of faith,

Taking pleasure in bad actions, lack of interest in the Dharma,

Heedlessness of the vows and of the samayas:

These are the eight incompatible propensities that leave no
freedom.²⁸

Now we are going to study each of the sixteen additional conditions one by one. Make sure you understand the definition and the corresponding remedy for each condition.

1) Eight intrusive circumstances that leave no freedom to practice the Dharma

An intrusive circumstance refers to an unfavorable condition a practitioner encounters temporarily, occasionally, or frequently in the course of their practice. As Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang said:

Even if you are not affected by any of these intrusive circumstances today, or in one particular session, or at the start of the session, they may appear tomorrow, in the following session, or at the end of the session.²⁹

In a word, an intrusive circumstance may arise at any time and anywhere. It leaves you no freedom to practice the Dharma, so it is alarming.

Many people, including those presently sitting in the Dharma hall, want to be good practitioners. You may even consider yourselves competent enough to

²⁸ The translation is from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 29.

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

deal with any affliction. It is good that you are self-confident, but one day, when an unfavorable circumstance arises, it is hard to say whether you will still stay with the sangha. After all, the circumstance may not be as easy to handle as you initially thought.

Therefore, we must all examine ourselves very carefully and apply the appropriate remedy to dispel each unfavorable circumstance. It is like when we have a wish-fulfilling jewel; we need to always keep an eye on it so it will not be stolen. In the same way, now that we have a precious human life, we should understand the following teaching and apply the remedy for intrusive circumstances so we will not be affected by them and deprived of the opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Past practitioners were fully aware of what the favorable and unfavorable circumstances are. They always guarded their body, speech, and mind with mindfulness and vigilance. As a result, whatever unfavorable condition arose during their practice, they would not become constrained, and their practice always started well and ended well. We should do the same: being able to discern unfavorable circumstances and remain vigilant at all times.

Venerable Longchenpa's wisdom is very profound. He gave very clear and detailed instructions here. Any practitioner who cares about their own practice will care about the issues brought up here. Later, when such a practitioner encounters an unfavorable situation, they can recognize it right away and apply the remedy to dispel it. The remedy for each of the eight intrusive circumstances is also covered in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, which you should take some time to read as well.

Now let's explain each of the eight intrusive circumstances in greater detail.

a. *Turmoil from the five emotions*: People who have extremely strong negative emotions, such as hatred for enemies, infatuation with friends and relatives, and so forth, may occasionally wish to practice the true Dharma. However, these five poisons tend to have a strong grip on their minds, making it difficult for them to accomplish the Dharma properly.

Those with strong negative emotions find it hard to practice the Dharma, even if they intend to be practitioners. For example, if someone has anger issues, when they have an outburst of anger, no one can calm them down, and they smash whatever is around them, including pots, bowls, teacups, or even windows. Another example is a person who has infatuation with family and friends or greed

for wealth; they will lose their sense of shame whenever infatuation or desire arises in them. As Gyalse Tokme Zangpo (1295–1369) says:

Our attachment to family and friends overwhelms us like a
torrent,
While our aversion toward enemies rages inside us like a blazing
fire.³⁰

At this moment, neither the teacher can dissuade him from being angry or greedy, nor can the Dharma be of help. The consequence is disastrous. This also applies to the rest of the five negative emotions.

Of course, when they are in a better mood, they want to practice well. However, their five poisons are so strong that the occasional idea of practicing the Dharma disappears as quickly as lightning at night. Most of the time these people are dominated by afflictions and do not have the freedom to practice the Dharma.

A certain staff member at Larung Gar who follows my teachings is like this. At the beginning, I had high expectations of him. When he was in a good mood and had few mental afflictions, he promised to volunteer for certain Dharma activities. His promise sounded so good that I believed him, saying, “All right! Go ahead!” However, after a while, he started to lose control over his emotional turbulence. Of course, it is fine if this happens only once because anyone can make a mistake. But in his case, it was a recurrence: he was angry one day and became greedy the next. Well, if he cannot even deal with his own intense negative emotions, how can he be of help in the Dharma activities?

Nevertheless, such an individual is wretched. After all, he is constrained by circumstances, due to his karma from previous lives, or perhaps his failure to antidote afflictions in this life. In any case, his turmoil of negative emotions stops him from having a successful practice.

In comparison, some other staff members may lack efficiency and competency, but they do not have strong negative emotions; even if they get upset, they will not throw temper tantrums. People with anger issues often blow up or explode at others, which can even scare the maras away, not to mention humans. Therefore, if a person is overwhelmed by strong negative emotions, it becomes not only challenging for them to practice but also for them to benefit other beings.

³⁰ Gyalse Tokme Zangpo, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of All the Bodhisattvas*, translated by Adam Pearcey, Lotsawahouse.org, 2006.

The remedy: The antidote to infatuation or greed is to meditate on impurity or, as said in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, to contemplate impermanence and no-self. The antidote to anger is loving-kindness or examining oneself with the instructions in the chapter entitled "Patience" in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. The antidote to ignorance is to meditate on dependent arising.

In general, when these negative emotions first arise, we should antidote them with mindfulness and vigilance in time. We should uproot them immediately, so they will not destroy the roots of merit in ourselves and in others, as said in *The Thirty-Seven Practices of All the Bodhisattvas*:

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to slay attachment and the rest—mind's afflictions—at once, the very moment they arise, Taking as weapons the remedies held with mindfulness and vigilance.

For once the kleshas have become familiar, they will be harder to avert.³¹

However strong a person's afflictions are, as long as they can apply the remedy, with the blessing of the Dharma, they can change completely. For example, someone used to be dominated by greed and lived a notorious life. But later, they gained a deeper understanding of the supreme Dharma and realized their past deeds were very bad. From that moment on, they made a sincere effort to change for the better and embarked on the right path.

Some people used to have strong hatred, so they always carried machetes with them and got into fights every day, much like how Geshe Ben Kungyal behaved before his ordination. Later, these people entered the Dharma and started to practice love and compassion. In the end, even if they were to be cut by others with a knife, they would not become angry for a split second.

Of course, people have different karmic affinities with the Dharma. Some may have studied the Dharma for a long time but have not had any experience. Others may align with the practice in no time. Just like severely ill patients getting cured right after a treatment, they can eradicate afflictions swiftly with the help of the Dharma, and their change is visible to everyone. Therefore, as long as you are

³¹ Gyalse Tokme Zangpo, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of All the Bodhisattvas*, translated by Adam Pearcey, Lotsawahouse.org, 2006.

motivated in your mind to antidote afflictions, you can dispel them. Why is that? It is because the remedy is in accordance with the reality of the mind.

b. *Unintelligence*: Even if an unintelligent person takes the laypeople's precepts or becomes a monastic, they cannot understand the teachings or apply them to their practice. That is, they cannot understand when listening to teachings, do not grasp the meaning when contemplating, and do not develop realization of the natural state when meditating. Such an unintelligent person and the Dharma always part company, so they lack the capacity to really hear, contemplate, and meditate, and they cannot taste the true flavor of the Dharma.

Such a person lacks the intelligence to recall, let alone understand, even the very basic Buddhist teachings, such as the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, not to mention the profound teachings on the Middle Way or the Great Perfection. The person has a human form but does not have the capacity to practice the Dharma, so it is very hard for them to build a supreme affinity with the Dharma in this life.

Of course, there are very few exceptions. For example, Siddhipanthaka was initially unable to understand the Buddha's teachings and almost completely forgot everything the Buddha said. But later, due to supreme causes and conditions as well as his faith, he attained enlightenment. Such a thing could happen.

The remedy: The remedy for unintelligence is to begin with confession. Someone complains that they are too unintelligent to remember anything; for example, they tried for a long time to memorize a text but could not remember a single word during the exam. Such an inability is due to heavy negative actions and obscurations from the past. Therefore, confession is a much-needed remedy here.

Moreover, the remedy also includes praying to Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom who embodies the wisdom of all the buddhas. Each of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas has a special aspiration and blessing power, and Manjushri is the one who helps beings develop wisdom. Therefore, we should sincerely pray to Manjushri and recite the name and mantra of Manjushri. By doing so, we will never part from the luminosity of wisdom life after life.

For this reason, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche asked those who took refuge with him to recite at least one hundred million times the mantra of Manjushri. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche reassured his followers, "Having recited

the mantra, those wise individuals will have more and more wisdom in this lifetime, and those lacking wisdom will be born as wise individuals in their future lives.”

In fact, dim-witted individuals are in greater need of pursuing wisdom. If they do not diligently hear and contemplate in this life, they may always remain unintelligent life after life. Someone said, “I am not smart enough! It does not make any difference if I listen to teachings or not. Therefore, I just choose not to listen!”

However, Sakya Pandita said:

Because of their lack of wisdom,
Those dim-witted individuals are reluctant to go after teachings;
If they examine why they lack wisdom,
Those dim-witted individuals should pursue the teachings even
more.

According to Sakya Pandita, it is just because a person is “too unintelligent” that they should diligently study the Dharma even more.

People’s views are upside down: they think they lack wisdom, so they are not willing to study the Dharma. In fact, it is because they lack wisdom that they should listen to Dharma teachings even more.

It is just like this: a rich man is not in a hurry to make money, whereas a poor man needs to make money quickly. A dim-witted person is unintelligent in this life because he did not study the Dharma in previous lives. To avoid being unintelligent again in future lives such a person should diligently study the Dharma regardless of any difficulty. Sakya Pandita said:

It is because one pursued no Dharma in the previous life
That one became a fool in this life.
To avoid becoming a fool in the future,
One should study the Dharma diligently regardless of
difficulties.

Therefore, I hope you will make the most of this current opportunity to study the Dharma and establish a positive cause and condition for future lives. Otherwise, if you miss the opportunity, it will be too late to regret it.

c. *Being dominated by evil influences:* Some evil teachers, who can appear

as monastics or tirthikas, hold wrong views, and, for example, reject rebirth and karma. People taken by such teachers as disciples will depart from the Buddha's teachings and deviate from the right path to liberation.

There are many charlatans these days, or false spiritual teachers, who mislead many Buddhists. Eventually, these Buddhists are also filled with perverted views and lose faith in the Dharma. Nevertheless, they often think they excel at views and practice. In fact, they are nowhere close to understanding the doctrine of Buddhism. Sadly, they can hardly be dissuaded from choosing the wrong path.

The remedy: The remedy for being dominated by evil influences—that is, being taken as a disciple by a charlatan—starts with examining whether the teacher has all the good qualities, or, in other words, whether the teacher is a charlatan or a qualified teacher. If the person is a qualified teacher, you should happily follow the teacher with three ways to please the teacher.³² If the person is an evil teacher, you should not approach them at the beginning. This is very important.

When examining a teacher, do not consider external signs such as miraculous abilities or clairvoyance; instead, you should examine whether the teacher has bodhicitta. If so, you can follow the teacher; if not, however supreme and profound the teaching given by the teacher is, you should not approach the teacher. Regarding this examination criteria, many masters, including Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, held the same opinion.

Patrul Rinpoche says in *The Golden Key to Pith Instructions*:

Many individuals who lack the pith of bodhicitta
self-claim to be tantric practitioners in this degenerate age;
Even if their self-boasting is spreading across the vast sky,
Their teachings are nevertheless demonic, despite the praise
from others.

As the verse says, during the degenerate age, many people do not have bodhicitta, yet they claim to be tantric practitioners; some even say they have

³² Patrul Rinpoche mentioned in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

“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 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.”

attained enlightenment. Even if such a person's self-boasting is diffusing across the vast sky and others also greatly praise them, without bodhicitta, their teaching is no different from the demonic dharma.

Of course, it is difficult for people without telepathy to fully discern whether the teacher has bodhicitta or not; so we have to infer the teacher's bodhicitta from his deeds. If what the teacher does is only for himself or his own lineage, this is not necessarily a good thing, so we need to continue the examination and remain cautious. If what the teacher does is always for the benefit of beings, then you may follow them. Thus, the only way to discern a charlatan teacher from a qualified one is to see whether the teacher has bodhicitta or not.

d. *Laziness*: Those who want to study and practice the Dharma but are too lazy will never succeed in the pursuit of Dharma, because they are so trapped in their own indolence and procrastination.

It is said in a book that Westerners and Easterners have different kinds of laziness: for Easterners, being lazy means basking in the sun or always lying down, whereas for Westerners, it means being busy all day long.

However, it seems that laziness in the East and the West is quite similar now. Urban dwellers' laziness is always being busy, whereas rural dwellers' laziness is always being idle. Neither of them pursues the Dharma. It is understandable if a worldly person is lazy. If a practitioner is lazy, it will indeed bring negative impacts to his liberation.

The remedy: To counteract laziness, you must reflect on death and impermanence. When you meditate on impermanence, you will realize not much time is left, so how dare you still idle here and there? When you see others talking about trivial things, you will think, "Why bother chit-chatting? The Dharma practice is more important! Life is so short, so what's the point of wasting time?"

Therefore, those who have practiced well on impermanence manage their time very well. In contrast, those who have not practiced well do not manage their time well, which is reflected in what they say and do.

e. *Being inundated by the effects of past evil actions*: For those who are heavily burdened by negative karma, the vast ocean of their previous wrongdoings churns with great turmoil. Despite their diligent practice of the Dharma, they can hardly develop any of the right qualities in their minds. Unaware that this outcome is

the consequence of their own negative actions, they instead lose confidence in the teacher and the true Dharma.

The remedy: Perseverance is a must for studying the Dharma. When Asanga³³ was in retreat at Kukkutapada Mountain, after six, nine, and twelve years, he achieved nothing, not even the sign of a good dream. Thoroughly discouraged, Asanga left the retreat cave. Along the way toward a nearby town, Asanga finally met Bodhisattva Maitreya, due to Asanga's act of great compassion to a dog, a form Maitreya had taken. If it took a sublime being like Asanga twelve years to actually see Maitreya, never mind us ordinary people with heavy karmic debts.

When obstacles come up during our practice—getting sick, encountering difficulties, and more—you should not conclude that your practice will be a failure or start to resent the Three Jewels. Instead, you should think, “All thanks to the supreme blessing of the Dharma, my next life's negative karmic consequence got ripened in this life.” The *Diamond Sutra* says:

It is because of their previous evil karma,
Which would cause them to be reborn in the wretched destinies.
But now by enduring the disparagement of others, this previous
Bad karma is eradicated, and they will eventually attain
Unsurpassed complete enlightenment.³⁴

Therefore, when encountering great obstacles or difficulties in the course of our practice, please do not resent the occurrence or externalize it to others. Instead, we should think of the obstacles as helping us eradicate negative karma. Please have conviction in the law of karma and repent for our past negative actions. Only by doing so can we eventually recognize the nature of the mind.

Some people have practiced the Dharma for a long time yet failed to attain any state of realization due to their heavy negative karma. Seeing no progress in their practice, they left the sangha and cut off their connection with the Dharma. Alas! Make sure you do not follow this bad example.

³³ Asanga was one of the most famous Indian Dharma master who lived in the fourth century and was the elder brother of Vasubandhu. He received teachings from Maitreya and transcribed them as the '*Five Treatises of Maitreya*'. Together with Asanga's own commentaries, these texts became the basis for the philosophical schools known as Yogachara, or Chittamatra. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

³⁴ The sutra is translated by the Chung Tai Translation Committee from the Chinese translation by Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva in 2009.

f. *Enslavement to others*: Some people are in a wretched situation. They are not allowed to study the Dharma or even simply set up a shrine table at home, under the control of their parents, children, other family members, or even superiors. Tibetans, on the other hand, are greatly supported by the whole family if they decide to pursue the Dharma. In fact, others will laugh at and criticize the Tibetan family if they do not support a family member's spiritual pursuit. So even if the family does not want to support the person, for the sake of their reputation, they have to.

The remedy: The solution for people who are controlled by others and have lost their autonomy is to try to find a way to regain their freedom. A master of Han Chinese Buddhism once said, "If you want to study the Dharma, there is always a way." Indeed, as long as you want to, you may study the Dharma secretly in various ways, or, as a last resort, you may leave the unsupportive environment. If parents put pressure on you every day, at a certain point you may tell them, "Thanks for being my parents. I will only repay your kindness in my next life. Pursuing the Dharma is not being ungrateful to you. I will dedicate my merit to you."

When some monastics have no other way out, they may say something similar to their families and dedicate merit silently to them. It is stated in many Buddhist texts that if nothing else works out, a person may leave the family and live a free life as a Dharma practitioner.

7) *Seeking protection from dangers*: Some people embrace the Dharma out of fear related to their current life—concerns about food, clothing, and other hardships. However, since they lack deep conviction in the Dharma, they can easily revert to their old habits and resume non-Dharma activities.

Some individuals encounter obstacles and difficulties in life and temporarily generate renunciation, so they choose to become monks or nuns. However, because they do not have a developed in-depth understanding of the Dharma, when obstacles arise, such as meeting their former lovers, they immediately break or abandon their monastic vows and return to their prior lifestyle as householders. This shows that the Dharma has not infiltrated their minds. It is very important to integrate the Dharma into one's mind. Unless you have experienced the true flavor of the Dharma, no matter how many seemingly good deeds you have engaged in, at a certain point when an obstacle arises, you will not be able to face it.

The remedy: You should correct your motivation for seeking protection from

dangers by cultivating and generating renunciation and bodhicitta through various means.

8) *Hypocritical practice*: Some practitioners are impostors who, by pretending to follow the Dharma, attempt to gain material possessions, services, and prestige. While they may appear to be practitioners in front of others, their true intentions are focused solely on this life, thus distancing themselves far from the path of liberation.

The remedy: The remedy for hypocritical practice is to recognize the faults of your worldly pursuits in this life and give them up.

These are the eight circumstances Longchenpa has listed that render it impossible to continue practicing the Dharma.



Lesson 23

“People who are tightly bound to ... snuff out the lamp of liberation.” [page 31]

We have finished the eight intrusive circumstances. Today, we continue to study the eight incompatible propensities.

2) Eight incompatible propensities that leave no freedom to practice the Dharma

If a practitioner has any one of the eight incompatible propensities, they will have no freedom to practice the Dharma, and the sprout of the three kinds of enlightenment³⁵ will wither, so they will be cut off from the family of enlightenment. That’s why they are called “incompatible propensities,” which implies “cutting off the opportunity.”

To some extent, the eight incompatible propensities are worse than the eight intrusive circumstances, as the latter ones only disturb our practice occasionally, but the former can stop our practice and push us away from the path to liberation.

Therefore, we must examine whether we have such unfavorable circumstances and propensities. If so, we must eradicate them immediately by applying their remedies. Meanwhile, we should pray to the guru and the Three Jewels, hoping we will not encounter any of them in the future, and even if we do, they will not last too long.

Some people find themselves in a very dreadful situation where, despite their

³⁵ The three kinds of enlightenment are: the Shravaka enlightenment, the Pratyeka enlightenment, and perfect enlightenment.

strong intention to practice the Dharma, they struggle to do so successfully. They may even renounce their families to become ordained. However, when karmic obstacles arise, when their afflictions become overwhelming, or when unfavorable conditions appear, they find themselves unable to face them. In the end, they get entangled once again in worldly life.

Therefore, it is crucial to always pray to the guru and the Three Jewels while studying the Dharma. This is because the power and the blessing of the guru and the Three Jewels are inconceivable. Problems for which we find no solutions on our own can, without a doubt, be solved by the power of the guru and the Three Jewels. Therefore, wherever you are and whatever you do, make sure you never part from the luminosity of the guru and the Three Jewels. This is what a real practitioner should be doing. Please do bear it in mind!

Now let's explain the eight incompatible propensities in greater detail.

a. *Being bound by one's ties*: Those who are deeply entangled in their worldly responsibilities, such as wealth, pleasures, children, and relatives, are too consumed by these demanding pursuits to find time for practicing the Dharma. Even if such people occasionally want to practice, they soon get so diverted by external factors that they cannot put the practice into action.

From youth to old age, many people have never had any freedom to practice the Dharma. As Mipham Rinpoche said in *The Just King*:

When they are children, their parents take charge.

In their youth, their friends take control.

When they have grown old, they are under the power of their children.

Fools are never independent.³⁶

I really like this verse. Many people are like this. When they are children, they are disciplined and controlled by their parents every day, and meanwhile, they are obsessed with toys. Even though the toys, like everything else, are just illusions in nature, these children believe the toys inherently exist and spend time playing with them, so they do not have the freedom to practice the Dharma.

When they are young, these people are tightly bound to family, relatives, and

³⁶ Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, translated by Jose Ignacio Cabezon, Snow Lion, 2017.

friends, so they can hardly spare any time for practice. When they are old, they are bound to their children and have to do whatever their children tell them, so they have no freedom to practice the Dharma. As such, many people live their lives under the control of others, so they do not really have the opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Why did many past eminent masters choose to forgo this life and leave all worldly matters behind? It is because they deeply felt that if their lives were bound by their ties, their practice would accomplish absolutely nothing.

Many people are especially obsessed with relationships, social status, and appearance, which brings a multitude of harms to their lives, let alone the possibility of properly practicing the Dharma. It is hardly possible for one to attain transcendental achievement while still clinging tightly to worldly pursuits. Wen Tingyun, a Chinese lyricist of the Tang dynasty, exclaimed:

Descendant of the noble family,
Do not emulate those sentimental men,
Since ancient times, being sentimental hurts a young man.

However, many people do not understand this. Upon seeing what they do in life, I cannot help but generate compassion: “It is truly sad they are so attached to these things, which are just illusions without inherent existence.”

If a person tightly grasps everything in this life, they will certainly have no time to practice the Dharma, and worse yet, they may even die for the pursuit of trivial gains. Like the old saying goes: Humans die for wealth, birds die for food. For petty profit, some people intrigue and fight against others; for a dead worm, birds peck each other and fight hard. From a Buddhist perspective, what these beings are pursuing is of little benefit and worth. However, as a Chinese proverb goes, “The player sees less clearly than the bystander.” Their grip is so tight that they can do nothing but struggle in the whirlpool of suffering.

The remedy: As practitioners, we should first examine whether we have generated renunciation of this life. Many mind-training pith instructions, such as the *Gateway to Training the Mind*, emphasize that the most important thing is to renounce this life. If a person, whether a monastic or householder, can renounce everything in this life, their practice can definitely result in success. In contrast, if a person is tightly bound to wealth and fame in this life, even if they appear

to practice well, they may not attain substantial achievement in their practice. Therefore, practitioners should reflect on the defects of samsara and develop authentic renunciation.

b. *Flagrant depravity*: Some individuals possess no shred of humanity, and their character is so morally corrupt that they are incapable of bettering their conduct.

A Buddhist should first of all be a moral person. Only on the basis of being a morally good person can one become a good practitioner. It is unrealistic for those with a depraved nature and notorious deeds to establish vast Dharma activities. When a person practices well, they are certainly a morally good person because when Dharma infiltrates their mind, they will part from the deeds of an immoral person. In contrast, if an immoral person doesn't give up any of their wrongdoings, will they become a great realized Dharma practitioner? I am afraid not.

As the great masters of the past said:

The abilities of a disciple can be improved,
But their poor character is truly hard to alter.

It is not a big problem if a disciple is dim-witted and lacks intelligence, because as long as they are willing to study the Dharma under the guidance of their teacher, they can gradually become a wise person. But if a disciple has a depraved character, then even a qualified teacher would find it very difficult to set the disciple on the right path. They might get a bit better for one or two days under the guidance of a teacher, but they will return to their previous state sometime later. As the old saying goes, "The rivers and mountains may change, but not one's basic nature."

When Geshe Potowa was approached by a person asking to be a disciple, he would first examine the person's basic character. If the person was depraved, however intelligent they might be, Potowa would not accept them. If the person had good character, even if they were a bit dim-witted, Potowa would accept them.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche constantly emphasized the importance of a person's character in many of his works, including the *Song of Victory* and the *Nectar Drops of Advice*. Through daily interaction with others, I have truly developed unwavering trust and appreciation for this instruction from the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and those of other past eminent masters. Sakya Pandita says in the *Treasury of Good Advice*:

Try as one might to reform bad people,
They simply do not become good-natured.
Even if one vigorously washes coal,
It simply cannot be made white.³⁷

Even if a depraved person encounters a Buddha-like master with great qualities, compassion, and wisdom, they will barely receive any transmission of realization from the guru's mind. Instead, they may go against the Dharma. Therefore, such a person has no opportunity to practice the Dharma, and they are in a state without freedoms and advantages.

The remedy: Some eminent masters say that it can be quite challenging to find a remedy for a depraved character. However, a few individuals used to be very bad, but due to their virtuous roots and good dispositions, and with the help of the guru's guidance and fellow practitioners' persuasion, they became kind people. Such cases have occasionally happened.

Therefore, we should carefully examine whether we possess good moral characters or not. An ordinary person tends to believe that they are morally good; even the worst person thinks that they are good. But in fact, if everyone thinks you are bad, perhaps you are indeed a morally bad person. On the other hand, if most people believe you are a good person, except for a few, then maybe those few simply do not like you.

Therefore, we should not be too sure of ourselves, thinking, "I am no different from Bodhisattva Manjushri, and someone is just jealous of me. I am actually a very good person." We should not think this way.

Every one of us inevitably has faults, so in the process of pursuing Dharma, we must correct our faults with the help of the guru and our Dharma friends. A wise person always examines their own faults, whereas a fool only checks others' faults.

Therefore, if we want to be real practitioners, we must have good character. This applies when we practice the Dharma, as well as when we accept disciples.

c. *Lack of dissatisfaction with samsara:* A person who remains completely unaffected by the horror of lower rebirths and the torments in samsara, as well as

³⁷ Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*, translated by John T. Davenport, Wisdom Publications, 2000.

the sufferings of their current life, lacks any motivation to free themselves from samsara. As a result, they have no justification for engaging in Dharma practice.

Once, a Dharma friend called me from America, saying, “We are living a happy life here. San Francisco is so beautiful. Boston is splendid!” I replied jokingly, “You’d better not get attached to these things; otherwise, your renunciation may not arise for even a split second.”

Indeed, when everything goes well in life—good health, social status, career, and family—many people feel the world is beautiful, not knowing that all conditioned things are suffering. These people regard samsara as a heaven, instead of a house on fire. Due to their lack of renunciation, they do not have any opportunity to enter the Dharma.

Especially for those who lack an understanding of the law of karma, they feel nothing when hearing of the sufferings in the lower realms of hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals. Venerable Longchenpa says in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*:

If now you cannot bear the least discomfort,
How can you withstand the dreadful sorrows of existence?
If when it is explained you are not moved to sadness,
Your heart inert like iron or a piece of stone,
It is clear you have no mind at all.³⁸

Therefore, such people have cut themselves off from the opportunity of attaining liberation.

Without renunciation, can higher states of realization arise within the practitioners? It seems highly unlikely. Many individuals claim, “Renunciation is only for Theravada practitioners. I am a tantric practitioner of Mahayana Buddhism, so I do not need to practice the renunciation of the Basic Vehicle.”

Their statement is not appropriate. Why? Because without the foundation of renunciation, the skyscraper of higher spiritual states lacks stability. The Buddha says in *The Sutra of Ten Chakras of Ksitigarbha*:

If you cannot drink a river dry,

³⁸ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

How can you drink the ocean dry?
If you do not study the Basic Vehicle,
How can you study the Great Vehicle?

Many practitioners fail to accord due importance to the practice of renunciation, the observance of the monastic or lay precepts. Merely hearing about them gives them a headache, and they show little interest. They fancy themselves to be great yogis, abiding in primordial wisdom and having no attachments. Yet, they almost resemble the villains in movies—obsessed with vices and uninterested in virtues, and they reject laws with the intent to commit wrongdoing. This is not right.

Establishing a foundation through the observance of individual liberation precepts or the cultivation of renunciation is of utmost importance. Practitioners should reflect on their resolve to be liberated from the cyclic existence of samsara. If such motivation has not yet arisen, then the path of their Dharma practice is not yet set.

Unfortunately, many people these days are excessively preoccupied with this life. They are uninterested in generating renunciation, let alone comprehending the profound teachings of the Vajrayana and Great Perfection. Thus, an ordinary practitioner should refrain from boasting and self-righteousness. Without acceptance of the fundamental teachings, the view, meditation, action, and fruition in the higher teachings will remain elusive.

I hope you will remember each and every instruction from Patrul Rinpoche in this text. Some sangha members at Larung Gar have pledged to memorize the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and I hope they can persevere in accomplishing this task. If you can memorize it by heart, I guarantee you will become a good practitioner. If you can memorize the text, you will learn all the instructions by heart. Merely reading through the text quickly will not lead to a deep understanding of its profound instructions.

I often think, “How wonderful it would be if I could always remember each and every sentence in this text!” Twenty years ago, when I first listened to the teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I had this thought, and now I still share the same thought. The vajra words in the text are incomparable to any worldly words.

I came across a book recently by a learned author in which he says we should

read at least ten minutes per day to boost our wisdom; otherwise, our minds become stagnant. If a worldly person feels like doing this, I hope you will do the same with the extraordinary transcendental text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. If you read and remember a little bit of this text every day, in the long run, you will develop an in-depth understanding of the content. The so-called practice does not refer to reaching the culmination in one step; it requires long-term sustained practice, which can be seen in those senior practitioners who succeed in their practice.

d. *Complete absence of faith*: Lacking any faith, either in the true Dharma or in the teacher, completely blocks access to the teachings and prevents one from entering the path of liberation. Having no faith is reflected in a person's behaviors. For example, a person lacking faith may see a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* as no different from a newspaper, or this person gives just a perfunctory reception to a teacher who has given them the highest teaching.

Faith and wisdom are vital in the course of our practice. Without wisdom, a person cannot realize the reality of all phenomena; without faith, a person cannot really enter the Dharma. Nagarjuna says in the *Precious Garland*:

Due to having faith one relies on the practices,
Due to having wisdom one truly knows,
Of these two, wisdom is the chief,
Faith is its prerequisite.³⁹

With faith, we will then pursue the Dharma. With wisdom, we will realize the no-self of the individual, the no-self of phenomena, or the teaching of the Four Dharma Seals. Between faith and wisdom, wisdom is the primary one because it enables us to realize the relative truth and the ultimate truth of all phenomena. Nevertheless, to attain such a realization, we need the impetus of faith, as said in the *Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*:

This truth of the Self-Sprung Ones
Is to be realized through faith.
The orb of the sun blazes with light,
[but] is not seen by the blind.⁴⁰

³⁹ Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion, 2007.

⁴⁰ Arya Maitreya, *Buddha Nature: The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*, written down by Arya Asanga, translated by Rosemarie Fuchs, Snow Lion, 2018.

The realization of the supreme ultimate truth of emptiness is also through faith. If you have no faith, you will not enter the Dharma. But if you have the same uncontrived faith as some senior practitioners do, even if you do not necessarily have the wisdom to assimilate the nature of reality, you will never turn back from the light of the Dharma.

If a person has faith in their guru, after following the guru for five years, they will still be with the guru ten years later. Even if the person receives criticism from the guru amid praises at times and encounters many challenges, they will always overcome those challenges.

In comparison, if a person has no faith in their guru, imagine a situation where the guru makes a negative comment about their cooking. They might retort, “Huh? I don’t cook well? Fine, you just find someone else to cook!” Then, they might pack their bag and leave.

Having faith is indeed crucial. A practitioner should not be too petty when following a guru or serving the sangha. It is not good to immediately leave the sangha just because of a few negative comments. The world we are living in is called the Saha world, or the Universe of Endurance, which, unlike the Buddha-field of the Land of Great Bliss, is full of disputes and competition. Thus, we have to practice forbearance.

When someone lacking tolerance receives just a mild negative comment from a fellow sangha member, they will refuse to talk to that person anymore or, even worse, they will stop going to the Dharma center. Some volunteers are like this. When someone criticizes their work, they quit volunteering, hand the job over to others, and leave the sangha. Such a person is to be pitied.

Those who have succeeded in volunteer work or practice definitely encounter many obstacles and difficulties. The reason they succeed in the end is that they have endured all hardships. For example, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had to face misunderstandings or even baseless slanders when accepting disciples, establishing the Dharma center, propagating the Dharma, and benefiting all beings. Nevertheless, as long as Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche found nothing wrong with his principles and direction, he would not concern himself with these challenges and difficulties that come his way.

Therefore, it is extremely important for all of us to have strong patience when studying or propagating the Dharma. Patience is also a sign of faith. As said in

Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, not parting from the Dharma and the teacher is a sign of faith.

Therefore, a faithful disciple is best advised not to leave the teacher and the Dharma. If a person follows one Dharma teaching today but loses faith tomorrow and sends back the Dharma book, then goes to another Dharma center, and keeps repeating this vicious circle again and again, in the end, this person gains nothing, and all this is in vain. Therefore, it is very important to follow a teacher for a long time and to delve deeply into the teaching.

“Delving deeply into the teaching” does not mean, for example, that you only study the *Amitabha Sutra* and nothing else. Instead, it means you should not shift your primary practices and lineages. Otherwise, something like this will happen: You have chosen to follow a teacher, and it took you a long time to finally learn the sadhana of his lineage. Then you meet another teacher, and you say to yourself, “What a solemn and nice master! I have great faith in him, even with my eyes closed. I have to prostrate before him today and take my refuge. I will pray to him, and he is my forever protector.” However, one or two years later, you move to another “protector.” This is not good.

e. *Taking pleasure in bad actions*: Those who derive enjoyment from engaging in harmful or negative behaviors and who lack the ability to control their thoughts, speech, and actions are completely devoid of any noble qualities and have strayed from the path of Dharma.

Perhaps it is due to the karma of previous lives that someone shows little interest in virtues and develops great passion for vices. This propensity is hard to find a remedy for. Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang says in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

For evil conduct, there is no distinct remedy.

Such a person is truly bad. He lacks interest in doing good and instead engages in all kinds of wrongdoings, including cybercrime, gambling, drinking, smoking, killing, or even taking drugs. How wretched they are! Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice* has a chapter on “An Examination of Bad Conduct,” which covers many bad actions one should refrain from doing.

Some people take pleasure in bad actions due to their own karmas, so despite all attempts, they cannot be tamed in this life. As Sakya Pandita says,

Even in the forest malicious people deteriorate,
Even in the city noble people remain serene.⁴¹

Even if a malicious person retreats to a quiet forest, he will remain rude and bad-tempered. He may say he wants to have a retreat practice and contact nobody, but once he is in contact with another person, he will behave as if he would devour that person alive. Even if he manages to stay in a quiet place for ten thousand years, he still cannot soften into a gentle and kind person.

By contrast, a noble person remains gentle and kind even if he lives in a crowded town. Such a person is like a steed that remains docile, even amid hustle and bustle.

Some morally corrupt individuals seem to lack any sense of virtue. They display a capacity, interest, or passion for committing negative deeds while showing no interest in doing good. As stated in Maitreya's *Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, such individuals are "lacking the potential":

Some cannot but consistently follow evil ways;
Others have completely destroyed virtuous ways.
Some have no merit that is consistent with liberation,
Have inferior virtue or are deprived of the cause.⁴²

Those who only think of wrongdoings and take pleasure in bad actions are devoid of any virtue, so they are cut off from the opportunity of attaining liberation and deprived of the cause. According to Mipham Rinpoche's explanation, "lacking the potential" does not mean they are permanently deprived of the potential; it means they are unlikely to develop the path to liberation now, as if they had no potential. These people are thus described in negative terms. Therefore, this refers to the fact that such people are very far away from liberation, but it does not mean they will never be liberated. Otherwise, this would imply they do not have Buddha nature, which would be wrong.

The remedy: Those who take pleasure in bad actions are hard to tame and help, even if countless buddhas and qualified teachers were to appear in front of them. Is there any remedy for such individuals? Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang says "no."

⁴¹ Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*, translated by John T. Davenport, Wisdom Publications, 2000.

⁴² *A Feast of the Nectar of the Supreme Vehicle: An Explanation of the Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, Maitreya's Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra, with a commentary by Jamgon Mipham, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2018.

I myself do not know any remedy for them, either. Whatever you tell them, the words just go in one ear and out the other, and they still believe what they like is the best.

In such cases instructions from a qualified teacher are of no use to them; Dharma books do not capture their interest. Therefore, it is really hard to tame such individuals. If we are reborn like them, we will definitely have no capacity to pursue the Dharma; therefore, we will not have the freedoms for the Dharma.

f. *Lack of interest in the Dharma:* Those without virtuous qualities and appreciation of the authentic Dharma lack interest in the Dharma, similar to a dog's lack of interest in eating grass or a cow's lack of interest in gnawing on a bone. When they hear the teacher talk about topics such as hearing, contemplating, meditation, liberating lives, and others, they become utterly disinterested. Without enthusiasm for the Dharma, they will never cultivate the corresponding qualities within their minds. The fifth incompatible propensity is about taking pleasure in bad actions, whereas this one is about having no interest in good actions.

Of course, we are not talking about non-Buddhists here. Among Buddhists, some will be very happy when receiving a Dharma book, as if they have received a wish-fulfilling jewel; but others appear indifferent, which is reflected in their facial expressions. The indifferent people may say, "Fine. Just put the book over there." These indifferent Buddhists can hardly develop any faith and wisdom in their minds, even if they live to be one hundred years old.

The Dhammapada says:

Better it is to live one day virtuous and meditative than to live a hundred years immoral and uncontrolled.⁴³

Some individuals live up to one hundred years but are obscured by wrong views and take immoral actions. As a result, they cannot develop true wisdom. Compared to them, it is better for one to live for only one day but to have accepted true wisdom wholeheartedly.

In this day and age, there are countless people who live long lives yet muddle along without a meaningful life purpose. The lives of such individuals revolve

⁴³ *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, translated from the Pali by Acharya Buddhārakkhita, Buddhist Publication Society, 1985, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

around eating, sleeping, and socializing. They continually die and are reborn in samsara, never seeking liberation. How pitiful! If we are the same as them, our minds are also deviating from the Dharma, and we will not have the opportunity to practice. Even if we manage to practice, we will not develop any qualities in our minds because all qualities and states of realization rely on faith and devotion. This is very important.

Let's take tantric teachings as an example: If you believe that tantric teachings encompass the sublime essence of all teachings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and are extremely rare and precious to listen to, such veneration will definitely bring change in your mindstream through the blessings of the lineage masters. In contrast, if you only regard tantric teachings as something ordinary, you may receive no benefit from them. This applies not only to Dharma teachings but also to worldly training. If you are not interested in the teacher's lectures, you will simply sit idle in class and learn nothing.

The remedy: You should first reflect on your interest in the Dharma. If your interest is not strong, you should, by all means, generate interest in the great qualities of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the guru. If you genuinely cannot develop interest, at least acknowledge that "the teaching is great."

Yesterday, a lay practitioner told me, "I cannot generate faith in Vajrayana. What should I do?"

I told him to read the *Legends of the Great Mahasiddhas in Vajrayana Buddhism* and Dorje Dechen Lingpa's *Journey to the Land of Padmasambhava*.

A few Dharma students followed my advice and read the books. They exclaimed, "Wow! So amazing! These masters are incredible!"

I replied, "If your praise for Vajrayana and the tantric masters is genuine and not just pretending, and you truly think 'it is so incredible,' this means your faith has arisen. Gradually, your state of realization will appear."

Some people cannot generate faith in the qualities of the Dharma. But if they read the masters' biographies and learn more about their stories, gradually they will generate admiration and revamp their thoughts. Otherwise, if they just dump into their minds the mass of worldly information obtained from television, newspapers, and social media, it will bring no meaning to their lives, not just in this life but in future lives as well.

g. *Heedlessness of the vows*: If a person enters the Basic Vehicle but then breaks the vows of individual liberation, or if a person embarks on the Mahayana path but then loses the commitment to bodhicitta, this person will have no choice but to end up in the lower realms. They will have no chance to practice the Dharma and escape from those states.

Those who break vows suffer in this life and future lives and will encounter obstacles to the attainment of Buddhahood, as stated in the *Fifty Verses of Samanera*:

Breaking vows brings suffering and hinders the attainment of
Buddhahood.

Therefore, it is crucial to uphold even a single vow or more. After receiving one's vows, a Buddhist should commit to upholding those vows. If not, one's mind will easily resonate with unwholesome dharma.

Ordinary people do not like to be constrained; they feel happy when exempt from any constraints. However, such "freedom" cannot help a Buddhist develop great qualities. *The Mahayana Sutra of Mental Contemplation During Earlier Births* says:

To enter the ocean of the Dharma,
Having faith is the root;
To cross the river of birth and death,
Upholding vows is the raft.

Without upholding the vows of individual liberation and the vows of bodhicitta, a Buddhist cannot attain the qualities of Sutrayana. Without such qualities, there is no way for the Buddhist to further unveil the extraordinary higher state of Vajrayana. Therefore, if a Buddhist breaks these two kinds of vows, fails to make proper repentance, and does not retake the vows, they will not have the freedom to practice the Dharma.

The remedy: It says in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

Better to regret greatly your broken vows than to be puffed up
with pride about perfect observance.

In the best case, when you take vows and keep them without
breaking them, you raise the victory banner of the Buddha and

tear down the battle standard of mara. But failing that, should you happen to break any vows, proper repentance also hoists the victory banner of the teachings and tears down mara's standard, so it is important not to leave breaches unconfessed, thinking that they do not matter.⁴⁴

Many eminent masters and lay practitioners in this world have broken neither the vows of individual liberation nor the vows of bodhisattvas. Such people are as pure as a lotus that rises out of the mud without being stained; they will be directly reborn in a pure realm. Other people break their vows for various reasons, but they regret and confess the breaches and later receive the vows again. Such people are also regarded as "holders of the vows."

If a Buddhist who breaks vows never applies a remedy and retakes the vows, they will not have real freedom to practice the Dharma.

h. *Heedlessness of the samayas*: This one is about upholding the tantric vows. Once a Buddhist receives empowerment, they are committed to upholding the samaya vows. After entering Vajrayana, if they break their samaya commitments to their vajra guru endowed with three types of kindness⁴⁵ and their vajra sisters and brothers, they will bring harm to themselves and others and cut off the opportunity to attain enlightenment.

There are many specific samaya vows. Some teachings say that seeing rocks and dirt as something inherently existent is a breach of samaya vows. However, some Dharma masters argue that since all ordinary people have grasping, if it were a breach, there would not be any pure samaya holders among ordinary practitioners. Therefore, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and other masters say that, loosely speaking, clinging to the inherent existence of phenomena is not a breach of samaya.

However, you definitely break the samaya vows if you have a major conflict with the vajra guru and do not repent afterward, or if you have disputes with vajra sisters and brothers and treat them as enemies.

Therefore, please pay extra attention to this! There are numerous samaya vows

⁴⁴ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by Dipamkara and the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004, page 50.

⁴⁵ The three types of kindness refer to teaching tantra, giving empowerment, and bestowing pith instructions.

in Vajrayana, including the samayas of body, speech, and mind, the twenty-seven root samayas, the fourteen root downfalls, and so forth. Particularly, each time the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche bestowed empowerment or gave tantric teachings, he would emphasize the importance of not having disputes or conflicts with one's vajra brothers and sisters.

Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche exhorted us, "If you have a dispute or conflict with a vajra fellow, or you stop talking to each other, you have to repent before midnight.⁴⁶ If, for example, you don't talk to your vajra fellow (due to a dispute), then you are not allowed to enter the Vajrayana mandala or to listen to tantric teachings with others."

Soon I am going to teach the *Aspirational Prayer of the Great Perfection*⁴⁷ at Larung Gar. If there are sangha members who turn their backs toward each other and are really on bad terms, they would better confess in front of another person, like a Dharma master, and sort things out before listening to the teaching. If not, these two people are forbidden from entering the Vajrayana mandala or other tantric venues.

I have to reiterate this today because very soon the teaching will start. Given the large number of listeners, I wonder whether there are sangha members in such disharmony. I do believe vajra sisters and brothers at Larung Gar get along well with each other, so there should not be any disharmony, but still, sometimes it is hard to say. I hope this time there will not be any sangha members on bad terms during my tantric teaching. If there are, as soon as the situation is discovered, either I will stop the teaching, or the relevant listeners will leave the Dharma hall immediately. It will definitely be handled this way.

Of course, there is no need to ask anyone else whether you have serious problems with another person. You yourself know best regarding this issue. If you are on bad terms with someone, you should talk to the person, saying, "Are we not talking to each other? When I see you, you always seem to dodge me. The other day when I was walking up, you happened to walk down, but the moment you saw me, you switched to another path. Do you have anything against me? If so, can we still talk to each other in the coming days? After Khenpo's tantric teaching is over,

⁴⁶ In *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang writes, "before the sixth of the six periods of a twenty-four-hour day is over."

⁴⁷ The prayer refers to Mipham Rinpoche's *The Self-Radiance of Indestructible Awareness and Emptiness: An Aspiration towards the Meaning of the Indivisible Ground, Path, and Fruition of the Great Perfection Manjushri*.

we will see what to do next. But now let's talk; otherwise, we cannot listen to the teaching (*the audience laughs*)!"

Indeed, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche always emphasized that people who are in disharmony with the teacher and with the vajra sisters and brothers are not allowed to attend tantric teachings. It has always been like this! Please remember this!

These are Longchenpa's eight propensities that lead one astray from the Dharma and extinguish the lamp of liberation. If you have one or more of these eight incompatible propensities, you are cut off from the opportunity for liberation. Therefore, practitioners with right views must carefully examine themselves and make sure these propensities do not remain in them. If you can do this, you will be happy in all your actions. You will be happy in this life, and you will be free from any potential harm in the lives yet to come. The Buddha says:

Lead a righteous life;

Lead not a base life.

The righteous live happily both in this world and the next.⁴⁸

The Lotus Sutra says:

Throughout the long night they will gain peace and rest and will
enjoy many benefits.⁴⁹

Therefore, a good practitioner worries about nothing, which is reflected in their facial expression or speech, whereas a bad practitioner is constantly in a state of anxiety, pain, and sadness. Therefore, we should strive to resonate with the nectar-like teachings of the Buddha. By doing so, we will live a happy, carefree, and meaningful life.

⁴⁸ *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, translated from the Pali by Acharya Buddhārakkhita, Buddhist Publication Society, 1985, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

⁴⁹ *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, 1994.



Lesson 24

“Before these sixteen factors ... all of practising the true Dharma.” [page 31-32]

This time I am teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* more extensively, so it is taking longer to complete. In terms of content, I am trying my best to add some instructions that I know; hopefully, they will be of help and benefit to your practice. Please prioritize the study of this text, and most importantly, please put the corresponding teachings into real practice. Throughout this year’s study, it is a must that you generate conviction about the content pertaining to the common preliminaries.

In the past, in Tibetan or Han areas, there were teachers who taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and disciples who learned the text. Nevertheless, it was very rare that a teacher guided ngöndro practice and practiced with disciples at the same time. Therefore, after careful consideration over a long period of time, I decided to allocate time to take you through your practice of ngöndro. Otherwise, if you only talk the talk without walking the talk, the teaching will not infiltrate your minds, then it will be very hard for you to deal with your defilements and afflictions.

Therefore, given this opportunity, I repeatedly urge those Dharma students who have the right conditions and time to practice in sitting sessions. In particular, you should establish a solid foundation through good practice on the four common preliminaries, or the four thoughts: “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” “the impermanence of life,” “the defects of samsara,” and “the principle of cause and effect.”

Of course, whether or not the foundation is well laid depends crucially on

yourself. Your practice should not be driven by extrinsic obligation or coercion. While such extrinsic methods may have pushed you to practice a bit, what is most crucial is your ability to engage in the practice on your own.

Without a solid foundation of ngöndro, even if we may have temporarily gained some experience or achieved a certain state through engaging in a specific practice, since our mind cannot resonate with the four thoughts, we can hardly get any real benefit in our pursuit of liberation. This is certain.

After all, many of us have been studying the Dharma for many years, so we should know this very well. As for me, although I am not a great practitioner or a Mahasiddha, at least I am a bit familiar with the Buddha's teachings, especially the teachings of the Nyingma tradition, and I have also put the teachings into real practice. Through my own experience and observation over the years, I truly realize that without a real understanding of the ngöndro teachings and a sustained practice of each teaching, one's practice cannot be successful. If you depart from the preliminaries, no matter how many teachers you follow, how many Dharma books you read, or how many lineages you become involved in, at most you just plant the root of merit in your mind. Without the preliminaries, it will be extremely hard for you to uproot the causes of samsara.

Now that we have the opportunity to practice ngöndro, please make sure you do not miss the opportunity. It is fine if you put aside other teachings and practices for now, but you must devote yourself wholeheartedly to the practice of the four thoughts, including "the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages," "the impermanence of life," and so forth. Recently, while teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in class, I also taught the guided meditative instructions of Longchenpa's *The Meaning Instructions on Three Virtues of Relaxation in the Natural State of the Mind*, a heart essence of the practical instructions of Longchen Nyingtik.

Currently, the sangha has finished meditating on "the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages," but here I ask you to continue this meditation for another two or three months. In addition, keep your prostration practice ongoing.

This year and next year, my plan is to set aside some time for Dharma students of the *Victorious Subdue-Mara Land*,⁵⁰ so that you can devote yourselves to the ngöndro practice. Meanwhile, you should continue your hearing, contemplating, and meditating.

⁵⁰ Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche named the center for Chinese sangha members at Larung Gar "the Victorious Subdue-Mara Land."

Human life is rare and transitory. I hope you will develop conviction about the common preliminaries through two years of practice. If one just sticks to the literal intellectual meaning of the text, not to mention intellectuals, even a third or fourth grader can easily speak about the content. There are many primary school students studying Dharma in the Northeast of China, who seem to present the teachings of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* better than I do. But I believe they do not put the teachings into practice as well as I do.

Although I cannot say that I practice ngöndro well, at least I have been practicing unceasingly. Those presenters can only talk about the teachings, for example: “Why is human life precious?” or “What are the eight intrusive circumstances that leave no freedom to practice the Dharma?” However, they do not reflect on the freedoms and advantages carefully to see whether or not they have them. They do not know that if some aspects are missing, they should try to acquire them by whatever means possible, whereas if they have them all, they should further examine whether these freedoms and advantages are with them temporarily or for the rest of this life. Only a person with practice experience will know how to apply these special examining methods.

Therefore, recently I’ve asked you, including volunteer staff members who serve the sangha or help others, to meditate every morning on “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages.” This is not hard to do. As long as you have conviction about the Dharma, you would not like to oversleep or engage in trifles. The reason you clung to these things in the past is that you did not develop deep conviction about rebirth and the preciousness of the human form. That is why you always found an excuse not to study the Dharma, or even if you studied, you only did it heedlessly. What a pity! Some householders I know always put off studying the Dharma on the excuse of being “busy.” Since they do not study the Dharma, there is nothing to say about their practice.

Not many people these days study the Dharma. Among Dharma students, many just stay on the surface without delving deeper, so very few Buddhists follow the sequence and truly practice step by step. Many Buddhists go after higher teachings right away, and they like to talk about things such as, “Have you received the empowerment of *Lama Yangtik* (*The Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru*)?” “Have you received the empowerment of Yamantaka?”⁵¹ and so forth.

⁵¹ Yamantaka—literally ‘The Destroyer or Slayer of Yama, the Lord of Death,’ is a wrathful form of Manjushri. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

They think receiving the highest empowerment means they can attain enlightenment in this very life, allowing them to swiftly “fly” to a pure realm—today to the Blissful Realm and tomorrow to the Copper-Colored Mountain of Glory. They like the idea of “flying around”—what a great joy! However, they are reluctant to engage in ngöndro practice, unaware that although ngöndro refers to a set of “preliminary” practices, it is actually the most crucial and fundamental practice.

Recently, I gave the transmission of *The Neck Pouch Vajrakilaya*, and the recipients showed great faith. On that day, vajrakilayas, or ritual daggers, were all sold out at Larung Gar; on the next day, the daggers were sold out in Sertar County. It happened to be a national holiday during that time, and I was told the daggers at Buddhist stores in cities like Chengdu and Beijing were also sold out.

Some people, including monks, even carry long ritual daggers on their waists, just like a Khampa or a native of Kham⁵² carries his Tibetan knife. This shows that they are very attached to possessing such a dagger. Practicing Vajrakilaya does bring inconceivable merit, but sadly, some people do not even know exactly what Vajrakilaya is or how to practice the generation stage and the completion stage. They just find Vajrakilaya nice-looking and think it can subdue evil forces, so maybe they can use the dagger to repel the “troublemakers.” Do they think like this? I do not really know because I do not have the clear knowing of the minds of others.

Sadly, I rarely hear someone place great importance on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, thinking the text is the most important thing in their life, and carrying a copy with them for frequent consultation. I am afraid there is no such person among us. If you do not agree with me, please raise your hands, and we will see how many hands are in the air.

Therefore, it seems you do not pay enough attention to *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* unlike most of the Buddhist practitioners of my generation. Well, perhaps it is because you have superior faculties, so you take the top-down approach—you start from the fruition downward—whereas practitioners of my generation have inferior faculties, so we choose the bottom-up approach, starting from ngöndro upward. When we first encountered *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, we would

⁵² Kham (Tibetan: ཁམས་, Wylie: khams) or Do Kham is one of the three traditional provinces of Tibet, the others being Amdo in the northeast, and U-Tsang in central Tibet and Ngari in the west. Kham covers a land area largely divided between five regions in present-day China, most of it in Tibet Autonomous Region and Sichuan, with smaller portions located within Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces. The natives of the Kham region are called Khampas (Tibetan: ཁམས་པ་, Wylie: khams pa).

start by steadily practicing “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” until we gradually attained the state of the practice.

Thanks to the solid foundation we built through the preliminary practices, twenty years after we first encountered the ngöndro teaching, we are still at Larung Gar. In comparison, some people who took ordination roughly around the same time as us, failed miserably in their practice because they only went after higher teachings.

Therefore, please grasp this opportunity and do not let it slip away. Although I am not a good practitioner, I have decided to guide your practice in person, and I have set aside significant time for this. During this long period, I hope each of you will establish a solid foundation through the preliminary practices. Our human life is truly rare and precious. In our short life, how many opportunities do we have to practice ngöndro? Not many, I am afraid. Perhaps this is the first time as well as the last time in this life for you to practice ngöndro in such an extensive manner. Perhaps this is the first time as well as the last time for me to guide you through the ngöndro practice.

Take, for example, the practice on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. Through your meditation, make sure you truly feel that having a human form is very rare and precious. This feeling should come from the bottom of your heart, not as a pretense. If you do feel this way, then when you see countless beings not studying the Dharma, you will feel sorry for them. Meanwhile, you should use your human form to practice diligently instead of wasting your precious human life. My goal is to help you reach this state of practice.

I, myself, am an ordinary person with inferior qualities, so I cannot guarantee that a few hundred of you will attain realization and become first-bhumi bodhisattvas right after completing your ngöndro practice. Moreover, we are currently in the degenerate age, and the fruition period of the Dharma has long passed, so swift realization is no longer possible. Nevertheless, as long as each of you lay a solid foundation, your practice will not waver or regress in this life. This will create an extremely supreme dependent arising for all future lives.

When I visit Han areas, I sometimes chat with lay practitioners and monastics who have been studying the Dharma for many years. Often, I do not hear them express concern about their next lives. All I hear from them is about the goodness of this life, clairvoyance, or miracles. Worse yet, when talking about politics, they

can eloquently refer to many political terms, but when discussing the Dharma, especially the topic of karma, they remain silent. This is concerning. We must know that the purpose of studying the Dharma is to assimilate the teachings into our minds, just as lineage masters pass on the Dharma from generation to generation.

Now, let's begin today's teaching. I do not cover too much of the content of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* in my everyday teaching. I often expand on my explanations of the text, so sometimes my teaching may not be coherent or have a clear logical flow.

But the text itself has supreme blessing power, so I hope you always carry a copy with you. Through studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, we gain a general understanding of Mahayana Buddhism and learn about the merits and benefits of generating bodhicitta. Through studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, we are further equipped with practical pith instructions on how to counteract afflictions and eradicate self-clinging. Meanwhile, with the invisible blessings of lineage masters, when causes and conditions come together, compassion, wisdom, and other signs of effective practice will definitely arise in our minds.

Let's continue with Patrul Rinpoche's text:

"Until all sixteen factors that leave no opportunity for practice have been thoroughly examined and eliminated, individuals in this degenerate age may appear to possess all the freedoms and advantages, and seemingly embody true practitioners of the Dharma. However, whether it be the lineage holder on his throne, the lama beneath his parasol, the hermit in his mountain solitude, the one who has renounced worldly affairs, or anyone who holds an inflated sense of self-importance – all may believe they are engaged in the practice of Dharma. Nevertheless, as long as these additional constraints continue to exert their influence, they are not truly on the correct path."

This paragraph is very important! Without careful examination, many practitioners may fool themselves and deceive others. Such practitioners think highly of themselves: "I am not an ordinary lay practitioner" or "I am not an ordinary monastic." They think of themselves as high-ranking lamas, Dharma kings, great tulkus, or Mahasiddhas who always live in the respect, praise, flowers, and applause of others—real qualified teachers of the Dharma!

However, if their mindstream is constrained by the sixteen additional conditions, including stupidity, emotional turmoil, and heedlessness of the vows

and of the samayas, they are not considered to have even entered the Dharma, let alone liberate all beings.

Many Han Chinese lay practitioners show great respect for me, but since I often examine myself, I know I am not impeccable. Therefore, these lay practitioners may in some ways overestimate me, as I am just an ordinary monk. There must be similar situations wherein we have not noticed our faults. For example, someone remains in the sangha but is not upholding pure precepts, or someone is sitting on the Dharma seat but is not managing sangha affairs in accordance with the Vinaya. In such cases, there is only one outcome for this person's next life: to have a bad rebirth as a hell being, a hungry ghost, or an animal.

In fact, there are many instances of practitioners falling into the lower realms. Here is a story from the *Chronicles of Mount Wutai*:

In the Tang dynasty, a monk named Fa'ai had been a temple overseer at Mount Wutai for twenty years. But with the sangha's money, he privately bought a large piece of land and left it to his disciple Ming Hui. When Fa'ai died, he was reborn as an ox in Ming Hui's family, and the ox was so full of strength that it could plow alone.

Thirty years later, the ox was old, so the farmer in charge wanted to sell it. That night, Ming Hui had a dream in which his late master cried and said, "I bought the land for you with the sangha's money, so I was reborn as an ox, and now I am old and weak. I hope you will skin me for a drum and put my name on it. Whenever there is a ritual of worship or recitation, please hit this drum. By doing so, my suffering will be relieved, and I will have the opportunity for liberation. Otherwise, even when the land becomes an ocean, I may still not get liberated."

Then the ox threw itself against a tree and died. Ming Hui was scared, so he woke up at midnight to gather the sangha immediately and told them what happened. Following the instructions in his dream, Ming Hui skinned the ox, made a drum out of the leather, and put his master's name on it. He sold the land and offered all the money to the sangha. Later, this drum was sent to Manjushri Hall at Mount Wutai, and upon hearing its story, people started to call it the "Human Skin Drum."

We can imagine Fa'ai must have received great respect from others during his life, but why was he reborn as an ox? It was because he lacked conviction in basic views, such as the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages and the law of

karma. As a result, he recklessly committed many wrongdoings, which led to his bad rebirth as an ox.

Here is a story from the *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*:

Shide⁵³ used to herd the cattle for the Guoqing Temple. One day when the sangha was engaging in the Uposatha⁵⁴ practice, Shide brought oxen to the front of the Dharma hall and started to clap hands and laugh. It disturbed the sangha, so a monk expelled him out with a stick.

Shide said, “From now on, I will never herd the cattle.”

A monk asked, “What are you going to do instead of herding the cattle? One cannot just eat without working here.”

“Yes,” replied Shide, “These oxen used to be those who ate without working in their previous life. They were the high-ranking masters and administrative monks in this temple.”

The sangha didn’t believe him, so Shide shouted out names to the cattle, one by one in front of the sangha, “Vinaya master Hong Jing, please step forward!” Hearing this, a white ox walked out with a moo.

Shide continued, “Temple Chef Guang Chao, please step forward!” Hearing this, a black cow walked out with a moo.

Seeing this, the sangha was shocked.

Shide pointed to the cattle and said a verse:

In the previous life, you didn’t uphold precepts;
You had a human face yet an animal heart;
In this life, you end up suffering this way,
Who do you resent for this?

The sangha was petrified after hearing this verse and realized the law of karma is infallible. Therefore, they corrected their wrong behaviors and engaged in genuine practice for the sake of their liberation.

Some people may wonder, “Given these stories, does it mean it’s more common

⁵³ Shide (9th century) was a Tang dynasty Chinese Buddhist poet at Guoqing Temple on Mount Tiantai on the East China Sea coast.

⁵⁴ The Uposatha (Sanskrit: Upavasatha) is a Buddhist day of observance, in existence since the Buddha’s time (600 BCE), and still being kept today by Buddhist practitioners.

for a practitioner than an ordinary person to have a bad rebirth?” Not really. In fact, ordinary people are even more likely to fall into the lower realms because they do not have the opportunity to practice, so they tend to commit more severe wrongdoings.

As you know, a lack of conviction about the rarity of human life will obstruct subsequent practice and hinder your progress on the path to liberation. Therefore, it is very important that we first carefully examine ourselves and analyze the eighteen freedoms and advantages one by one. In a way, this is how a primary school child does their homework; we carefully check whether we have this freedom or not, or if we have that advantage or not. This, in itself, is the so-called practice.

Some of you have followed this advice and practiced accordingly yet felt nothing; this means you have not really focused on the practice. If you meld each piece of teaching with your mindstream, you will definitely generate faith in the Dharma. Practicing Dharma does not mean meditating with your eyes closed or having a direct vision of a deity in a particular form. What I just mentioned about reflecting on our freedoms and advantages is already the real practice of Dharma.

Some of you did not practice well the common preliminaries; you did the practice recently but had no feeling. This means your practice is just a formality, and your practical experience can easily change or even regress. So, before blindly assuming the forms of Dharma, it is important to first carefully check whether or not you have all thirty-four ($18+16=34$) aspects of the freedoms and advantages.

Some Dharma students at Larung Gar were very much looking forward to receiving ordination. For example, regulations require a four-month probationary period for ordination, but they could not wait. Two or three days after the probation started, they asked, “Can I get ordained now? I do not want to wait any longer. May you shave my hair and formally give me ordination?”

Therefore, only halfway through the probationary period, such a Dharma student became a monk or a nun. This person was very happy, saying, “Thank you! How comfortable! I do not have hair left anymore. Am I cute?” This novice monk or nun probably thought having no hair left is a sign of ordination; they did not know that developing conviction in the mind is the key.

Some Dharma centers also attach great importance to things such as issuing a refuge certificate, giving a Dharma name, and organizing rituals. Although these external formalities are necessary, the most crucial point is to carefully examine

your own state to see whether you have the eighteen freedoms and advantages, plus the sixteen additional conditions described by Venerable Longchenpa.

Therefore, through this study, I hope you will realize that some of your practice is merely a display of formality without really engaging the mind. In fact, once the Dharma has integrated into a practitioner's mind, their manners will be very different from someone whose practice is just superficial. This can be seen in many eminent masters.

Once a practitioner has generated conviction about the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, they will place great importance on transcendental practice for liberation, which is reflected in their speech, actions, and manners. They will not get busy with mundane trivial issues, including watching television, films, or cartoons, because they know those are just deceptive illusions that lack any true meaning.

Of course, it is hard to have all the freedoms and advantages during the degenerate age. If you have all of them, take a moment to rejoice and reflect deeply on each one, over and over again.

Everyone should reflect on this: Have I ever examined my inner state for the freedoms and advantages? If not, as of today, you must carefully reflect on them one by one. I am not just paying lip service here. It is not that I never practice in this manner myself and only ask you to do so, as Longchenpa says in the *Thirty Pieces of Heart Advice*:

If we have listened to many learned masters and received deep
instructions,
Have studied a few sutras and tantras,
Without ever applying them—‘Oh how pitiful’—we are just
fooling ourselves.⁵⁵

Ever since I encountered this teaching, I have been putting it into real practice. If we do not put the ngöndro teachings into real practice and instead focus on other practices, our practice will be off track and can hardly achieve any substantial progress. Therefore, this is what we should remind ourselves: “Now that I have

⁵⁵ Longchen Rabjam, *Thirty Pieces of Heart Advice*, translated by Daniela Hartmann and edited by Judith Amtzis, Jacqueline Bourbon and Monsieur “Fifi” Greywhiskers, Lotsawa-house.org.

finally attained these hard-to-find freedoms and advantages, I will not waste them; no matter what, I will commit to practicing the true Dharma.”

This human life is indeed very rare to find. In terms of its causes, to obtain a precious human life, we must have upheld pure precepts and had pure faith, as stated in Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland*:

Having faith dispels the states without freedoms,
Upholding precepts enables a good rebirth.

In terms of its conditions, we must have practiced generosity, generated supreme aspirations, and so forth. In addition, by reflecting on its metaphors⁵⁶ and nature, a precious human life is indeed very hard to obtain.

We are fortunate to have a human form in this life, and if we want to get a good rebirth in the next life, we must uphold pure precepts. If we want to uproot defilements including greed, anger, and ignorance accumulated since the beginningless time, we must practice with this human form. Vasubandhu says,

To attain a good rebirth, it is important to uphold precepts;
To uproot defilements, it is important to practice Dharma.

Some people complain about their heavy afflictions, saying they have read many Dharma books and recited *The Diamond Sutra* many times, but their greed and anger persist or even grow stronger. Well, it is because they have not put the teachings into real practice. If they engage in real practice, afflictions will absolutely go away. This will definitely happen because practicing Dharma directly antidotes afflictions; it is as when a fire is fierce, coolness will naturally disappear.

Therefore, we should be highly motivated to practice the Dharma. As Patrul Rinpoche says, the authentic Dharma is just around you, so there’s no need to seek it elsewhere.

Some people are always unable to have a successful practice; they switch from one teacher to another, from one monastery to another. Sometimes when I listen to their stories, I can only remain silent. Why is this happening? It is because they have not established a solid foundation; they rarely reflect inwardly but only seek outwardly, so wherever they go, they cannot have a successful practice.

⁵⁶ The metaphors include a blind turtle meeting a yoke, getting dried peas thrown at a smooth wall to stick to it, and balancing a pile of peas on the tip of an upright needle.

In fact, everyone can have a successful practice; the key is whether a practitioner is willing to devote enough effort. For example, if you devote enough effort to the practice of the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, then you will be able to practice the Dharma steadily for a few decades, which will, without doubt, lead to success in your Dharma practice.

But if your practice is just so-so, if you give up halfway after a few attempts and lack patience and perseverance, then no matter which practice you engage in, it will not turn out well.

Especially, while studying the Dharma, if you intentionally stop receiving transmissions or become unwilling to practice, this is the so-called obscuration of mara. Padmasambhava gave a supreme instruction to Yeshe Tsogyal, in which he said:

Whatever brings obstacles to one's practice, be it internal or external, is the obscuration of mara.

For example, if you want to receive a transmission, but someone else dissuades you from hearing it and suggests you leave, this is an obscuration of mara.

Mara does not necessarily take the form of a ferocious devil; sometimes it may appear as a friendly Dharma fellow or a loving and caring teacher who seems to care about you so much. After hearing his words, you may be so enchanted that you do not feel like sleeping for three or four days, feeling comfortable and warm in your heart; when you close your eyes, his smile and look appear in your mind.

Nevertheless, if this person brings obstacles to your practice, then whatever he appears to be, according to Padmasambhava, is an obscuration of mara. Dharma students should stay cautious about this.

As mentioned earlier, you must check your own state carefully first to see whether or not you have all thirty-four aspects of the freedoms and advantages. If you find some aspects are missing, you should strive to your utmost to acquire them. At all times, you should make sure to carefully examine whether or not you possess all freedoms and advantages.

Of course, such an examination does not only last one day or two. You should examine your own state anytime and anywhere in your life. Many senior practitioners set a great example for us: their practice is not constrained by time and place; in the isolated forest, they always engage in their daily practice; in an

urban setting or in a hospital, their practice never stops. Place and time do not constrain these practitioners.

By contrast, some practitioners practice well when staying in a quiet forest and remain firm and steady like a statue of an arhat. However, when they come to a metropolitan area, they stop their daily practices for many days.

Those who left Larung Gar for somewhere else during the term break, please reflect on this. You are supposed to recite everyday prayers such as *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, but I have heard that some of you who are visiting other places do not chant the prayers at all for two or three days. This means the external environment has had a great impact on you, and you do not practice diligently.

To be honest, I like practitioners whose practice is not influenced by place and time. For them, practice becomes a habit, just like taking meals on a regular basis. Whenever and wherever they are, they hold onto their practice. This is true perseverance.

In summary, you must check the freedoms and advantages all the time. If you fail to check, and any of these elements are missing, you will miss the opportunity to truly practice the Dharma. It is just like driving: even if a driver is skilled and all the other conditions are present, with a broken wheel or without gas, the car still cannot move. Nowadays, some people don't have a successful practice, so they ask for divination everywhere, seeking answers to questions like: "Why is my practice substandard?" "Why can't I attain signs of progress in the practice?" "Why have I not had a direct vision of my deity?"

Actually, your unsuccessful practice is because you do not have all the causes and conditions, among which the thirty-four freedoms and advantages are the most crucial. If one of those elements is missing, your opportunity to practice might be cut off. Therefore, you do not need to ask around; the problem with your practice lies here. If you do not have any problems with the freedoms and advantages, your practice will definitely go smoothly. Therefore, it is very important to know this essential information.

After all, accomplishing even a minor everyday task requires the coordination of many mutually dependent causes and conditions. So, how could the practice of the true Dharma, aimed at achieving the ultimate goal and benefiting both oneself and others, not require the conjunction of many interconnected factors? For example, when Tibetans were traveling long distances, it was common for them

to brew tea along the way. The making of tea requires many different elements, such as the pot, the water, the wood, the fire, and so on. Just lighting the fire itself is impossible without a flint, steel, tinder, the traveler's hands, and other necessary items.

[When I was a kid, many Tibetans made fire in the traditional manner with a flint (a small piece of white rock), tinder (a velvet-like material made from a specific dried white flower), and steel. Tibetans normally kept all these items in a pocket, and when it was time to make fire, they rubbed the steel against the flint, and when sparks fell on the tinder, smoke immediately rose. They added a bit of dried grass or paper, and the fire started to burn. If the traveler is missing just one thing, such as the tinder—either used up or wet from rain—then even if the flint and steel are in perfect condition, it is of no use. As a result, he is left with no other option but to abandon the idea of making tea. Similarly, without the presence of every single element of freedoms and advantages, the true practice of Dharma becomes impossible. For example, if practitioners have heavy afflictions, they may, at first, practice well in a sangha, but later their negative emotions take over; they start to lose their temper, cannot get along well with their vajra brothers and sisters, and then leave the sangha. From then on, they put aside all the other sequential practices. Therefore, through direct or vicarious experience, a wise person will realize that each of these elements is indispensable.]

It is indeed a great pity to lose the opportunity to practice the Dharma. Therefore, now that we have all the favorable conditions and freedoms, we must seize the opportunity, so we will not regret it in the future. There is a verse in Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way* that the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche really liked:

If, when free and dwelling in a wholesome state,
We make no effort to remain therein,
We will fall into the depths and then, deprived of freedom,
How shall we escape and rise again?⁵⁷

When we are free and have favorable conditions as humans, we do not guard our body, speech, and mind with mindfulness and vigilance, and we do not practice diligently to antidote afflictions. Once we fall into the three lower realms, we are

⁵⁷ Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara* with commentary by Jamgon Mipham, *Introduction to the Middle Way*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2002.

completely under the control of our negative karma, so how can we escape and rise again? We should contemplate this scriptural evidence again and again!

Some people often say, “I am too busy to practice.” In fact, as long as you appreciate the precious human life, you can certainly find time for practice. Otherwise, time flies quickly by, as said in the sutra:

The human form is hard to attain and easy to lose,

The time easily flits by and is hard to capture.

Once we squander this human life or commit wrongdoings with it, it will be harder to regain the human form than to scale the sky! *The Brahma's Net Sutra* says:

Once we lose our human form,

We will not regain it even after ten thousand kalpas.

Therefore, we have to rely on the qualified teacher's teachings and the sublime being's supreme pith instructions, and then develop a self-rescue mentality. Each of us should check our state to see whether we should meditate on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. Without real practice, just listening to the teachings is not enough. There is a big difference between hearing and practicing, as well as between knowing and experiencing. We should recognize the difference and then truly engage in the practice!



Lesson 25

“If you check your own mind ..., and similar ones in other texts.” [page 32-34]

Today we continue to learn about the “particular advantages related to Dharma.”

If you carefully examine your own mind to determine whether you are free from the sixteen additional conditions and possess all eighteen freedoms and advantages, you will realize that obtaining even the basic eight freedoms and ten advantages is very challenging. Acquiring all eight freedoms is relatively easy; for example, you are not a being in a lower realm or a long-lived god in this life, and the four states of freedom as a human are not difficult to attain. However, obtaining all ten advantages is more difficult, and very few people possess all of them.

Why is this the case?

First, let’s consider the five individual advantages. While for most Buddhists it is not difficult to be born as a human with all their faculties intact and live in a central region, if they become involved in a lifestyle conflicting with the Dharma (such as those born in communities of hunters or prostitutes or those who reject the law of karma) and lack faith in the Dharma, then they only possess three of the five individual advantages.

This is akin to a car with four tires; if three of them are in good condition but one tire is flat, the car cannot run on a highway. Similarly, if a person possesses three individual advantages but holds wrong views or lacks belief in Buddhism, there is no opportunity for them to embrace the Dharma.

If a Buddhist fulfills one of two conditions—either avoiding a lifestyle conflicting with the Dharma or having faith in the Dharma—they would possess four of the five individual advantages. However, would it be possible for them to practice the Dharma? The answer is no. Even if a person does not commit severe wrongdoings such as slandering the Dharma or destroying Buddhism, if any of their thoughts, speech, and actions are negative or their motivation for positive actions, such as meditation, recitation, circumambulation, and pilgrimage, is only for this life, their lifestyle is still considered to be in conflict with the Dharma, even if they have the reputation of being a good and learned individual. I have encountered several so-called great masters whose discussions and actions mostly revolve around worldly matters. When the topic of rebirth is brought up, they do not show much concern and argue that one should strive for success in this life rather than the next, even if rebirth does exist. Many Dharma teachers hold the same viewpoint. Numerous ordinary people turn to Buddhism seeking peace, family harmony, promotion, or wealth, so their actions are solely for the benefit of this life. As a result, even if a person is a highly respected monk, a prominent lay practitioner, a generous donor, or a great philanthropist, they still lead a lifestyle in conflict with the Dharma. Why? Because their goal only pertains to this life, and it is impossible for renunciation and bodhicitta to arise in their mind.

Each of you, whether you are a monastic or a lay practitioner, should reflect on this: “Why am I studying the Dharma?” If your goal is to seek safety in this life or to escape from troubles, or if you do not even have a particular goal and live your life mindlessly, then you are not pursuing liberation in a future life. In such cases, even if you are recognized as a great master, you do not even have the advantage of “having no conflicting lifestyle” among the ten particular advantages.

This issue may be hard for many people to avoid, so we have to carefully reflect on it over and over again. It is really necessary to give teachings on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time, and I hope Buddhists will understand this specific teaching. Studying the Dharma or performing a Buddhist ritual as a mere formality is not worthy of praise; we commend someone for being a real practitioner. Otherwise, it has little meaning to live a life occupied solely with the benefits of this very lifetime.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often taught us:

Between this life and the next, I place more importance on

the next life. Although I dare not say that what I do is one hundred percent for the next life, the majority of it is for the liberation of the future life.

Therefore, a practitioner should place more importance on the next life than this life. You may check yourself to see whether you are pursuing this life or the future life. Between these two, which math symbol will you use to express the relative importance: equal, greater than, or less than?

The statement that “seeking the benefits of this life is a conflicting lifestyle” might be a blow to many people, so it deserves our deep reflection. As humans, one of our greatest differences from other beings is our capacity for self-reflection. Without this capacity, we are no different from an animal that only knows to eat grass and drink water without the cognitive ability for reflection and discernment. A human must reflect on their deeds, for example, thinking, “I have been a monastic for many years, so what is the ultimate purpose of my studying the Dharma?”

If your goal is just for this life, then you are living a conflicting lifestyle, which you should not be doing. You should aim for the liberation of your future lives; otherwise, if you only focus on this life that lasts only a few decades, you are too shortsighted. You should think, “I am pursuing liberation, so fame and wealth are of no value to me.”

Next, we should check the five circumstantial advantages. Among these five, although a buddha has come, has taught the Dharma, and the teachings have not yet disappeared, if a person has not entered the Dharma, then they only have three of those advantages. If a person does not enter the Dharma, there is no point in being accepted by a compassionate, qualified teacher. Therefore, this person lacks two of the five circumstantial advantages. As a result, it is impossible for them to succeed in the practice of the Dharma.

Someone has entered the Dharma and been accepted by a qualified teacher, but their mind remains unsettled and wavering. Once they lose interest in the Dharma, it is unrealistic to constrain them to the path through external forces. At a certain point, their “camouflage” of being Buddhists will fall off, and their true character will be revealed. Therefore, both monastics and householders should have a deep understanding of the Dharma. If a person constantly relies on reminders

from the teacher or fellow practitioners and lacks solid faith in the Three Jewels, it is uncertain whether they may stay in the sangha or not.

“Entering the Dharma” does not simply mean seemingly asking for some teaching and being given it. Many people think they are real Buddhists because they have a refuge certificate, a Dharma name, and have received empowerments or teachings in front of such-and-such teachers. Well, this is not necessarily so. Why? It is because the teachings of the Basic and Great Vehicles have not been integrated into their actions, and their minds have not generated the corresponding beliefs. Therefore, even if they think they are Buddhists, it may not be the case.

Once, I asked a taxi driver, “Do you believe in Buddhism?”

“Yes, I do,” he replied.

I asked, “How can you tell?”

“See,” he pointed to the pendant in his car, “I have an image of Avalokiteshvara here, which shows I believe in Buddhism.”

“What else can prove you are a Buddhist?” I asked.

“Nothing else. Anyway, I pray to Avalokiteshvara for protection, so I am a Buddhist,” he said.

Strictly speaking, he is not a Buddhist because he does not even know whether Avalokiteshvara is a god, a buddha, or a bodhisattva, and the reason he prays is to pick up more passengers so he can earn a bit more money.

There are many Buddhists like the taxi driver, including some monastics who just muddle along. Some individuals join a Buddhist group after encountering setbacks in life, but they neither have faith in the Buddha nor generate renunciation from samsara. Are these individuals Buddhists? Well, they are Buddhists by name but not in essence.

Many people like the statement “The truth is always the truth,” but is the “truth” you are referring to merely a conceptual thought or an actual reality? If it is just conceptual, then it is certainly not the real truth. Similarly, a Buddhist who adheres only to the concept of being a Buddhist is not a real Buddhist. Why? Because the beliefs in the Basic and Great Vehicles have not arisen in their minds.

From the perspective of the Basic Vehicle, a real practitioner who seeks liberation must have the conviction that everything in samsara is meaningless and no different from a dream or an illusion. The *Lotus Sutra* says:

There is no safety in the threefold world;
It is like a burning house, replete with a multitude of sufferings,
Truly to be feared, constantly beset with the griefs and
Pains of birth, old age, sickness, and death,
Which are like fires raging fiercely and without cease.⁵⁸

If you have such a conviction, it means you have generated genuine renunciation. Of course, we should not just pay lip service; we should feel this conviction from the bottom of our hearts, feeling this urgency in the same way a prisoner wants to be freed from prison as soon as possible. Wherever we are in samsara, be it in the god realm or the human realm, when we generate such a conviction, it means genuine renunciation has arisen in us.

As long as you can recognize the illusory nature of samsara, by any means, whether it be following the guru's instructions or relying on another spiritual friend's assistance, it is acceptable.

Once upon a time, a monk had a magician friend. One day, while they were chatting over tea, the monk asked the magician, "I want to see the illusion you create. Can you perform it?"

The magician said nothing, went outside, and brought back a tall steed, saying, "Do you want this horse? I can sell it to you."

Noticing it was really a nice horse, the monk asked, "What a horse! How much?"

[Back then, many Tibetan monastics liked horses, just as monks today like cars.]

The magician replied, "You can ride the horse to give it a test, and then we can talk about the price."

Without thinking too much, the monk mounted the horse and took the reins the magician handed to him. Then, the magician gave the horse a hard pat on its rump. The horse rushed out like an arrow. It leaped over mountains, valleys, grasslands, and rivers. After traveling afar for several days and nights, the horse threw the monk into an unfamiliar open field and disappeared without looking back.

After a long journey through mountains and rivers, the monk finally trekked

⁵⁸ The *Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson.

out of the wilderness and arrived at a village. Since he knew nobody, he became a beggar and servant, endured many sufferings, and lived like a stray dog for many days.

Later, the monk disrobed and married a local woman. They had three children, whom they brought up with innumerable worries and hardships. However, the former monk did not expect that their children would grow up to be rebellious and disrespectful, which really upset him. To take care of his family, he had to hunt, oblivious to the pain he experienced and the negative actions he committed. Living such a life, he gradually grew old.

One day, he went hunting on a mountain as usual. After walking for a long time, at the lowest point of the mountain ridge, he found a mother antelope that had just given birth to a calf. The antelope was very weak and could barely walk. He ruthlessly killed the mother and the calf, and then limped home with the dead antelopes on his back, using his gun as a crutch.

When he reached the other side of the river near his home, his youngest son was very happy to see him coming back with the catch. He called out, “Daddy!” and ran toward him. The son accidentally slipped off the bridge, fell into the river, and was immediately swept away by the current. The older sister and brother noticed their brother’s fall, so they both recklessly jumped into the river to save him, and unfortunately, they were both swept away as well. His wife witnessed all of this, wailing. Then, without hesitation, she jumped into the river.

Witnessing how his whole family was swept away in the river in the blink of an eye, the man was so heartbroken that he fainted to the ground. He did not know how long it took him to regain consciousness. He leaned against his gun and tried to get up, but he fell down again.

Then suddenly he felt as if he was waking up to daylight. He realized that he was still in his magician friend’s house, with a stick in his hand, and that he was lying on the ground. The magician smiled and said to him, “Get up for some tea.”

He got up and found that the tea he had been sipping before was still hot. He gazed in awe—he had experienced the ups and downs of his whole life in just a few minutes! He could not believe it, and it took him a while to regain his composure. Recalling the joys and sorrows brought by the hallucinations, he deeply felt that there was no real meaning in samsara. So, he generated strong renunciation. He thus renounced everything in his worldly life and retreated to a mountain

to practice diligently with unwavering determination. Finally, he became a great enlightened one.

Therefore, illusions, as told in the story, can help us recognize the true nature of samsara. I notice that many Dharma students like to watch TV when visiting an urban area. Through the stories on TV, maybe they realize the nature of samsara, or maybe they generate greed, anger, and other afflictions. Nevertheless, when you really generate renunciation, you will never envy anything in the world, including fame, social status, or beautiful objects. This is the basic requirement for Theravada practitioners. As for Mahayana practitioners who have embarked on the path of the Great Vehicle, the essential thing is to have genuinely aroused bodhicitta, with the aspiration to benefit all sentient beings.

Although it is not easy for us to cultivate genuine renunciation and bodhicitta, at the very least, we must have unwavering faith in the teacher and the Three Precious Jewels. This faith should remain steadfast even in the face of risking our lives. Without that, simply reciting prayers and wearing yellow robes does not necessarily make us true Buddhists.

When teaching us *The Great Perfection of Peaceful Manjushri*,⁵⁹ the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche explained that “refuge” means “surrender” in worldly terms. On the face of it, “surrender” does not seem to be a nice word. But in fact, this word implies that while you are fighting against afflictions, if you always think, “The Three Jewels are always my only refuge and protection. From now on, whatever happens to me, favorable or unfavorable, pleasant or painful, good or bad, I have no other refuge nor protection except you. You are my only protector, my only guide, my only shelter, and my only hope.”

With such conviction, you sincerely surrender to the Three Jewels. This is the so-called refuge.

Anytime and anywhere, you should always determine to take refuge in the Three Jewels. For some people, taking refuge is just receiving a certificate or having a Dharma name; but when encountering a tiny obstacle, they easily give up the Three Jewels. At that time, let alone taking refuge, some monastics even take off their monastic robes, which is terrible.

There was a Gelug geshe near Lhasa named Ngawang Phuntsok, and people

⁵⁹ The full title is: *Placing Buddhahood within Reach: The Practice Manual of Peaceful Manjushri*.

normally called him Gen Lamrimpa or Geshe Lam Rim. He passed away a few years ago and left quite a few works. I am fortunate to have read his books and was deeply touched.

In 1959, while he was in retreat in a mountain cave with seven disciples, he was arrested and imprisoned for no reason. While he was doing forced labor, the jailer ordered him to remove his monastic robes, but Gen Lamrimpa firmly refused, saying, “I can give you my life, but I will never take off my robes.” Then in the 1960s, during the time of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards coerced him to burn Buddhist scriptures. But Gen Lamrimpa said in front of everyone, “You can arrest me and shoot me dead. As a monk, there is no way for me to burn the scriptures!” His unflinching bravery under such abusive and oppressive circumstances is truly admirable.

As for us, now that we are living a happy life, we think we are good Buddhists, but when we encounter hardships and obstacles, will we still remain faithful to the Three Jewels? Will we still think, “The Three Jewels are my only protection; I don’t have any regrets even if I have to lose my life for the Three Jewels?”

Each Buddhist should reflect on this. If you do not have such a level of determination, even if you shave your head, put on monastic robes, and appear dignified; or even if others praise you, saying you are a great monk, a great Dharma master, or a great khenpo, you still cannot be regarded as a true Buddhist.

Some householders appear very devoted: They always recite sutras, prostrate, release lives, and participate in charities. Such deeds indeed have merit, but if your faith in the Three Jewels is only skin-deep and does not sink into the mind, you may not be a true Buddhist yet.

It is like when you chant the name of Buddha Shakyamuni in front of ants, it helps plant the seed of liberation in the ants, but does it mean the ants are Buddhists? Of course not! So, strictly speaking, some of you may not be Buddhists yet, although you have shaved your head and taken ordination years ago. You may think you are a Buddhist, or even a Mahayanist, but you are only qualified as a “Buddhist” if you never even think of abandoning the Three Jewels when you encounter major obstacles.

I often remind you to generate bodhicitta. If not that, at least you should generate renunciation; and if not that, at least you should have uncontrived faith

in the Three Jewels. If you have none of these three, you are not a true Buddhist because you do not even meet the basic requirements for a Buddhist.

This paragraph⁶⁰ is so important that you must keep it in mind and use it as a mirror to see whether you meet the requirements for a Mahayana practitioner or a Theravada practitioner, or if you are just a so-so Buddhist. If you are not even a Buddhist, then who are you exactly? A tirthika? Well, you may not believe in another religion. Then you are neither a Buddhist nor a tirthika, so you have to belong to a third category.

Make sure that you know how to identify each of these freedoms and advantages, and to check whether you have them yourself. This is of crucial importance. However, many people do not know this, so they focus on the eight worldly concerns every day and squander their precious human lives. What a pity!

There is a Chinese story:

In the Ming dynasty, there was a man named Luo Hongxian, who was very talented. He became *zhuangyuan*,⁶¹ or the top scorer, in his twenties on the government exam to select official posts and was appointed afterward. It was much harder to be the top scorer at that time than to be admitted by top Chinese universities like Tsinghua University or Beijing University. Luo was a man of integrity. After witnessing the dark corruption in the government, he felt the impermanence of life, so he resigned from his government position, lived in seclusion, and eventually became a monk. He was referred to as “Monk Zhuangyuan.”

After taking ordination in a monastery, Luo pretended to be slow-witted, and he was willing to take on the toughest manual labor, including chopping wood, carrying water, making fires, and cooking. He did all kinds of manual labor to tame and hone his mind. Thirteen years passed in this way.

Before his ordination, he had a wife and a son. Thirteen years later, his son became the *zhuangyuan* as well. Both the father and the son were top scorers,

⁶⁰ It refers to this paragraph in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*: “The starting point of the path of liberation is the conviction that the whole of samsara is meaningless and the genuine determination to be free from it. To travel the path of the Great Vehicle, the essential is to have genuinely aroused bodhicitta. The minimum is to have such unshakeable faith in the Three Precious Jewels that you would never renounce them, even to save your life. Without that, simply reciting prayers and wearing yellow robes is no proof that you have entered the Dharma.”

⁶¹ The candidate ranking first in the exam of Keju, or the Imperial Examination System, was called Zhuangyuan.

which was such a rare thing that everybody was talking about it. Meanwhile, his wife and son really missed him, but there was no news about Luo after his ordination, so they did not know where to find him.

Perhaps because his family missed him so much, one day Luo suddenly had the idea of paying a visit home, so he returned to his hometown. When Luo was standing in front of the door of his mansion, a servant thought he was just a monk begging for alms, so he went inside to inform Luo's wife. His wife had a kind heart, so she asked the servant to offer him a bucket of rice. Luo refused to take the rice and requested to see the mansion owner. The servant thought Luo was a greedy monk, so he went inside and informed the wife. The wife sent the servant to give him some money. Again, Luo refused to accept it. He asked for an ink brush and paper and wrote a poem that said:

"I don't accept your rice and money; I left thirteen years ago and now I visit my hometown; your offspring have their own merit; please don't be like a horse or a cow to serve them."

[This poem is also applicable to many people today. They spend their whole lives toiling for children and grandchildren instead of studying the Dharma. As such, they squander their life every day. Actually, their offspring have their own merit. If they have a lot of merit, you do not have to worry about them; if they have little merit, it is useless for you to worry about them. So, make sure you do not just toil like a horse or a cow in this life, just for your children.]

The servant presented the poem to Luo's wife; she was surprised and rushed out the door after reading it. However, Luo had already left. The wife immediately sent people to look for him everywhere but could not find him.

Later, Luo followed Chan master Longku in Fujian, practiced Chan and the Pure Land diligently, and eventually attained realization. Feeling sympathy for worldly people who were still deluded, he composed the *Gathas of Awakening*, which was widely circulated. One of his verses is:

I advise you to embark on the path of practice as soon as possible,
Because once you lose human life,
It will be hard to regain it even after millions of kalpas.

As evident from this verse, the teaching on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages is also particularly emphasized in Chinese Buddhism.

In summary, the above teaching is about the nature of freedom and the advantages related to Dharma. I hope everyone will meditate on this properly.

2.1.1.3. Reflecting on Images that Show How Difficult it is to Find the Freedoms and Advantages

The Buddha said in sutras, including the *Mahayana Noble Flowers Sutra*, *The Sutra of Nanda's Going Forth*, and *Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma*, that it is more difficult for a being to obtain a human life than for a turtle to accidentally put its head through the opening of a wooden yoke while being tossed around by huge waves on the surface after coming up from the depths of the ocean.

Imagine the vast expanse of the cosmos, consisting of a billion universes, as an immense ocean. Drifting upon this ocean is a yoke, a wooden object with a hole in it that can be fastened around the horns of draft oxen. This yoke is continuously tossed about by the waves, sometimes moving eastward, sometimes westward, and never remaining in one place for even a moment. Deep within the depths of the ocean resides a blind turtle who only emerges to the surface once every hundred years. The chances of the yoke and the turtle crossing paths are incredibly slim. Furthermore, the yoke itself is lifeless, and the turtle is not actively seeking it out. Due to its blindness, the turtle lacks the ability to spot the yoke with its non-functional eyes. Even if the turtle had eyes to see, and the yoke had the intention to seek the turtle, it would still be extremely difficult for the turtle and the yoke to meet in the vast ocean.

This is just an assumption, explaining how difficult it is to obtain a human birth. If there were a blind turtle and a yoke in the ocean, although it is extremely hard for them to meet, we still cannot completely negate the chance of their meeting. Even if we adopt the Three Modes of Logic in Buddhist logic, we still cannot bring up sufficient evidence proving they will never meet.

If the yoke were to stay in one place, there might be a chance of them meeting; however, it is constantly moving. If the turtle spent all its time swimming on the surface, it might, perhaps, cross paths with the yoke; but it surfaces only once every hundred years. Therefore, the chances of the yoke and the turtle coming together are extremely small. Nevertheless, by sheer chance, the turtle might still slip its neck into the yoke. However, according to the sutras, it is even more difficult than that to obtain a human life with the freedoms and advantages. Please do not think this is

just a tale or a saying; instead, we should reflect on its meaning in our mind. While giving a teaching, a Dharma master used the analogy of a blind turtle meeting a yoke to explain the difficulty of obtaining the human birth. A child heard this and felt inspired; to verify the meeting is indeed very hard, he went back home, drilled a hole in a board, and threw it into the pool near his house. He wanted to test the analogy in person, so he jumped into the pool. Although he often surfaced to look for the board and tried to put his head through the hole, he always failed to do so because the board was swaying in the water.

Then he generated more faith in the Buddha's words, thinking, "The ocean is vast and deep with huge waves, the wooden yoke has such a small hole, and the turtle is blind and only surfaces once every hundred years, so there is hardly any chance for their meeting! Now the pool I stay in is narrow with small waves, and I have two eyes and surface all the time, but I still cannot pass through the opening of the board, let alone the blind turtle in the vast ocean!" Then the child recited a verse:

It is extremely hard for a blind turtle to meet a wooden yoke;
 It is as hard for a being in the lower realm to regain a human
 birth;
 Now I aspire to take ordination
 And leave the prison of the three kinds of existence;
 If I constantly and skillfully practice the Dharma,
 It's certain that I will attain liberation.

[This verse is like an instruction from an achieved master. It is very well written.]

Later, the child took his ordination in a monastery and always meditated on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. Eventually, he attained realization.

To those of you who have an affinity with Dharma, you may realize this analogy from the sutras is just so good. If you go to the sea, you may take the opportunity to reflect on this analogy of the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. Of course, if you only commit wrongdoings every day and you study no Dharma, your human life is not necessarily precious, as Milarepa told the hunter Gonpo Dorje:

The Buddha says it is rare and precious to attain a human form,

but when I meet people like you, I do not feel your human life is that precious.

Therefore, a human life committing vices is not precious. A human life performing virtues is indeed very rare and precious.

Especially through this analogy, we should understand that it is extremely hard to regain a human life from a lower realm. Some instructional texts further extend this analogy:

The blind turtle symbolizes beings in these three lower realms. The fact that the turtle only rises to the surface once every hundred years symbolizes the difficulty of escaping from the lower realms. The ocean symbolizes the depth and vastness of the three lower realms and their infinite sufferings. Even if a being is occasionally reborn in the celestial realm or the asura realm, it is impossible for them to encounter the authentic Dharma and a qualified teacher.

Therefore, you should carefully contemplate this analogy when you meditate. It is when you truly generate conviction about the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages that your practice of the uncommon preliminaries, including prostration and mandala offerings, will become easier and more willing. Such conviction becomes your motivation, so you are willing to engage in practice. If you do not have this conviction, you will instead regard running a business, earning money, or sleeping in as more important.

When I was in the hospital, I met a doctor who had to commute two or three hours to work every morning.

I asked her, “Aren’t you tired? It is a long journey—two or three hours in the morning and another two or three hours back home at night, but you always arrive on time.”

She replied, “Well, it is tiring, but I can handle it. It is hard to find a job now. My current job is so precious that however tiring it is for me, I will not give it up. As long as I get up a bit earlier, it will be all right. Every morning, I buy a steamed bun for my breakfast and eat it while taking the bus. There is no problem!”

If we feel the preciousness of our human life in the way she feels about her job, we can definitely get up early in the morning and have no interest in busy worldly chores. With such motivation, there will be no problem accomplishing any of our Dharma practice.

By contrast, if we do not feel the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, even if we have heard it from the teacher or read it from the sutras, we will still enjoy sleeping in, and we will always procrastinate doing our practice with the excuse of being busy. We will feel our career is more important and practice is insignificant, which means our value system is entirely inverted. Driven by such values, we will not engage in diligent practice in our short lifespan. We were busy and deluded in the past, and we will be busy and deluded in the future, without freedoms, advantages, and clarity.

Nagarjuna expresses the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages in Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*:

Since even more difficult than the meeting of a turtle
And the hole in a solitary yoke located on the ocean
Is the attainment of a human state from that of a creeping
creature,
Make that (attainment) with human faculties be fruitful
through practicing the hallowed Dharma.⁶²

It is extremely hard for a blind turtle to go through the opening of a wooden yoke in the sea; it is even harder for beings in the three lower realms to attain a human life. That said, King Surabhibhadra, you should practice the authentic Dharma to make your precious human life fruitful!

Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

This is why Lord Buddha has declared
That like a turtle that perchance can place
Its head within a yoke adrift upon the mighty sea
This human birth is difficult to find!⁶³

It says in the *Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma*:

Attaining a human life is as difficult as a turtle going through a
yoke tossed about on a sea.

⁶² Translated by Alexander Berzin, March 2006, verse 59.

⁶³ Shantideva, *The Way of The Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, Chapter 4, verse 20.

This turtle-and-yoke analogy is mentioned in many Buddhist scriptures, so it bears a very profound meaning. Whenever you see the sea, a turtle, or a yoke, you should think of this analogy and often contemplate the rarity of human life.

However, due to their lack of practice, many people these days only consider this analogy as a tale and think it has nothing to do with them. In fact, it is most relevant to each of us, and we should feel the connection. But for those who have never practiced, this analogy is just pure words unrelated to them, and the meaning cannot infiltrate their minds. Even if the meaning does occasionally appear in their minds, it will not stay. Only those who practice well can truly realize how precious it is to attain a human rebirth. As a result, they will not want to squander their lives, so they will devote all their time and effort to practices that benefit their next lives.

Therefore, we should check the state of our minds. If we have conviction about the rarity and difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, then other practices, such as meditating on the impermanence of life, will develop easily. If we do not think human life is precious and rare, then it is certain our practice is not good.

Because of this, I ask you to do a retreat for one hundred days so you can focus on the common preliminaries. After the retreat, if you have generated conviction about the rarity and difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, and you have realized you should not squander your life and should practice diligently, this will be of great lifelong benefit to you. The retreat is successful even if you have not attained a divine vision, seen Buddha Samantabhadra or Bodhisattva Manjushri, or dreamed of a Dharma king offering you a prophecy.

So, for now, please try your very best to attain the states of ngöndro practice. Otherwise, it is truly unfortunate that despite wearing monastic robes, you are not considered a true Buddhist at the moment of death. It is even more disheartening that you immediately descend into a lower realm as soon as you close your eyes. Considering how quickly life slips away, this is indeed a great pity.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* and other texts make comparisons to illustrate the difficulty of obtaining a human life. For example, they compare it to getting dried peas to stick to a smooth wall or balancing a pile of peas on the tip of an upright needle. These comparisons emphasize the immense difficulty of attaining human birth.



Lesson 26

“When you consider the relative numbers ... sink back into delusion!” [page 34-35]

We are continuing on the topic of “freedoms and advantages,” so now let’s move to the fourth point.

2.1.1.4. Reflecting on Numerical Comparisons

Recently, I have been suggesting that you meditate, which is very important for everyone. Without meditating on the rarity and difficulty of finding freedoms and advantages, we will not be able to cut off clinging to this life. As a result, our practice is doomed to fail.

Therefore, beginning practitioners should not immediately pursue the higher teachings or the most supreme empowerments. Instead, we should start with practicing ngöndro well and establishing a solid foundation.

When the preliminary practices infiltrate our mind, we will naturally be driven by a powerful motivation to do other practices. In contrast, without a good foundation laid out by ngöndro practice, even if we appear to have received high teachings and attained certain states of realization, they may not stay in our mindstream for long. This is the practical experience of veteran practitioners, as well as the essential instructions from eminent masters of the past.

Therefore, please make sure to understand the content of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* very well, and then engage in contemplation. Although the text

itself is rather straightforward and easy to understand, it may take a long time to truly resonate with the content and to always integrate it with one's mindstream.

During our practice, it is crucial to attain conviction. Take, for example, the practice on the difficulty of finding freedoms and advantages. Many Dharma students can present this topic well, but how many of them can talk about it from their own practical experience instead of just parroting the text? Who can always keep it in mind, whether they are working, sleeping, or at any moment while walking, sitting, lying down, and so forth?

If we have touched a raging fire with our own hands, even if someone insists that the fire is cold and not burning, our conviction about the nature of fire will not sway because of our personal experience. In the same manner, if we have resonated strongly with the belief that human life is rare, even if thousands of people tell us that human life is easy to come by, we will not be fooled by these lies or trapped by the present pleasures in life. Instead, we will tirelessly strive for liberation.

This can be considered a state of “realization.” The Chinese character for “realization” is “悟,” which combines elements of “mind” and “me.” Therefore, true “realization” is not about other people's words or external circumstances. Instead, it must come from within our mind—it is our inner experience, feeling, or conviction.

Hence, faith in Buddhism is not superstitious but a conviction grounded in wisdom. To generate faith in Buddhism, one should first doubt, then dispel the doubts through examination, and eventually build solid conviction.

Many individuals inclined toward natural science and other worldly knowledge believe that the basis for all success lies in genuine interest. However, I would argue that sometimes interest can be blind and irrational.

In comparison, true faith in Buddhism is the result of errorless conclusions from careful scrutiny, much like the way gold is refined. Therefore, Buddhism does not promote blind faith. Even regarding his own vajra words, the Buddha suggested we examine them as well and try to refute them if they do not make sense to us. What we seek is truth consistent with reality, and whenever we are fully convinced that the Dharma aligns with reality, our faith is considered true faith.

The practice on the difficulty of finding freedoms and advantages seems to be a basic practice of common preliminaries, but if we look at it from a deeper and more subtle perspective, it is closely related to all aspects of our practice. Therefore,

at the very beginning, we should approach the practice of ngöndro in the same way a child learns syllables. Without starting with syllables, we may end up like me speaking Chinese. As a Tibetan, sometimes when I speak Chinese, you all laugh, and I also feel a bit embarrassed.

Similarly, if we do not have the ngöndro foundation, even if we have received a lot of higher teachings, because we did not start right, it will be challenging for us to practice those teachings well. Even if we later want to go back to the preliminary practices, we may find it very difficult to do so effectively. It seems that some Dharma masters have not practiced ngöndro well either, so they do not guide disciples in a sequential manner, which results in some disciples forsaking Buddhism for other spiritual traditions. What a great pity!

Some teachers do not emphasize the importance of systematic and sequential study and practice of the Dharma. When they notice their disciples earnestly studying the Dharma, they might even persuade them to do retreat directly at a specific place, saying the blessing power is great over there.

I feel sorry for the disciples, but there is little I can do. After all, the teacher might consider those disciples their “private property,” so I do not have the right to interfere. Nevertheless, some teachers only consider talented, intelligent, and wealthy disciples their “private property.” The teachers often introduce a disciple without wealth, talent, and capacity to me with a long reference letter, saying, “This is my disciple. Please take care of him, including his life, accommodation, and practice.” That is strange! Why don’t they introduce their “best disciples” to me? (*The audience laughs.*)

Now let’s move on to the root text for the teaching.

When considering the relative numbers of beings from different realms, it becomes clear that being born as a human is incredibly rare. As said in a sutra:

It is believed that if the hell beings were as numerous as the stars in the night sky, the number of pretas would be equivalent to the stars visible during the day. Furthermore, if there were as many pretas as there are stars at night, there would only be as many animals as there are stars during the day. In a similar vein, if there were as many animals as there are stars at night, there would only be as many gods and humans as there are stars during the day.

It is also said:

The number of beings in hell is as vast as the specks of dust in the world, the number of pretas is as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges River, the number of animals is as many as the grains in a beer barrel, and the number of asuras is as plentiful as snowflakes in a blizzard. However, when compared to these vast numbers, gods and humans are as scarce as the particles of dust on a fingernail.

Therefore, the numbers of beings in the six realms can be portrayed in the shape of a pyramid, with a great number of hell beings at the bottom and a small number of gods and humans at the top.

We can also see that people who commit wrongdoings are numerous and everywhere, whereas people who do good are far fewer in number. Just take a look at the crowds on the streets of big cities or in the shopping malls or restaurants: how many of them commit virtuous deeds such as generating bodhicitta, upholding pure precepts, or reciting sutras, and how many of them commit negative actions with their body, speech, and mind? After all, the law of karma never fails, so the negative actions will definitely result in rebirth in lower realms.

According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, during the Accomplished Age, people committed none of the ten negative actions, so there were no hell beings then. Later people became immoral and corrupt, and they committed more and more wrongdoings. Especially during the present degenerate age, people's negative actions are extremely horrendous.

The Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra says:

For sentient beings in Jambudvīpa, their every movement and thought are sources of negative karma and sins.⁶⁴

Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way also says:

Most people cling to an unwholesome direction.
Thus, most common beings certainly go to bad rebirths.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Tripitaka Shikshananda and translated from Chinese into English by Johnny Yu.

⁶⁵ Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

Many people these days commit wrongdoings every day. Not to mention their entire lives, just the negative actions committed during a day, such as killing animals for food, would have already resulted in being stuck in samsara for millions of years.

Many monastics might have committed numerous wrongdoings before taking ordination. Have you compared your negative actions with your good actions before and after ordination, and checked which one outweighs the other? Are you looking forward to attaining good fortune as a human or a god in your afterlife? Are you certain you won't fall into a lower realm when you die?

If even a monastic, who has renounced worldly life in pursuit of liberation, cannot assure themselves of a favorable rebirth, let alone a person who disapproves of Buddhism, holds wrong views, or even slanders the Three Jewels.

Many places are "hell on earth." When we walk into a big restaurant, we notice hundreds of people eating live fish or shrimp. We do not have clairvoyance, but from their actions, we are able to infer their bad rebirth. This is without question. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the inhabitants of the hells are innumerable.

The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (The Samyuktagama Sutra) has an analogy:

It is akin to the particles of dust on a fingernail,
This quantity is equivalent to that of humans;
It is akin to the specks of dust in the entire world,
This quantity is equivalent to that of beings other than humans.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* also records a discourse between the Buddha and Mahakasyapa:⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Here is the original text translated by Kosho Yamamoto:

Then, the World-Honoured One took up a small bit of earth and deposited it on his fingernail, saying to Kasyapa: "Is this bit of earth, or that of the ten directions, greater?" Bodhisattva Kasyapa said to the Buddha: "O World-Honoured One! The earth on your fingernail cannot be compared to the earth of the ten directions." "O good man! One abandons one's body and gains a body again; one casts aside the body of the three unfortunate realms [i.e. the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals] and gains another body. And when all the sense-organs are perfect, one gains life in the Middle Country, gains right faith, and practises well the Way. Practising well the Way, one indeed practises the Right Way. Practising the Right Way, one attains Emancipation, and then one truly enters Nirvana. This is like the earth on my fingernail. One casts away one's body and gains one of the three unfortunate realms. One casts away the body of the three unfortunate realms and gains the body of the three unfortunate realms [again]. One is not perfect in all one's sense-organs, one gains life in an out-of-the-way [remote] place, holds an upside-down view of life, follows a twisted way, and does not attain Emancipation and Nirvana. All of this

Once the Buddha picked up a bit of dirt from the ground and asked Mahakasyapa, “Which one has more particles of dust, the dirt in my hand, or the dirt in the whole world of the ten directions?”

Mahakasyapa answered, “Of course it is the dirt in the entire world of the ten directions.”

The Buddha said:

The number of those who have a human form and who practice virtues are as few as the particles of dust in my hand, whereas the number of those who don’t have a human form and who commit vices are as many as the specks of dust in the entire world of the ten directions.

In addition, the Buddha also said,

Those who attain a human form are as few as the particles of dust on a fingernail.

Those who lose a human form are as many as the specks of dust in the whole world.

As for the text of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, please do not think you are unable to put it into practice. In fact, it is not hard to put it into practice. As long as you carefully contemplate the analogies quoted from the sutras, you will be able to understand the rarity of human life. Since the sutras are errorless, we should have uncontrived faith in them. Of course, this faith is not blind but rational. Through careful examination with wisdom, we cannot find any fault in the Buddha’s teachings, so we have to admit the sutras deliver the errorless truth; hence, we believe the analogies are correct. On this basis, we can reflect on numerical comparisons in a real-life context. Specifically, we can compare the number of Buddhists with that of non-Buddhists and the number of humans with that of animals. As for the number of beings whose existence is beyond our direct perception (e.g., hell beings, pretas, etc.), we can generate conviction about the analogies through the authority of Buddhist scripture. This is how we should reflect on numerical comparisons.

This is the right way to practice.

may be likened to the earth of the ten quarters.

In fact, there are far fewer beings inhabiting the higher realms. It is not enough to simply grasp this concept intellectually. By observing closely, we can readily perceive the striking disparity between the number of human beings and animals. Just consider the multitude of bugs that inhabit a clod of earth during summertime, or the countless ants in a single anthill—there are hardly as many humans in the entire Jambudvīpa. There are many bugs and ants on grass lawns in the summer. Because of this, the Buddha decreed that during the three months of summer, monastics should enter retreat⁶⁷ and should not carelessly walk on fields in case they step on bugs. Although it is stated in the sutras that the negative karma is not great if one unintentionally steps on and kills an insect, this act nevertheless brings harm to a life.

In the summer, you may also check the bugs on a hill to see whether the sutras are correct about the huge difference between the number of people and the number of animals. When I was herding yaks during my childhood, I often saw countless tiny insects on cliffs and hilltops in summer. Especially on drizzling or snowy days, I could see enormous layers of tiny black insects everywhere, including roadsides, rocks, and lawns. There might be several trillion of them in a place the size of one's palm. Seeing this, I dared not walk, afraid that I might step on and kill innumerable beings. In winter, when I visited forests, I saw innumerable ants in anthills as well.

Ocean sunfish have an incredible reproductive capacity and can release as many as three hundred million eggs at a time. This means the number of eggs that one female sunfish releases after over twenty rounds of spawning nearly matches the population of the entire world.

Therefore, it is clear that animals in the mountains, in the air, and in the sea significantly outnumber humans.

When I visited Hong Kong and other cities, I went to aquariums with some Buddhists. When I saw the fish swimming around, I truly felt the rarity of human life and the impeccability of the Buddha's teachings, and I could not help but generate compassion toward these sentient beings. But some householders did not seem to feel the same way. During the visit, they exclaimed, "Wow! This fish is so pretty!" or "Wow, cute fish, come, come, give me a kiss.." (*The audience laughs.*)

But even within human beings, we can see that those born in outlying regions

⁶⁷ It refers to Vassa, also known as Buddhist Lent or the Rains Retreat.

where there is no Dharma are far more numerous compared to those born in places where there is Dharma. Speaking of outlying regions, if we say there is no Dharma in some big cities, it is not completely accurate because there are Buddhists and monastics living there. But can we say the Dharma is thriving there? I am afraid not. In places like Shanghai, Beijing, and other densely populated cities, the Buddha's teachings and the realization of the Dharma are relatively scarce. By comparison, Tibetan areas are less populated, but Buddhism flourishes here. Take the Garzê region, for example: recent statistics show eighteen counties with a population of less than one million but with 515 monasteries open to the public and many monasteries closed to the public. In particular, there are about forty-five thousand people living in Sertar County, over forty thousand in Luhuo County, and about one hundred twenty thousand in Kangding County, but there are thirty to forty monasteries in each of these counties, and the vast majority of the population believes in Buddhism.

In the Tibetan regions where Buddhism thrives, many places are sparsely populated. Sometimes one has to drive a long while before seeing a house. In contrast, many cities in the Han Chinese areas are densely populated. For example, Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province, has an urban population of more than 4.6 million, and if the population in the surrounding counties is included, the overall population amounts to over ten million. There are over twenty-one million people in Shanghai and sixteen million in Beijing. I did some research in the past trying to figure out the monastic population in these big cities but could not find the data. Nevertheless, we have a general idea about the low number of temples in Shanghai and Beijing, so it is easy to estimate how limited the number of monastics there is.

In addition to monastics, there is a considerable number of lay Buddhists. However, some lay people study Buddhism just for the benefits of this life, such as the well-being of their families, and very few of them practice the Dharma for liberation. Take the twenty-one million people in Shanghai for example, how many of them aspire to attain liberation? You may check this question.

Many of you were brought up in big cities, so you may estimate how many people in your hometowns practice Dharma. Those who don't practice Dharma might have committed wrongdoings on a scale as large as the king of mountains, so will they fall into the lower realms after death? The answer is a resounding yes, according to the law of karma. Of all the ten million people living in a city, are

ten thousand of them certain to have a good rebirth? Through this analysis, you will realize why there are so many beings in the lower realms. Through various examinations, you will understand how precious it is to obtain a human life, in which one can study and practice Dharma.

In particular, there are even fewer people who have all eighteen freedoms and advantages. For example, among the 515 monasteries in the Garzê region, there are over fifty thousand monastics, but how many of those monastics truly have all the freedoms and advantages? If we check them one by one, we will realize there are not many.

Of course, those real eminent masters definitely have all the freedoms and advantages. They study and practice the Dharma day and night, which is very admirable. When teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Khenpo Kyiwang commented, “When we read the biographies of those great masters, we realize they are very different from us ordinary people.”

Take Mipham Rinpoche for example. Given the many works he wrote, one would think he spent his whole life just composing texts; given the large-scale Dharma activities he engaged in, one would think he spent his whole life just giving teachings; given the many virtuous deeds he engaged in, one would think he spent his whole life just on good deeds.

A true great master not only has great aspirations and capacities to benefit others but also never slackens in his own practice. For example, Patrul Rinpoche listened to the ngöndro teachings from his root lama twenty-five times in his life, and each time he listened, he completed the entire cycle of ngöndro practice. As for us, how hard it is to complete ngöndro even once!

Recently, a householder called me, complaining, “There is no way for me to finish the one hundred thousand prostrations! I just did one hundred, and I had to rest for three days and nights.” Alas!

Ordinary people’s capacity to do good is too weak. For example, we are supposed to prostrate for only fifteen minutes a day, but many of us are overwhelmed, wishing the time to be up as soon as possible. However, when we commit wrongdoings or just squander our time doing nothing, we can easily spend 150 minutes, not to mention just fifteen minutes. Therefore, for ordinary people, doing good is as hard as climbing a mountain, while doing bad is as easy as going downhill.

We have drifted aimlessly through the first half of our lives. However, it is

entirely up to us to decide how to spend the second half of our lives. As a Tibetan saying goes: “Put your clothes back on and retie your belt.”

As of today, we must recalibrate our lives and become true practitioners for the rest of our lives. Otherwise, we will squander our precious human lives, which would be a great pity.

With all these perspectives in mind, we should be filled with immense joy that we possess all the freedoms and advantages. A human life can only be called a “precious human life” when it is complete with all the freedoms and advantages, and from then onwards, this human life truly becomes precious.

Of course, you should have all the freedoms and advantages for a long time. It should not be the case that you have them all just for now, and then in a few days you start to lose them one by one.

What exactly is a “precious human life”? In *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, 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.⁶⁸

Longchenpa defines “the precious human life” in the following way: learning and reflecting on the Dharma, attaining its essence, disciplining one’s body, speech, and mind, persuading others to live a virtuous life, and practicing steadily like the unshakable king of mountains. Such steady practice is contrary to the situation where one practices only for a short while but changes completely once away from the supervision of the teacher and the sangha.

⁶⁸ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

A real practitioner practices steadily and consistently: they persist in their practice from ten years ago and keep on practicing twenty years later. Such a practitioner is considered to have a “precious human life.”

In contrast, if a person does not have all the freedoms and advantages, then however intelligent and clever this person is in worldly matters, however courageous, smart, prestigious, or knowledgeable they may be, they do not have a precious human life. There are many successful world leaders and influential entrepreneurs who seem powerful and capable of doing anything, but this abundance of good fortune can also allow them to commit more wrongdoings, which, unfortunately, is the cause of their future bad rebirth.

As the old saying goes:

Before falling into the lower realm, one excels as a king.

Therefore, such a human life is not precious at all. These are referred to as an ordinary human life, a merely human life, a hapless human life, a meaningless human life, or a human life returning empty-handed.

Some university professors, supervisors of doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, and academicians think highly of themselves and have always been scornful of Buddhism. In fact, such a person only contributes to a specific academic discipline at most, and they may not necessarily understand what the virtues are to keep and what the vices are to abandon. Longchenpa says:

Three kinds of human life may be attained:
 Mere, superior, or that which is most precious.
 Those who have the first, not knowing right from wrong,
 Do evil deeds. And though their faculties are whole,
 They’re only human in the commonly accepted sense.
 They may be born within a central land,
 And yet they act like savage borderers.⁶⁹

Therefore, those who do not accept the law of karma, even if they are very intelligent and capable in certain fields, are not worthy of our admiration.

In short, as a monastic, you would better not strive for anything worldly.

⁶⁹ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

Since you have had the fortune to receive ordination, you should uphold pure precepts, study and practice diligently, so the Dharma will permeate your mind. As a householder, you should also uphold pure precepts and study and practice well. By doing so, no matter whether you are a monastic or a householder, you will have a precious human life.

Otherwise, if you are only centered around the eight worldly concerns and never study and practice Dharma—you do not even bother turning a prayer wheel or reciting the Avalokiteshvara mantra—you are living a human life in vain. It is as if you have a wish-fulfilling gem in your hands but fail to use it or return empty-handed from a land full of precious gold. What a pity!

Toward those people, we should be compassionate and help them if we can. Otherwise, they will be living such a wretched life! They think they are smart and wise, claiming, “The more negative actions, the happier,” “The more negative actions, the more beautiful,” “The more negative actions, the more heroic,” and so forth. Their words and deeds are totally misguided, and they are oblivious to the sufferings in the lower realms.

It is like when a psychopath praises the joy of imprisonment due to their obliviousness to the suffering in prison, and then deliberately breaks the law. A normal person would say they have gone insane, and there is no way to dissuade them from doing silly things. There are many such individuals around us. If you tell one of them that they are wrong, they will be unhappy and refuse to admit their faults. However, all they do is accumulate bad karma, and no matter whether they accept the law of karma or not, they must endure excruciating sufferings in future lives.

We are very fortunate to have encountered the great Dharma, but there are countless beings around us who are still extremely ignorant and do not know what to keep and what to abandon. Therefore, we should always pray to the guru and the Three Jewels for blessings so that we will be capable of helping them as soon as possible.

In fact, benefiting sentient beings does need blessings from buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Dharma protectors. Otherwise, it is hard to accomplish what you wish.

Next, we will study a few analogies in Patrul Rinpoche’s text that further explain the stupidity of those who squander their human lives.

- 1) To come across a precious jewel
 Is nothing compared to finding this precious human life.
 Look how those who are not saddened by samsara
 Fritter life away!⁷⁰

Let's compare this precious human life with a precious wish-fulfilling jewel. The jewel can only meet all your needs for food and provisions in this life. For example, if you win a ten-million-dollar lottery, you can only buy things like houses and cars and enjoy some temporary pleasures. The lottery money is useless for your happiness in a future life; the actual power of jewels and money is limited.

However, attaining a precious human life is very different. It allows us to study and practice the Dharma so we can free ourselves and others from samsara. Therefore, a jewel is nothing compared to our precious human life. Sadly, some people cultivate no aversion to samsara, so they fritter their lives away. What a great pity!

Therefore, now that you have a precious human life, please do not squander it. Make sure to cherish and spend your time well every day. In fact, to cherish your human life is to cherish your time; you should regard time as life, and within your limited time, try your very best to undertake positive actions. For example, the sangha members staffing at Larung Gar should make good use of their spare time by focusing on the Dharma, in addition to serving the sangha. It is important for them to avoid being lazy or sleeping in, as this may hinder their progress in their Dharma practice.

The biography of Master Xuyun tells a story of two lazy monks who slept in while the abbot was out and were beaten up badly by ghosts. As you can see, even ghosts will bring troubles to practitioners who do not cherish time for diligent practice. By contrast, those practitioners who are very motivated to study and practice are not impacted by sickness and obstacles, so a ghost or other non-human has no way to bring them troubles.

- 2) To win a whole kingdom
 Is nothing compared to meeting a perfect teacher.
 Look how those with no devotion

⁷⁰ The translation of this version is taken from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 35.

Treat the teacher as their equal!⁷¹

Being enthroned as an emperor is nothing compared to meeting a qualified teacher. However, those lacking veneration only regard the teacher as an ordinary friend, so they cannot attain the profound realization in the teacher's wisdom mind. How pitiful!

In *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, Longchenpa says:

One receives no blessings if regarding the teacher as an ordinary person.

As we should know, blessings come from faith. If we see the teacher as a buddha, we will receive the blessing of a buddha; if we see the teacher as a bodhisattva, we will receive the blessing of a bodhisattva; if we see the teacher as a superior person, we'll receive the blessing of a superior person.

For example, when the teacher tells us, "Do not fritter away your time," if we treat this instruction as the words of the Buddha, then our veneration will bring us the corresponding benefit, and we will definitely receive the extraordinary blessing. However, if we think, "What are you talking about? You are frittering away your time all day long, so how dare you give me this instruction?" then we definitely will not receive any blessing.

As said in the well-known verse:

Now that we have the precious human life that is hard to obtain,
And we have encountered the Dharma that is hard to meet,
If we do not use this human form to liberate ourselves in this life,
Then when can we get ourselves liberated?

Therefore, when we are fortunate enough to encounter the supreme Dharma and the qualified teacher, we should strive to attain liberation.

- 3) To be given command of a province
Is nothing compared to receiving the bodhisattva vows.
Look how those with no compassion

⁷¹ The translation is from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 35.

Hurl their vows away!⁷²

Obtaining a leadership position such as a director-general, a division chief, or a section chief is nothing compared to receiving the bodhisattva vows and generating bodhicitta in the mind. However, those without compassion do not appreciate their bodhisattva vows; they often hold grudges against others and discard bodhicitta like throwing away a piece of rock. What a great pity!

- 4) To rule over the universe
Is nothing compared to receiving a tantric empowerment.
Look how those who do not keep the samayas
Jettison their promises!⁷³

Becoming a universal ruler is nothing compared to receiving a tantric empowerment. Keeping samaya vows is essential for tantric practitioners. Those who do not keep the samayas will lose all the blessings, qualities, and wisdom transmitted through the authentic lineage. They will not receive any benefit from the Dharma, and instead, they will fall into the lower realms. What a great pity!

Many tantric practitioners these days pay no attention to keeping their samayas and practicing ngöndro. All they want is to receive this empowerment and that empowerment. Perhaps the reason they participate in an empowerment is to receive something to eat or drink, not necessarily for attaining blessings and achievement.

If we want to receive blessings and attain enlightenment, it is crucial to practice ngöndro and uphold samayas. Without these two, just attending an empowerment ritual may not bring any significant change to our mindstream.

If a practitioner places special emphasis on ngöndro and samayas, they will definitely make more and more progress in their Dharma practice. If a practitioner does not care about ngöndro and samayas but instead just visits here and there for new teachings, then their mind will run counter to the Dharma. This is what we have witnessed with our own eyes.

⁷² The translation is from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 35.

⁷³ The translation is from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 35.

- 5) To catch sight of the Buddha
Is nothing compared to seeing the true nature of mind.
Look how those with no determination
Sink back into delusion!”⁷⁴

Catching sight of buddhas and bodhisattvas is nothing compared to seeing the true nature of mind through the teacher’s pith instructions. However, those without determination will sink back into delusion, even if they have recognized the true nature of mind. This is because, due to their lack of diligent practice, they fail to maintain that recognition. As Jigme Lingpa said, even though beginning practitioners may see the true nature of mind, this recognition is like sunshine appearing through clouds, but soon it is covered by the clouds of discursive thoughts again; thus, the mind of a beginner quickly regresses to its previous deluded state. What a great pity!

Therefore, when tantric practitioners see the true nature of mind upon receiving the teacher’s pith instructions, they should continue to practice. Some practitioners have received many mind-training instructions, and they may have attained a certain understanding and experience of the nature of mind. Then, they must persist in doing sustained practice; otherwise, their state of practice will regress easily. So please, never give up diligent practice.

⁷⁴ 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, 2011, page 35.



Lesson 27

“These freedoms and advantages do not come by ... that we may attain the very essence of the freedoms and advantages.” [page 35-37]

In the previous class, we reflected on numerical comparisons among beings of the six realms, and we understood the rarity of human life. Now let’s continue with this.

The attainment of these freedoms and advantages is not random or accidental. It is the result of the accumulated merit and wisdom over many kalpas, as stated in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

...to obtain the freedoms, we need to observe pure discipline; to obtain the advantages, we need to gather a mighty store of merit through the practice of generosity and so on. Furthermore, in order to obtain the freedoms and advantages, these primary causes have to be linked by pure aspiration, which is a contributory cause.⁷⁵

It is said in the sutras that there are four kinds of “rarity”: the rarity of obtaining a human life, the rarity of encountering the Dharma, the rarity of generating faith in the Dharma, and the rarity of generating bodhicitta. Now we have all four kinds of rarity—the result of an accumulation of merit and wisdom built up over many kalpas, so we have such a supreme opportunity in this life.

Many people, upon amassing great wealth, think they are tremendously

⁷⁵ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by Dipamkara and the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004.

fortunate. In fact, having a human life is far more fortunate than having wealth. The wealth, however abundant it is, can only bring us temporary benefits for this life, whereas our human life can enable us to obtain the ultimate benefit of liberation from samsara.

Therefore, we should carefully reflect on this, which in itself is the practice of the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. The so-called practice does not necessarily mean we meditate with our eyes closed until certain states arise or the bindu (essence-drop) appears.

If we contemplate this over and over again, in the end, the conviction that “human life for the Dharma is very rare and precious” will arise naturally. Such a conviction is neither a pretense nor a fabrication; it arises naturally from our mind, and we feel so fortunate to have such a precious human life. This means we have realized the rarity of human life.

Such a practice is not hard at all, so everybody can do it. Some Dharma students complain, “I got up early in the morning, trying to meditate, but was not able to do it well. Maybe it is because my karmic debt is too heavy? It is just so hard for me to meditate that I have no choice but to fall asleep again.”

In fact, no matter how dim-witted you are and how rampant your discursive thoughts are, you can still read the text related to your meditation practice over and over again and reflect on the content repeatedly. Then, you will be able to grasp its meaning and start to “feel” it in your meditation.

The great learned master Trakpa Gyaltsen said:

This human life with freedoms and advantages
Is not the outcome of your own resourcefulness,
But the result of the merit you have accumulated.

The fact that we have the human form with eight freedoms and ten advantages is not the result of our power, social status, wealth, or fame. Some worldly officials may have obtained their positions with money or connections, but there is no way for them to obtain a human form by the same means. The only reason we have this human form is that we have engaged in wholesome deeds and accumulated merit over many kalpas. To the monks and nuns present today, please do not think your ordination just came by chance or coincidence—that you happened to generate

renunciation from family life. In fact, it involved many intriguing causes and conditions relevant to you.

Many people like to say, “Whatever happens is predestined,” or “We cannot change our destiny.” Actually, if they know the explanations in the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and in Buddhist logic, they will have to accept the law of cause and effect. When they finally understand the profound relationship between causes and effects, they will realize everything is the result of previous actions, and whatever happens now has its antecedent causes. Those wise individuals who have such an understanding will definitely ponder issues related to their liberation from the cyclic rebirths in samsara. By doing so, they will appreciate their precious human life and will not fritter away their time on nothing.

However, for those who do not have the slightest notion of Dharma, being born as a human only to engage in wrongdoing, such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying, is considered even worse than being born in the lowest of the low realms. Why? Because the negative actions conducted by animals are quite limited due to their lack of intelligence, whereas those conducted by human beings can be fatal, given their expertise and competence in certain fields. For example, a person can build all kinds of weapons, such as nuclear weapons or atomic bombs, which can destroy all lives on earth in a second.

Some individuals are unable to conduct such large-scale wrongdoings, yet they have formed very bad habits since childhood. For example, they slaughter chickens or fish every day or devour many lives to nourish their own bodies. In comparison, although animals are in a lower realm, they will not commit so many acts of atrocity. For example, yaks and goats spend their whole lives eating grass and drinking water and live a pure life.

Some people live terrible lives; they are so adept at committing wrongdoings but so incompetent at doing anything good. They do not believe in the Three Jewels and have never made one prostration, offered one butter lamp, or burned one piece of incense in their whole lives. It is very likely that we have such individuals around us. They can be found everywhere, so we do not necessarily have to meditate hard, trying to figure out what such a person is like. Given what they do, we can tell their human life is worthless. As Jetsun Milarepa said to the hunter Gonpo Dorje:

To have the freedoms and fortunes of human birth is usually

said to be precious, but when I see someone like you, it doesn't seem precious at all.⁷⁶

The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa has this story about how the hunter Gonpo Dorje met Milarepa:

When Milarepa was in retreat in a secluded cave at Mountain Nyishang Gurta on the border between Nepal and Tibet, one day he heard a dog barking, followed by a gunshot. Soon a black deer came near Milarepa, covered in sweat and trembling with fear. Upon seeing the frightened deer, Milarepa generated great compassion and calmed the deer by singing a vajra song, or a song of realization. The deer relaxed and lay down on its left side.

Soon afterward, a hunting dog with red fur appeared, barking aggressively. Milarepa also generated great sorrow and compassion toward the dog, and he pacified the dog's anger by singing another vajra song. The dog wagged its tail in a friendly way and lay down on its right side.

Milarepa thought, "A depraved person must be after these two animals. I am afraid this person is coming soon." Shortly, a fierce hunter with angry eyes appeared, running toward Milarepa with his gun, bow, and arrows on his back. When the hunter saw his dog and the black deer peacefully lying down beside Milarepa, like a mother and her child, he thought, "This yogi must have cast some spell on my dog and the deer!"

Therefore, he flew into a rage and shot an arrow at Milarepa. Being an expert archer, he was shocked that he missed. At that time, Milarepa sang a vajra song to the hunter, which included this verse: "To have the freedoms and fortunes of human birth is usually said to be precious, but when I see someone like you, it does not seem precious at all."

[Indeed, hunters, fishermen, and butchers spend their whole lives committing vices, so they are really pitiful!]

Upon hearing this vajra song, the hunter felt the yogi was miraculous and perhaps an extraordinary enlightened being. Then he entered Milarepa's cave and found no provisions or possessions, but only some nettles and grassroots as his food. The hunter could not help but generate incredible faith in Milarepa. He

⁷⁶ The translation of this verse is sourced from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 36.

offered his bow, arrows, and captured animals to Milarepa, requesting to be his disciple and vowing to never again commit wrongdoings.

Initially, the hunter planned to return home and explain his plans to his family, and then come back and follow Milarepa. However, Milarepa disagreed, asking him to immediately cut off his attachment to his family and follow him into a life of practice right away.

Later, the hunter Gonpo Dorje became a great enlightened master. The dog and the black deer were also freed from the sufferings of the lower realms.

There are many wonderful stories about Milarepa's life. Those who have not read the biography should do so. In the history of Tibetan Buddhism, Milarepa is considered a great practitioner. His songs of enlightenment and vajra words have had a profound influence on later generations, myself included.

I have great confidence in his biography. I remember more than twenty years ago when I was still in junior high school, once I was home on sick leave, and a lama from my village read us the *Biography of Milarepa* every night. In about two weeks, I heard the entire biography from this lama. My memory was very good back then, so I could retell many stories I heard.

One summer, after I was back at school from sick leave, I went with my classmate Soratse to the Zongta Grassland, where flowers were blooming everywhere. It was so beautiful! We first washed our feet by the river and then sat on the grass. I told him stories from the Biography of Milarepa for the whole afternoon. As he listened, tears fell down his cheeks. Later, he failed to enter the normal school due to poor grades, but he still remembered those stories.

Last year when we met, he said, "When we were in junior high school, you already gave me teachings, and I still remember them vividly. At that time, I started to generate great faith in the Dharma."

Sometimes, one short story can indeed change a person's life. I have interviewed many Buddhists with higher worldly educations, and some said that after reading Milarepa's stories and his songs of enlightenment, they gained a new perspective on life that eventually brought them to the monastic path. There are many such cases.

Now let's get back to the teaching.

When we have time and opportunity, we should meditate on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages more often. Many people either lack mental

strength or have no opportunity to practice, so few of them really know the rarity and difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. If you look around, not many people in the whole world are living a precious human life. Of course, they will be upset when hearing us speak like this, but still, their human life does not seem precious at all.

The world population is rapidly growing: in just over fifty years, it has increased from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 6.3 billion in the year 2000.⁷⁷ It is expected that in a few decades, the population will reach ten billion. Given the limited space and resources on the earth, this rapid growth will bring a series of environmental, social, and economic problems, as well as an energy crisis.

These problems and crises arise from the fact that more and more people are doing less good, committing wrongdoings, and rejecting the law of karma. Unfortunately, the opposite is not happening—people are not engaging in more virtuous acts; thus, they are unable to bring a brighter future to the world. Given all the existing problems, humankind will have to face even more challenges and hardships in the future.

We Buddhists must reflect on what has happened. Compared with our ancestors, modern-day people are more interested in wrongdoings and are also more capable of committing vicious actions. Today's ethics, morality, and cultural education are also getting weaker.

The world seems to be moving forward with astonishing developments in science and technology, of which many people are proud. However, people's morality has been constantly deteriorating, so human beings are bound to become more deluded and perilous.

Therefore, we should reflect more on the difficulty of finding freedoms and advantages and refrain from indulging ourselves in immediate gratifications as worldly people do. Of course, we are not pessimists who cannot discern pleasure from sorrow or who blindly believe life is full of suffering. After all, wisdom in Buddhism is more insightful than any worldly knowledge. If indulgence were indeed a worthy action, it would be advocated in Buddhism; yet the Buddha never advocated indulgence, and you can figure out why.

Regarding the capability for committing wrongdoings, humans far surpass all other sentient beings. Thus, nothing has as much power to drag us down to

⁷⁷ The world population in 2020 is 7.75 billion.

the lower realm as human life. Some people, due to the vicious deeds they have committed throughout their lives, condemn themselves to countless kalpas of suffering in the hell realm, with no chance of regaining the human form. For example, a national leader who starts a war or destroys Buddhism will undoubtedly face dire consequences. There were several persecutions of Buddhism in the history of China, the largest of which were the Three Disasters of Wu and the Disaster of Emperor Shizong.

The first Disaster of Wu was carried out by Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei, who was an ill-tempered and cruel ruler. He ordered Buddhism to be abolished three times and destroyed Buddha statues, images, and scriptures across the country. Meanwhile, he slaughtered monastics, both young and old, without any mercy. Once a monastic at large was captured, he would be decapitated or slaughtered in public. As a result, not a single monk or nun could be seen within Emperor Taiwu's territory.

The second Disaster of Wu was carried out by Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou dynasty, who destroyed temples and stupas, burned Buddhist scriptures and images, and forced monastics to disrobe. Later, Emperor Wu invaded and took over the territory of Northern Qi and implemented the abolition of Buddhism there as well. He again destroyed all the Buddha images and scriptures, demolished over forty thousand temples, confiscated their land, and gave it to his ministers. More than three million monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life. Buddhism was completely wiped out at that time.

The third Disaster of Wu was carried out by Emperor Wuzong of the Tang dynasty, who ordered the burning of all Buddhist scriptures in the palace, the burying of all Buddha statues, and also banned all teaching in the temples. He banned more than 4,600 large or medium-sized temples and more than forty thousand small temples. More than 260,000 monks and nuns were forced to return to civilian life.

The fourth persecution was carried out by Emperor Shizong of the Later Zhou dynasty, who did not execute monastics or destroy Buddhist scriptures on a large scale, but still banned more than thirty thousand temples and forced tens of thousands of monks and nuns to disrobe. He ordered Buddha statues destroyed so the copper could be used to mint coins to fill up the national treasury.

These emperors' persecutions of Buddhism were very similar to those of

King Langdarma of Tibet, a ninth-century Tibetan ruler who also persecuted Buddhism.

The vicious deeds each of them committed in a lifetime are so terrible. Take Emperor Wuzong for example: among the twenty-one emperors of the Tang dynasty, he is the only one who suppressed Buddhism. He was on the throne for only six years, but nevertheless, he managed to demolish Buddhism during his reign. If science and technology had been very well developed, he could have brought the persecution of Buddhism to the whole world.

Some historical accounts contend that the Three Disasters of Wu were related to Taoism, and the Disaster of Emperor Shizong was related to Confucianism. However, some historians have said the fundamental reason for the four anti-Buddhism persecutions was related to the national economy.

Before each persecution, large-scale expenditures on Buddhism during the previous reigns had exhausted the national treasury. In addition, during periods of foreign invasions, monks and nuns could legitimately escape military service and could also avoid paying taxes, which put a lot of pressure on society. Monastics were supposed to conduct ascetic practices, but many of them amassed significant wealth in the temples and acquired extensive land holdings. This situation placed great financial pressure on the state. Moreover, the emperors considered Buddhism a foreign religion that conflicted with local Chinese religions. The above reasons prompted the emperors to persecute Buddhism.

Changlu Zongze, a Chinese Chan Buddhist monk of the Song dynasty, reviewed the situations and commented:

The Three Disasters of Wu befell our religion,
Followers of Buddha Shakyamuni departed, leaving temples
and stupas deserted.
This occurred because in the past when Buddhism was revered,
Monastics failed to uphold the true essence of purity and
simplicity.

Therefore, the anti-Buddhism persecutions were connected to the fact that many monastics did not lead a simple life and fully dedicate themselves to spiritual practices in line with the pure teachings of Buddhism. This failure to uphold the true principles of Buddhism ultimately set the stage for future calamities.

Practitioners of later generations have to reflect on Changlu Zongze's words. Today, many monastics and practitioners live a simple life with few desires, and they truly study and practice the Dharma, which is worthy of praise. However, some monastics merely idle their time away without doing anything meaningful; they contribute nothing to Buddhism and society at large and instead cause misunderstandings about Buddhism.

As a Buddhist, if you conduct virtuous deeds, you will bring great benefits to society and the nation. Even if you are not capable of doing something significant, as long as you make aspirations with pure intention, there is no doubt you will bring peace and happiness to beings.

On the contrary, if Buddhists are greedy for money, hardly uphold pure precepts, and do not act according to the Dharma, the increasing number of such Buddhists will become a burden to society.

Therefore, when we study the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages, we should also review relevant historical events and compare current situations with those that caused the anti-Buddhism persecutions.

We just learned that if an individual has committed a severe wrongdoing, they cannot be freed from the lower realms for many kalpas. Therefore, when we have a human form, it is totally up to us what we do with that form: doing good or doing bad.

Some people complain, "I can't study Buddhism, because I am controlled by my family, my work, and my karma." In fact, compared to beings of other realms you still have freedom. Imagine if you were an animal, you would not have any possibility to practice the Dharma. Now that you have this precious human life, you can always find a solution to alleviate the pressures from society and family on your Dharma studies. The key is whether you have enough mental strength to do so.

Recently I read an article entitled *Holding the Key to Your Happiness*, which stated that a mature person has the ability to grasp the key to their own happiness. They do not need to rely on others to make them happy; instead, they can bring happiness to others. Similarly, the key to our future happiness is also in our own hands if we choose virtues over vices. If a person firmly believes in the law of karma, they will not allow themselves to willingly plunge into the abyss of suffering by committing vicious deeds. However, due to influences from the external environment and their own karma, some people are dubious about the existence of a lower

realm and its suffering. As a result, they may engage in certain actions that deviate from the right path.

As the verse says:

Used well, this body is our raft to freedom.
Used badly, this body anchors us to samsara.
This body does the bidding of both good and evil.⁷⁸

If we use this human body to offer lamps, prostrate, and engage in other good deeds, then it is our raft to freedom. Our body can then take us across the ocean of cyclic birth and death full of suffering to the other shore of liberation and nirvana. However, if we use this human body to conduct vicious deeds such as killing, then it anchors us to samsara and imprisons us in the lower realms with no hope of liberation.

Therefore, this human body is like a servant who can either clean up the house or mess up everything. Thus, we have to weigh the pros and cons of this human life. Each one of us has a body, and all our actions are carried out through it. Therefore, our mind—the master of the body—must always check and guide what the body is doing with mindfulness and vigilance.

It is thanks to the power of all the merit we have accumulated in the past that we have now attained this precious human life complete with all the freedoms and advantages. Therefore, we must use this human life to pursue the essence of the supreme Dharma. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

And yet it may indeed be kept
As food to feed the vulture and the fox.
The value of this human form
Lies only in the use you make of it.⁷⁹

Apart from performing virtuous deeds, we must prevent the body from doing things mindlessly or even engaging in negative actions. Although the body can be like an enemy that carries out actions leading to all our sufferings, we still need to protect it well. Because if through the body, we uphold precepts and live long,

⁷⁸ The translation is from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Yale University Press, 2011, page 36.

⁷⁹ Shantideva, *The Way of The Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

it can generate great merit. As said in Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*:

Although the body is seen like a foe,
Nevertheless it should be protected.
By long sustaining a disciplined [body]
Great merit is created.⁸⁰

Therefore, those who study and practice the authentic Dharma can bring great benefit, even if they just stay in this world for one day. Those who always commit vicious deeds might be better off leaving the world a bit earlier. And even if they are reborn as animals, this is better than becoming a human, because at least animals cannot commit wrongdoings as much as humans can.

Many people indulge daily in eating, drinking, and partying, relentlessly pursuing wealth. In succumbing to the eight worldly concerns, they squander their precious human lives meaninglessly. If we, as practitioners, do the same, failing to practice the Dharma throughout our lives, then at the time of death, we will only clutch our chests in deep regret. It will be truly heart-wrenching and lamentable.

Some people are unaware of the existence of rebirth. When they die, they are no different from unintelligent yaks; they have neither regret for their past wrongdoings nor caution about the horrors of rebirth.

In fact, sometimes it seems that human beings are not as smart as we think. Some scientists and writers consider themselves smart, but they do not even know whether rebirth exists or not and remain indifferent to future lives. As it says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Thus, having found this moment of reprieve,
If I now fail to train myself in virtue,
What greater folly could there ever be?
How more could I betray myself? ⁸¹

Now that we have obtained the precious human life, if we fail to engage in virtuous deeds, nothing could be more ignorant than this! It is understandable if

⁸⁰ Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

⁸¹ Shantideva, *The Way of The Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011, chapter 4, verse 23.

others betray us, but isn't it too much if we betray ourselves? Unfortunately, many people are influenced by karma from past lives and conditioned by education in this life, so they become incredibly ignorant. Alas! What a pity!

Now that you have obtained a precious human life capable of studying and practicing the Dharma, you should really rejoice. In *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*, Longchenpa says one should reflect on the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages with joy.⁸² To be honest, do you have this feeling: "In the vast sea of people, thousands of them do not know the existence of rebirth. I am aware of its existence and have prepared for future lives. How fortunate! Although I may not have practiced the Dharma well, I do feel horrified about committing wrongdoings myself and become wretched when seeing others engage in negative actions?" If you have such feelings, you will appreciate this human life and use it to cross the sea of life and death full of suffering.

As you should know, it is this present life that is the turning point at which you can choose between lasting good or lasting evil. This choice is similar to the way a child's school years are crucial for them in finding a good job in the future. The same rationale also applies to your present practice. Your present life, which lasts a few decades, is crucial for you because it determines whether your future lives are filled with lasting happiness or lasting suffering.

Therefore, every person should carefully contemplate this. If in this lifetime you do not make use of this human form to attain enlightenment, it will be very difficult to obtain such a human life again. Once reborn into a lower realm, there will be no light of the true Dharma, and you will be clueless about what to do and what not to do. As a result, it will be extremely hard to escape from the lower realms, and you will fall endlessly further into even lower realms. Therefore, from now on, you must make every effort to practice the Dharma.

During such contemplation, you should apply the three supreme methods: start with generating bodhicitta, then practice without any conceptualization,

⁸² The root verse is:

To see the Buddha in this life is meaningful,
To hear the Dharma and to practice it is also meaningful.
This meaningful existence and the fruitful one to follow
Arise from the attainment of a form endowed with freedoms and advantages.
Reflect on this with great joy, constantly.

Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

and dedicate the merit at the end. Specifically, at the beginning of a session, you should generate bodhicitta by vowing to benefit all sentient beings. When you start meditation, you do not necessarily have to close your eyes; you can read and reflect on the text over and over again, and gradually conviction will naturally arise. When listening to the teaching, some practitioners may feel that a human life is really hard to obtain, but such a feeling can disappear as fast as lightning in the dark night. Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang offers this analogy:

...you will be like a piece of red-hot iron that becomes black again, as soon as it is removed from the forge.⁸³

These practitioners might be like this: When they are in a meditation session, they become so absorbed that tears stream down their cheeks, but when they are out of the session, they barely feel anything anymore. This is because they do not have a long-term sustained practice. If they can persist in the practice and always contemplate the content, they will truly recognize the rarity of human life. As a result, they will regard everything other than studying and practicing the Dharma as unreliable, including fame, social status, and possessions.

As some eminent masters said, if we are betrayed by a close friend we deeply trust, we will feel immense despair and harbor strong aversion toward the friend. If we have the same level of despair and aversion toward everything in samsara, it means we have cultivated genuine renunciation.

Of the four thoughts—the four contemplations that turn the mind away from samsara—the first is the thought of the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. If conviction about this thought arises in you, you will generate long-lasting renunciation, which means that except for the pursuit of liberation, you will have no interest in anything else. As Milarepa says:

In a rocky cave in a deserted land
My sorrow is unrelenting.
Constantly I yearn for you,
My teacher, Buddha of the three times.

Personally, I like this verse very much. Retreating in his secluded cave, Milarepa retained no interest in anything in samsara at all times, instead of just for a few days.

⁸³ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, translated by Dipamkara and the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2004.

It is just like how a person feels when they break up with their romantic partner—the whole world loses meaning for them. We should be like Milarepa, who always remained in a similar state of disgust and aversion toward samsara. Meanwhile, Milarepa firmly believed that his guru was inseparable from all the buddhas of the three times. It should not be the case that we are happy seeing the guru today and then abandon and even slander the guru a few days later. A practitioner's fervent faith in the guru should never regress. True renunciation and uncontrived faith in the guru are the two most crucial points in one's practice.

We should contemplate and meditate on the rarity of human life over and over again and put the teachings into practice. As a measure of how much this practice has truly convinced us, just like Geshe Chengawa, he devoted all his time to practicing and never even slept. Geshe Tonpa was worried about his health and advised him, "You would better rest, my son. You will make yourself ill."

"Yes, I should rest," Chengawa replied, "But when I reflect on how difficult it is to attain the freedoms and advantages that we have, I don't feel like resting." He recited the mantras of Miyowa⁸⁴ nine hundred million times and went without sleep throughout his entire life.

This level of dedication to practice is extraordinary. It might be very hard for us to emulate Geshe Chengawa and never sleep, not even for one hour a day. Patrul Rinpoche might have set standards for different levels, the highest of which is the state achieved by Geshe Chengawa. If we really cannot reach a similar state, at least we should practice diligently and avoid being lazy.

It is truly incredible if a person can recite nine hundred million mantras throughout their life. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche mentioned that he also recited nine hundred million repetitions of mantras of various deities, some mantras with only one syllable and some with a dozen syllables. Even though the mantra consists of only one syllable, it is not easy to recite it one hundred million times as we have vowed to do. In the past when we vowed to recite the syllable "Ah" (ཨ), I was not able to complete my recitation. Recently, I managed to recite a specific mantra one hundred thousand times a day, and it has not been very easy to do. I have to deal with many things in a day, so I have to get up earlier and go to

⁸⁴ Miyowa, or Akshobhya, refers to the Unshakable Tathagata Buddha, symbolizing the overcoming of anger and hatred towards other beings. It is believed that reciting the mantras of Akshobhya can purify all negative karmas, remove our outer, inner, and secret obstacles, overcome our hatred and anger, remove diseases, and more.

bed later in order to have some time for my own practice. Otherwise, a person like me, who is very occupied, will find it really hard to practice the Dharma.

If you want to practice well, you must not get lazy; otherwise, if you sleep too much, a few hours will slip away unnoticed. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

So take advantage of this human boat.
Free yourself from sorrow's mighty stream!
This vessel will be later hard to find.
The time that you have now, you fool, is not for sleep!⁸⁵

Sakya Pandita also says:

Our lifespan is cut in half,
As sleep at night is equivalent to death.

Our life is already so short, so if we spend half our life sleeping, it is truly a great pity.

It is very hard for us to emulate Geshe Chengawa and never sleep at night, but even if we are not able to do the same, we should at least develop conviction about the rarity of human life. If such a conviction arises strongly in your mind, you will not sleep in. It is as if you have a big trip tomorrow morning, say to Beijing, Hong Kong, or somewhere in America, I bet it will be hard for you to fall into a deep sleep. If you do not have conviction, you will sleep soundly; the worse your practice on the rarity of human life is, the longer your sleep will be. The reason many practitioners sleep excessively is that their practice is poor. They must find a way to solve this issue.

Of course, not sleeping at all is impossible for most of us. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche suggested that we rest well when it is time to rest. I was still young back then, so I did not understand Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's words very well, thinking, "The time at night is so precious, so it is better to sleep only a little. Why does my guru say this to us?" But when I reached a certain age, I started to understand Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's intention and care. Indeed, when it is time to sleep, one should sleep; otherwise, it is not good. Nevertheless, we must not act

⁸⁵ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

like worldly people who live an idle life and conduct no virtuous deeds at all. We should find a good balance here and not go to extremes.

Therefore, before we develop conviction about the rarity of human life, we must practice diligently.

Here is the summary verse of this chapter:

*Although I have obtained these freedoms, I lack the essence
of the Dharma.*

*Although I have entered the Dharma, I squander my time
on distractions.*

Bless me and all deluded beings like me,

*That we may realize the true meaning of the freedoms and
advantages.*

Modestly, Patrul Rinpoche stated, “Even though I have been fortunate enough to possess the precious human life with all its freedoms and advantages, I am not excelling in my practice. Despite having entered the Dharma long ago, I am still squandering my time on unwholesome actions driven by greed, anger, and ignorance. I beseech all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, lineage gurus, and Dharma protectors to bestow their blessings upon me and all foolish beings like me, that we may attain the very core of these freedoms and advantages.”

Please remember that praying is of great importance. *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* specifically addresses the prayers and aspirations related to the practices concerning the four thoughts. Simply reflecting on the text briefly without earnest prayer is not sufficient.

When you do the practice, make sure you recite with your palms together and pray with your eyes closed: “Through the blessings of the guru, the buddhas, and the bodhisattvas, may I generate conviction about the rarity of the precious human life.” You should have a strong desire for this, as well as uncontrived faith in the guru, and then you can begin the meditation in this state. By doing so, your practice is bound to succeed. Otherwise, if you just go through the content in your mind carelessly while meditating, you will not reach any state of practice.

I hope everyone can develop conviction about the difficulty of finding the

freedoms and advantages, which is more important than anything else. With this as the foundation, you will not have any difficulty in doing subsequent practices.

On the other hand, if you fail to establish a solid foundation, however splendid the building above the ground is, at a certain point it will collapse. Therefore, it is very important for each and every practitioner to lay a solid foundation for their Dharma practice.

[This concludes *The Difficulty of Finding the
Freedoms and Advantages.*]



Lesson 28

“Seeing this threefold world as a fleeting illusion, ... which are like flies at the end of the season, have any permanence or stability?” [page 39–40]

The Words of My Perfect Teacher starts from the four common preliminary practices. We have finished the first one—the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages. You know the content now, but how is your practice? It is totally up to you to put the teachings into real practice. Now we move to the second common preliminary practice—the impermanence of life.”

2.1.2. THE IMPERMANENCE OF LIFE

Patrul Rinpoche placed an homage prayer in front of each chapter to praise his root guru’s realization and great qualities.

Seeing the impermanent and illusory nature of the three realms,

You have left the trivial affairs of this life behind like spit.

Through ascetic practice, you have followed the footsteps of the eminent virtuous ones of old.

Peerless guru, at your feet I humbly bow.

Through this prayer, Patrul Rinpoche pays homage to his root guru Jigme

Gyalwai Nyugu. In the course of our own practice, we should often pray to our gurus using this homage prayer as well, which is the tradition of many practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. When we pray, we may use this prayer.

For example, when meditating on “the impermanence of life,” you should begin with the practice of Guru Yoga. Before proceeding to the meditation, once again, put your palms together and pray to your root guru, aspiring to cultivate a conviction in the impermanence of life with the guidance of the guru’s blessing. It is essential to pray and pay homage with fervent faith.

Then, what are the great qualities of Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu?

“Seeing the impermanent and illusory nature of the three realms”: With wisdom, he directly perceived that the three realms (the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm) are a fleeting illusion, entirely characterized by emptiness, no-self, and impermanence in nature, devoid of any inherent existence.

“You have left the trivial affairs of this life behind like spit”: Thus, he did not grasp or desire any of the worldly trivialities, including glory, wealth, status, and fame; moreover, he left them behind like spittle in the dust.

I recently read the biography of Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu. What a wonderful account of his life story! It says in the biography that he did not have, not even for a split second, any envy or desire for the various displays of worldly beauty akin to heavenly beings or wealth resembling that of a nāga king. From his childhood until his death, he had unsurpassable faith in the Dharma. He spent his whole life pursuing the authentic Dharma, forgoing the eight worldly concerns, and following his guru wholeheartedly. What he did is beyond an ordinary person’s imagination.

“Through ascetic practice, you have followed the footsteps of the eminent virtuous ones of old”: In terms of studying and practicing the Dharma, he had been following in the footsteps of eminent masters of the past, persevering with his ascetic practices.

As seen in the biographies of many masters, they never parted from ascetic practices. Unlike some practitioners these days, who are unwilling to endure any hardships, they wish to attain realization while living an easy, comfortable, and happy life. It is fine to study and practice the Dharma in a rather comfortable environment if external conditions permit, but some people have gone a bit too

far—they do not want to spend time or effort on the Dharma, and even when the Dharma is brought to their doorstep, they are still unwilling to accept it.

Knowing how diligent the eminent masters of the past were, we practitioners of this later generation should feel very humble about ourselves. Past masters excelled greatly in pursuing the Dharma, generating renunciation, and assimilating the teachings that all phenomena are empty at the ultimate level and impermanent at the relative level. We should feel embarrassed when we claim to be disciples of these masters.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had all the great qualities described in this prayer: seeing the nature of the threefold world in his wisdom, regarding this life's worldly concerns as spittle in the dust, having no desire for pleasures that mundane people like, accepting all hardships for Dharma practice throughout his life, and practicing as diligently as the past eminent masters. Therefore, be it his blessing power, wisdom, or realization, our guru is incomparable. How extremely fortunate we are to have encountered such a great teacher in this life!

“Peerless guru, at your feet I humbly bow”: At the feet of his root guru, who has such supreme qualities, Patrul Rinpoche bows in great veneration with body, speech, and mind, and prays wholeheartedly: May all the states of preliminary practices and main practices in my guru's mindstream soon merge into mine, so I can attain the same fruition as my great guru did.

As I have mentioned many times, during our practice, we should not separate ourselves from prayer and aspirations. You are currently studying Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang's *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, which contains some analogies and similes that might be hard for you to understand. But they are from the wisdom mind of an enlightened practitioner, so their meaning far exceeds that of articles written by worldly people full of discursive thoughts. When you read this guidebook with fervent faith and pure wisdom, you are sure to obtain the corresponding states in your own minds.

In fact, the state of mind of an author for a Dharma book is very important. If the author has generated great compassion, conviction about impermanence, and realization of the nature of all phenomena, then readers will definitely receive benefits and obtain a definitive understanding.

Therefore, I suggest that you study *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* while practicing ngöndro. By doing so, I believe your mindstream will become more

virtuous and refined. Those of you with rigid personalities will start to become flexible and gentle, not being overly attached to worldly things; your faith in the Dharma will steadily grow, and you will be able to easily resolve any interpersonal conflict from within.

Whether our practice integrates with our minds is up to us. If the teaching does not infiltrate our minds, our study of the Dharma becomes superficial. It is just like taking courses at a university when one only studies the text without ever thinking of taming one's mind.

The way I am teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* this time follows the style of practical guidance, and the explanation I provide is also very comprehensive. There are still more “treasures” embedded in the text, but I am unable to go deeper due to the limitation of my “mining tool.” I just try my very best to dig out some treasures that I find very precious and share those with you—the Dharma friends with corresponding karmic connections. With your faith and wisdom, you will discover the rest of the treasures on your own, those that are beyond my ability to discover for you.

The content on impermanence we are about to cover is very important. Please do not forget your prayers and aspirations when studying and practicing it. Meanwhile, you should remember the content word by word, sentence by sentence, before proceeding with contemplation and meditation. This is the so-called analytical meditation and calm-abiding meditation.

As a beginner, you cannot directly abide in a meditative state. Therefore, when you meditate according to the practical guide, you should first do the analytical meditation, and then alternate periods of analytical meditation with periods of calm-abiding meditation, and then in the end you can naturally abide in the meditative state. This method applies to whatever practice you are undertaking, as Mipham Rinpoche stated clearly in the *Beacon of Certainty*.

Some individuals cannot always maintain awareness of impermanence, which indicates they have not reached the state of meditative abiding. Therefore, they should read the text repeatedly and contemplate the content over and over again. This textual analysis is also considered a practice, as it allows one to delve into deep meaning through careful examination, making it indispensable.

The method for listening to the teaching is outlined in *The Difficulties of Finding Freedoms and Advantages*. The content itself comprises seven meditations:

the impermanence of the outer universe where beings reside, the impermanence of the beings inhabiting it, the impermanence of holy beings, the impermanence of those in positions of authority, additional examples of impermanence, the unpredictability of the circumstances surrounding death, and intense awareness of impermanence.

2.1.2.1. The Impermanence of the Outer Universe Where Beings Reside

Our world, this outer environment formed by the collective good karma of beings,⁸⁶ and considered indestructible, encompassing the four continents, Mount Meru, the celestial realms, and the Iron Ring Mountains, lasts for many kalpas. However, it is also impermanent and will ultimately be destroyed by seven fires and one flood. *The Precious Garland for the Four Themes* says:

It is the same as well with the entire perishable world of your environment. At the times of its disintegration through seven fires, one flood, or wind, everything will become void, without even a remnant of a tip of a hair left: there will be only space.⁸⁷

Scientists agree on the eventual destruction of the universe. They believe that the planets in the universe, including the galaxy, the earth, the moon, and the sun, are moving and changing at every instant. Research published in a top-tier scientific journal⁸⁸ states that the earth's current lifetime is around 4.6 billion years and the sun's is around five billion years. About seven billion years from now, the sun will become a 'red giant' star, engulfing the earth. Despite divergent conclusions about when exactly the earth will end, scientists all agree that the earth, as well as the other planets, is not permanent and forever existing.

Of course, we are not experts on astronomy and hardly study this field, so when the subject of the "outer environment" is brought up, many of you immediately

⁸⁶ The outer environment is formed by the collective karma of beings. For example, hells are formed by the collective karma of hell beings, Jambudvīpa is formed by the collective karma of beings in Jambudvīpa. In today's world, China exists because of the collective karma of Chinese, and America exists because of the collective karma of Americans. As for our Larung Gar, it is formed by the collective good karma of the fourfold assemblies of our Buddhist institute.

⁸⁷ Longchenpa, *A Precious Garland for the Four Themes*, translated by Alexander Berzin and Matthew Kapstein, revised by Alexander Berzin.

⁸⁸ Ball, P. The end is shy. *Nature* (2001). <https://doi.org/10.1038/news010510-7>

think of your own house. This is similar to ants and other insects that, due to their narrow vision and limited mindset, only care about their own nests and show no interest in the bigger world beyond their own habitats.

When I was in middle school, I used to do things like this. During geography classes, I would not pay proper attention. When exams were approaching, I would cut out questions from the textbook, hide them in my sleeves, and plan to sneak a peek during the test. [Now, I am not trying to lead kids astray—do not follow my example!] It is the twenty-first century now, but back when I was studying, it was the twentieth century—a completely different time from yours.

The outer environment is indeed impermanent. A Dharma friend once told me that after studying the sixth chapter of *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, on the kalpas of destruction and voidness, he generated a strong sense of impermanence. Then, when looking at a mountain, he would think, “The whole outer environment is impermanent; this mountain looks spectacular, but it is nonetheless impermanent, and at a certain point, it will be nonexistent.”

In the same vein, when we look at a tall building, we should also think, “This building is constructed with steel and mortar and appears very sturdy. It may last for a few decades or even a few hundred years. However, since all conditioned things are impermanent, this building will not escape final destruction in the end.”

We must generate conviction about impermanence. We should not be like some worldly individuals who have no sense of impermanence; otherwise, we will procrastinate in our Dharma practice and ultimately fail to achieve anything. Why do so many Kadampa practitioners focus primarily on the practice of impermanence? It is because if a person practices impermanence effectively, they will undoubtedly become diligent, avoid laziness, and oversleeping. Moreover, they will not become preoccupied with worldly trivialities and will find fewer excuses to avoid practicing.

On the contrary, if a person does not effectively practice impermanence, no matter how many times they have received empowerment or pith instructions, what they have is simply verbal information about the text, which can only serve as a resource for a hopeful future. Furthermore, they are less likely to genuinely apply the teachings in practice. For this reason, eminent masters of the past placed great importance on the teachings of impermanence.

Some people think, “I do agree that the body is impermanent, but the outer

universe is so vast; can it be destroyed all at once?” To be clear, we never said the outer universe would be destroyed in one or two days. However, you should understand that it is impermanent by nature, so in the end, it will not escape final destruction.

Knowing this, we can further realize through inference that the outer environment we live in, as well as the body and mind we possess, will all cease to exist in the end. Therefore, we will develop a great aversion toward the illusion-like world, and this aversion is the best ally of our practice.

I hope every guidance in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* will inspire an inner experience within you. Once you have obtained these states of experience, you will surely perfect your practice and will not give in halfway through your spiritual journey.

Today, while talking to a Dharma friend, I reflected on this with a strong feeling, saying, “I feel so fortunate: When I first came to Larung Gar, I began my study and practice with *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Debate and discussion are important, but for a beginning practitioner, one must start with *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. In my mind, putting the teachings in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* into real practice is the most important practice in my life. Failing to establish a solid foundation through this practice is like building a magnificent palace on loose soil. No matter how splendid the exterior and interior designs are, how exquisite the building materials are, or how elegant the details are, the building will eventually collapse due to its inadequate foundation.

Some teachers do not place importance on preliminary practices. Of course, I am not criticizing any specific teacher; after all, each teacher has their own approach to taming disciples. However, I personally feel that without a solid foundation through preliminary practices, even if a student’s progress initially seems good, it can eventually fall apart. While receiving empowerment or pith instructions on the Great Perfection or Chan practice, the disciples may appear to have a good understanding. This brings great joy to the teacher, as they believe the lineage has more successors. The disciples also feel very grateful, regarding the teacher as their Dharma parent. However, after some time, it can be difficult to tell whether the guru-disciple relationship remains the same. Without the foundation, the mansion of realization in the disciple’s mindstream can easily fall into ruin bit by bit, leaving nothing in the end. Such a phenomenon is quite common these days.

Therefore, I sincerely wish you will not just talk about the preliminary practices; you should emulate Patrul Rinpoche and the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, who, deep within their minds, regarded ngöndro as the most important practice. Only after this foundation is well laid will your subsequent study and practice of the Dharma not be constrained or distracted by external circumstances. For example, when you study the five great treatises, the profound Sutrayana and Vajrayana teachings, or when you go out propagating the Dharma and benefiting beings, you will not be bound by various external conditions.

If you have conviction about impermanence, when you encounter temptations in the city, you can easily see through their nature. Even if you, as an ordinary person, generate afflictions due to the habitual tendencies of past lives, such afflictions will not last long. It is like a warrior who immediately jumps back up after falling to the ground; a practitioner will immediately guard the mind with vigilance and mindfulness when encountering any obstacle. Such power of the mind is very strong.

However, if your ngöndro practice is not grounded, then the power of your mind is not strengthened, and you may become lost when facing obstacles, feeling the overwhelming influence of the maras to the point that you can barely fight back.

After all, the outer universe is destined for destruction because 1) everything is impermanent, so it will be gone once the causes and conditions are exhausted; 2) beings commit serious misdeeds, as stated in *The Sutra of the Great Conflagration*:

When the disasters of fire happen,
Beings all commit misdeeds, uphold wrong views, reject virtues,
And engage in ten negative actions...

The outer environment will vanish sooner or later. Compared to the vast universe, each of us humans is truly insignificant. Nevertheless, each of us is a “citizen of the earth,” so we all have the responsibility to protect our planet.

We are citizens of the earth, as are yaks and other animals. Humans and animals are neighbors on this planet. Sadly, many people do not realize this. They slaughter animals, upset the ecological balance, and pollute ecosystems; all of these actions result in the shrinking of human habitat on the earth.

Before the seven stages of fire and one of water even begin, perhaps humankind

will have already gone extinct due to our own misdeeds. Countries around the world have held many meetings and discussions on these issues, trying to figure out solutions. But so far, the situation has only been somewhat alleviated, and the problems are not yet uprooted.

As inhabitants of the arth, we are responsible for protecting the environments we live in. Even if you reside in a small cabin, you should keep the surroundings clean. It is important to adopt the right attitudes and behavioral intentions to protect the environment.

Due to their personal qualities, some people only care about themselves, focusing on what to eat or wear, and rarely think about their larger surroundings. This is not good. We should care about our external environment; we should also protect and care for the animals living within that environment with compassion. By doing so, humans and nature will be in great harmony, celestial beings will spread auspicious rains of flowers, and people will live in peace and happiness.

On the contrary, if human beings think maliciously, act ruthlessly, and destroy nature unscrupulously, disasters are bound to occur. Why have earthquakes, fires, and other natural and man-made disasters occurred so frequently around the world in recent years? In fact, this is connected to the misdeeds of human beings.

It is not only Buddhists who believe this; many scientists in the West also believe there is a mysterious connection between humans and nature. Nevertheless, they have not yet found the “key” to solving the mystery. Through the lens of Buddhist views of impermanence and dependent origination, this mystery can be easily understood.

As the present great kalpa draws closer to the time of destruction, the beings inhabiting each realm below the god realm of the first meditative state will gradually vanish from the bottom up until not a single being is left.

As those who have studied the *Treasury of Abhidharma* already know, the destruction of a great kalpa takes twenty medium kalpas, during which the destruction of sentient beings lasts for nineteen medium kalpas, and the destruction of the outer universe lasts for one medium kalpa. Therefore, during the medium kalpas of destruction, beings disappear realm by realm, starting from the hell realms. Those hell beings with heavy karmic debts, who must continue experiencing their causal effects, will then be reborn in the hell realm of another universe. Those hell beings with lighter karmic debts will generate virtuous minds through the power of their

Dharmata (Dharma-nature), and as a result, will be reborn in the realm of pretas. Then beings in the realms of pretas, animals, and humans will also progressively disappear; some will be reborn in another universe, while others will be reborn in a higher realm due to the power of Dharmata.

Eventually, beings will disappear realm by realm until no one is left below the god realm of the first meditative state. In general, humans must practice until they reach and maintain a certain level of meditative concentration so they can be reborn in the god realm of the first concentration (or the first dhyana level). However, during the kalpas of destruction, they do not need to practice; they can attain the first meditative state through the power of Dharmata.

Then, seven suns will appear in the sky one after another. Here, some scriptures state that there will indeed be seven suns, while other scriptures mention one sun with heat equivalent to seven suns. However, the viewpoint of Patrul Rinpoche aligns with that of Longchenpa, as stated in *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, and this viewpoint is also expressed in the *Dirghagama Sutra*, which states that there will be a total of seven suns.

I conducted a detailed comparison of some Buddhist scriptures and found that Patrul Rinpoche's viewpoint here is consistent with that in the *Dirghagama Sutra* and somewhat different from that in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*.

Of course, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is a practical guide, while the *Treasury of Abhidharma* offers detailed analysis, resulting in different presentation styles that I will not elaborate on. If you are interested in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, I encourage you to consult its commentaries; what I am about to teach below is covered in the third chapter.

The first sun will burn down all trees and forests. The second will dry up all streams, creeks, and ponds including the stream at Larung Gar where nuns wash clothes. The third will dry up all the rivers, including the Ganges River and Nairanjana River in India, and the Yangtze River, Jinsha River, and Yellow River in China; and the fourth will leave all the great lakes, even Manasarovar, completely dry, without a single drop of water remaining. When the fifth sun appears, the great oceans, too, will progressively evaporate at first to a depth of one hundred leagues, then of two hundred, seven hundred, one thousand, ten thousand, and finally eighty thousand leagues. The remaining seawater will shrink from a league down to an earshot, until not even enough remains to fill a hoofprint (some scientists

believe that the sun will eventually become a red giant star, and one billion years later, no living beings will be left on earth due to the burning heat). By the time the sixth sun appears, the entire earth and its snow-capped mountains will have burned up. And when the seventh emerges, Mount Meru, the four continents, the eight sub-continents, the seven golden mountains, and the iron encircling mountains are all engulfed in flames. As said in the sutra:

When the great kalpa approaches its end,
The entire universe is destined for destruction;
All the mountains will be burned down,
And not a single particle of dust will remain.

The flames spiral downward, incinerating all the hell realms. [There will not be any beings left in the hell realms, so the fire will only engulf the outer environment of the hells]. As the fire surges upward, it will engulf the celestial palace of Brahma, already long abandoned. [The beings in the celestial realms have been reborn elsewhere owing to their karmic forces or the power of Dharmata, leaving the palace empty.] Above, the younger gods of the realm of Clear Light will panic and cry out in fear, “What an immense conflagration!” But the elder gods will comfort them, saying, “Do not panic and do not be afraid! Once it reaches the world of Brahma, it will recede. This has happened before.”

After seven such destructions by fire, realms including the god realm of the first concentration and below will all disappear; rain clouds will form in the realm of the gods of the second concentration, and torrential rain, like yokes of wood and showers of arrows, will pour down from the sky. Like salt dissolving in water, everything up to and including the realm of the gods of the Clear Light will vanish.

[When the god realm of the second concentration is closer to the time of its destruction, the beings inhabiting it will have already been reborn elsewhere, so the water will only destroy the outer environment.]

After such devastation by seven fires and one great water is over, the crossed vajra of wind at the base of the universe will surge upward. Like dust scattered by the wind, everything up to and including the realm of the gods of the third meditative concentration will be swept away.

Why will the god realms of the first, second, and third concentrations be destroyed by fire, water, and wind respectively? According to Buddhist scriptures

such as the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, this occurs because these three concentrations or meditative states correspond to specific faults of the conceptual mind. In particular, the first concentration (the first dhyana level) has the features of conception and discernment, like fire, so the corresponding god realm is destroyed by fire; the second concentration (the second dhyana) has the features of joy and pleasure, like water, so the corresponding god realm is destroyed by water; the third concentration (the third dhyana) has the features of inhalation and exhalation, like wind, so the corresponding god realm is destroyed by wind. The fourth concentration, known as the ultimate meditative state, is free from the eight faults of meditative concentration,⁸⁹ so the corresponding god realm will not be destroyed by fire, water, or wind.

Since the god realm of the fourth meditative state won't be destroyed during the great kalpa, does this mean it is permanent? Of course not! Longchenpa states in *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* that beings in the god realm of the fourth meditative state will either move to another universe due to the power of Dharmata or will eventually die out.

In the end, countless four continents, Mount Meru, and the heavenly realms in the three-thousand-fold universe will not escape final destruction, and everything will become a great void. As the Buddha says in *The Buddha Speaks of Impermanence*:

The Earth, the sun, and the moon will all perish in due time,
Not one thing in the world can escape impermanence.

In fact, the principle of impermanence is very profound. Taranatha tells a story in his *History of Buddhism in India*:

King Ashoka built 84,000 stupas to enshrine the relics of the Buddha, as a way to repent for his past wrongdoings. After the project was completed, to celebrate and dedicate the merit, he devised a plan to make offerings to members of the sangha for three months. He invited many monks and made great offerings in a forest garden. Ashoka especially had faith in an old bhikkhu who occupied the first seat in the row and made a special offering to him.

This old bhikkhu was, in fact, quite unlearned and dim-witted and could not

⁸⁹ According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, the eight faults are: considering, examining, the in-breath and out-breath, and pleasure and the other three, suffering, mental pleasure, and mental unhappiness.

even recite one verse. After mealtime, those who sat in the lower seats asked him, “Do you know why the king made a special offering to you?”

The old bhikkhu answered, “I don’t know.”

They then told him, “The king wants to ask for teachings after the meal is offered, so you must give a teaching.”

The words struck the old bhikkhu, who said, “I have been upholding upasampadā⁹⁰ for sixty years, but I do not understand a single verse. Had I known the king’s intention, I would have passed my food to another monk so that he could give the teaching. But now that I’ve finished my meal and cannot spit it out, what should I do?” He was tormented by his thoughts.

At that time, there was a garden deity in the forest who was aware of the old bhikkhu’s thoughts. He considered, “If the old bhikkhu offers no teaching, the king, after having done such a great virtuous deed, may develop wrong views and lose faith.” Therefore, the tree spirit transformed into human form and approached the old bhikkhu, telling him, “If the king asks for the teaching, you may say, ‘the earth and the mountains will all perish, let alone your throne. Your Majesty, please contemplate this.’”

Soon, the king came and offered the old bhikkhu a set of golden kasayas—the robes of a fully ordained monk—and then sat by his side for teaching.

[The Tibetan region also has a tradition of giving special offerings to senior practitioners. For example, if there are twenty monks offering chanting service, and the donor offers twenty yuan to each of the sangha members, they will specially offer forty yuan to the monk in the first seat. Perhaps it was the same in India back then.]

The old bhikkhu repeated what he had just heard from the garden deity. Upon hearing it, the king, due to his faith, was filled with great awe; he deeply contemplated the meaning of what the bhikkhu said and felt overjoyed by the significance of the bhikkhu’s words.

Then the garden deity told the old bhikkhu, “As an ordained monk, you shouldn’t waste the devotee’s offerings!” The old bhikkhu agreed, so later he sought teachings from acharyas (or teachers), practiced wholeheartedly, and attained Arhathood three months later.

⁹⁰ It means “fully ordained” here.

Therefore, the principle of impermanence is indeed supreme. When you visit a place and a benefactor makes a generous offering and then asks for teachings, if you know nothing, you can always say, “the earth and the mountains will all perish, let alone your wealth. Please think about this!” (*The audience laughs.*)

This is an important teaching that will surely benefit him, provided he has faith.

Reflect deeply and sincerely—if every one of the billion universes that constitute the cosmos, each with its own Mount Meru, four continents, and heavens, is to be simultaneously destroyed in this way, in the end, all things dissolve into a vast and empty void. Since even a great cosmos eventually fades into nothingness, how can our fleeting human existence, fragile like flies at the end of the season, ever be considered stable or permanent?

Buddhacharita (Acts of the Buddha) says:

Fires of the Kalpa of destruction can melt down Mount Meru
and evaporate all oceans,
Let alone these human bodies of ours, which are like bubbles;
Then how can we expect our bodies to remain forever?

We should understand that the mountains will be destroyed, the oceans will be destroyed, and the whole world will be destroyed, so there is no need for us to grasp anything so tightly. If a person lacks conviction about impermanence due to insufficient practice, they will think that everything exists inherently, including houses, cars, bodies, and so forth. If one tightly clings to something that they believe truly exists, failure will come to that person’s practice. However, if we practice well on impermanence, we will not face this issue.

In short, we should carefully contemplate and truly practice the above-mentioned content. It says in the *Pure Rules of Chan Monasteries*:

One should practice Dharma diligently,
As if to put out a fire on one’s head;
Just remain mindful of impermanence,
And be cautious not to indulge in indolence.

We should reflect on this in our meditation practice. We must practice diligently from this moment forward. We cannot procrastinate on our practice

and simply set it aside. Instead, we should contemplate impermanence and engage in diligent practice as promptly as a woman puts out the fire in her hair. Please do not squander your time idly.

This human form that we have is hard to obtain and easy to lose. We never know when we'll leave this world. So, whenever we think of engaging in positive actions, we should do so immediately and not procrastinate. Therefore, please cultivate renunciation now and practice diligently now. On the other hand, we should always exercise restraint when we have the intention to engage in negative actions.



Lesson 29

“These freedoms and advantages do not come by ... that we may attain the very essence of the freedoms and advantages.” [page 35-37]

As we have already learned, the outer universe in which beings live changes with each split second, and nothing remains unchanged and permanent, including the Dharma hall we use for teachings.

Recently, I listed how many times the teaching venue has changed since the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche began teaching until now, as well as how many times the venue where I give teachings to the Han Chinese fourfold assemblies has changed over the past decade. While laypeople who were not at Larung Gar were studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, they have also changed the venue many times. All these changes are reflections of impermanence.

Not to mention elsewhere, just look at where you have lived: the house you grew up in, the environment of your previous schools, and the place you live in now. What will these places become in the future? Therefore, if you examine many perspectives, you will come to understand that the outer environment is impermanent.

In fact, school education also covers the concept of impermanence; that is, everything is always in motion, and nothing is absolutely static.

Although worldly knowledge discusses impermanence, it does not delve into the subject as systematically and deeply as the Dharma does, let alone provide specific guidance for us to integrate it into our minds and put it into practice,

as *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* does. Many people like to say, “Everything is impermanent,” but have they really acted on that understanding, felt the urge to practice Dharma, and cut off attachment to permanence for worldly concerns?

Only when we have deepened our practice on impermanence will we find the motivation to practice Dharma. We’ll use impermanence day and night to encourage and supervise our Dharma practice.

Therefore, we must put enough effort into the practice of impermanence. It is easy for everyone to feel the constant change of everything once in a while; for example, after listening to a teaching, reading a good book, or encountering the death of a loved one, we may suddenly realize how impermanent everything is and conclude that we would better practice diligently.

However, it is not easy for many people to keep the principle of impermanence in mind at all times. Therefore, we should study, contemplate, and read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* often. Otherwise, ordinary people can easily succumb to external temptations. The temporary state of recognizing impermanence is like sunshine in the clouds, which will soon be obscured again by the dark clouds of obstacles. That is why past eminent masters have said that the preliminary practices are also the main practices, and they are even more important than the main practices.

A practitioner I know placed great importance on Great Perfection and Chan practice but showed little interest in the impermanence of life and the defects of samsara. Many years have passed, and I have heard her practice has not progressed well. I believe she used to attain certain states, but in order for such states to take root in her mind, she must practice ngöndro.

During these preliminary practices, our focus should be on both quality and quantity. We must genuinely connect with and align our minds with each meditative guidance and transform our minds accordingly—this is the state we should aim to reach. For example, when we pray to the guru, it is better to truly cultivate guru devotion so that we may have tears running down our cheeks and hair standing on end, or at least generate genuine respect for the guru. When meditating on impermanence, we should not just recite the guidance text and feel indifferent; instead, we should strive for a personal experience, a deeper inner resonance, like a vibration emanating from the depths of our being.

Therefore, we should not just focus on superficial formality when practicing

Dharma. While formality can be considered a component of a virtuous act, it does not hold substantial significance. No matter which practices you are engaged in, you should generate a “feeling” deep down in your mind. It is only when you taste the practice’s “flavor” that you will not be easily swayed throughout your practice. Otherwise, when someone praises the practice of impermanence, you may start the practice; but a few days later, when someone else belittles the practice of impermanence and advocates another practice, you might immediately echo what they say and change your practice. This is not good. If you have tasted the “flavor” of the practice, you will generate conviction, which will protect you from being influenced or swayed by external factors.

2.1.2.2. The Impermanence of Beings Living in the Universe

From the summit of the highest heavens to the deepest hells, not a single being can escape death. There are countless beings in the six realms. The number of all beings is much greater than the 6.5 billion⁹¹ humans on the earth. Nevertheless, none of the beings can escape death, (except the very few eminent masters who have attained the level of Vidyadhara with power over life,⁹² or who have directly entered the pure realm without abandoning their physical bodies). As the *Letter of Consolation* says:

Have you ever, on earth or in the heavens,
Seen any living being born who will not die?
Or heard that such a thing had happened?
Or even doubted that it could?

Where there is life, there is inevitably death. When the Japanese Zen Buddhist monk Ikkyū broke his master’s favorite cup, he did not dare to tell his master directly. Instead, he waited until the master returned and asked, “What thing, once born, will not die?” The master replied, “Everything born is bound to die. There is nothing that never dies.” Ikkyū then revealed the pieces of the broken cup

⁹¹ The world population in 2005.

⁹² Vidyadhara with power over life (Tib. ཚེསའཇུག་འཛིན་, tsewang rigdzin, Wyl. tshe dbang rig 'dzin) — one of the four vidyadhara levels. This stage is reached after not only the practitioner’s mind has matured into the dharmakaya, but one also gains the power to purify the ordinary body and transform it into a subtle body, which is immortal. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

he had hidden behind him and said, “Then your cup is dead.” Thus, the master did not scold him.

Nobody has ever seen anyone or heard of anyone in any realm—even in the worlds of the gods—who was born but never died. In fact, there is absolutely no doubt about whether death will eventually come or not. *The Collection of Impermanence* says:

Neither in the space nor in the sea,
Nor in the mountains and forests,
There is no such a place
Where the Lord of Death will not reach.

Therefore, wherever it may be - be it in space, the sea, or the forests in the mountains - there is no place the Lord of Death will not reach. There is nowhere you can hide to escape death. If there were indeed a deathless place, given the great compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas, they would have placed countless sentient beings there. However, this is simply impossible.

Here is a story I have told you before:

Two monks specializing in Buddhist logic went on a trip to receive teachings. One night, they could not find accommodation, so they asked an old lady if they could stay at her house overnight. Besides her daughter, the old lady had no one else living with her.

The old lady asked, “Have you studied Buddhist logic? I find monks who have studied this to be very troublesome. If so, please do not stay at my house; you surely will give me a difficult time.” Hearing this, the monks pleaded, “We do study Buddhist logic, but we guarantee not to give you any trouble. We really cannot find anywhere else to stay tonight; please help us and let us stay here overnight.” Seeing their sincerity, the old lady agreed, albeit a bit reluctantly.

After supper, the old lady found a louse on her body, so she told her daughter, “Please quickly take it away to a place where it won’t die (meaning somewhere safe).” One monk heard her and immediately said, “Grandma,⁹³ if there is indeed a place where death never arrives, can you also put us two there?”

The old lady was quite annoyed and complained, “You monks of Buddhist

⁹³ The literal translation here should be “Lao Pusa,” or “the old bodhisattva,” which is a respectful way to refer to a senior believer of Buddhism.

logic always talk like this. Didn't you just promise me you wouldn't give me a hard time? Had I known this would happen, I wouldn't have let you stay in my house!"

Indeed, there is no place where death never arrives. If there were, people with money, power, and resources would manage to go there at all costs. It is a certainty that everyone dies, and no one is exempt from death. Ordinary people typically understand the certainty of death, but unlike good practitioners, they do not reflect on the uncertainty of where and when they will die. Therefore, the primary reason for our laziness is that we do not practice impermanence well.

Especially since we are born in Jambudvīpa, where lifespans are uncertain, and we live in the degenerate age, death will come swiftly upon us. In reality, from the very day of our birth, we have been moving step by step toward death. A person's lifespan never increases, only decreases, and the Lord of Death approaches us relentlessly, like the shadow of the setting sun, drawing ever closer with each passing moment.

In the first age of this kalpa, human lifespans could extend to sixty thousand or eighty thousand years, but now, at the end of this small kalpa, our lifespan is extremely short. Our lifespan resembles a leaky pool, with the water within it only decreasing instead of increasing. Death never stops approaching us.

Many people are very happy on their birthdays when others sing the "Happy Birthday" song to them. In fact, this is unwise. It is similar to when a butcher approaches a yak to be slaughtered; if someone is singing "Happy Birthday" to the poor animal, do you think the yak will be happy?

The time and place of death are always uncertain. No one can be sure whether they will still be alive tomorrow, tonight, or even in the very next breath. No matter how intelligent and well-versed you are, you dare not assert, "I certainly won't die now." At most, you may guess, with much uncertainty, "Maybe I won't die now." There is no way for you to present solid evidence and conclude with irrefutable reasoning, "I surely won't die now, because of so-and-so."

Therefore, *The Original Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* says:

The Great Ghost of impermanence arrives at an unscheduled time.

Death never sets an appointment with anyone; it often comes unexpectedly

and takes our lives. Sometimes, when we witness a person dying, it can strike us profoundly.

A few days ago, when I was in the town of Upper Luokema, someone asked me to practice phowa⁹⁴ for a deceased lady. When I arrived at her place, she was still breathing, and her children and other family members were crying around her. Although she could not move anymore, it seemed she knew what was happening; when she heard me reciting, she tried to put her palms together.

This lady was fairly wealthy, but after working so hard all her life, she could not take anything with her at the moment of death. Whether she liked it or not, this was the reality. However, the way she left this world was not bad: she had been very ill for one or two months and knew recovery was impossible, so she had made some preparations for her death.

But many people might not be this fortunate, as *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says:

“This I have not done, and this I am only starting.
And this—I’m only halfway through...”
Then is the sudden coming of the Lord of Death,
And oh, the thought “Alas, I am finished!”⁹⁵

The Lord of Death comes out of the blue, and we have not prepared at all. Therefore, life is indeed very fragile. However, the biggest problem is that people do not keep the principle of impermanence in mind; they naively believe that death will not arrive too soon. With such a mentality, one’s practice is bound to fail.

As it says in *The Collection of Deliberate Sayings*:

Who knows if death will come tomorrow?
Today, one must strive diligently.
The great army of the Lord of Death—are they your kin?

We do not know whether we’ll die tomorrow, so as long as we can still breathe and have a chance for practice, we must engage in diligent Dharma practice. Otherwise, do you think you are a beloved one of the Lord of Death, such that

⁹⁴ Phowa refers to the transference of consciousness, which is covered in the last chapter of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

⁹⁵ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

this close relationship will prevent you from falling into a lower realm and instead allow you to directly enter the Blissful Land? If you don't think this way, why not start practicing diligently right now?

In our daily lives, we should always reflect on, "Will I die or not?" For example, when you go to the bathroom, you should think, "Will I die here?" When you go to fetch water, you should think, "Will I die on the way?" When you go to bed at night, you should think, "Will I wake up alive tomorrow?"

Life is truly between this breath and the next. As recorded in *The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters*, the Buddha asked his disciples, "How long is life?" Some answered, "A few days," while others said, "Between meals." Hearing their responses, the Buddha shook his head in disagreement. Then, one disciple said, "It's between this breath and the next." The Buddha agreed and nodded.⁹⁶

Human life is extremely fragile. Apart from natural disasters, a construction company can guarantee our house will remain intact for decades. However, no one can "sign a contract" with us, promising that we will remain alive for decades. In *Letter to a Friend*, Nagarjuna says:

Life is fragile and impermanent,
Like a water bubble blown by the wind.
In deep sleep, breathing in and out;
How miraculous to wake up in the morning.

People sleep peacefully, breathing in and out steadily, yet there is no certainty that death will not come during this time. To wake up alive after a night's sleep is so extraordinary.

Non-practitioners may wonder why it is remarkable that one wakes up still alive, saying, "I am in good shape, and I am not sick; how could I die while sleeping?" But have you ever considered that you could die suddenly if an earthquake strikes and your house collapses at night?

⁹⁶ Here is text from *The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters*, translated by D. T. Suzuki:

The Buddha asked a monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" The monk answered, "By days." The Buddha said, "You do not understand the Way."

The Buddha asked another monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" The monk answered, "By the time that passes during a meal." The Buddha said, "You do not understand the Way."

The Buddha asked a third monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" The monk answered, "By the breath." The Buddha said, "Very well, you know the Way."

Not long ago, a practitioner was in retreat in her cabin, which, for some reason, suddenly caught fire. By the time people noticed the fire, she had already died inside. During the morning of that day, she certainly wouldn't have thought, "Today is my last day." Otherwise, she could have made some preparations.

Once, a person who was skeptical yet intrigued by Buddhism told me, "Wouldn't it be great if everyone knew how long they were going to live, so they could make some preparations? As it is, I do not know when I am going to die. Sometimes this terrifies me!" He wished to live like the beings of Uttarakuru,⁹⁷ who have a fixed lifespan. But in my view, whether one has a fixed lifespan or not does not matter that much.

Everyone is going to die one day. Of the several hundred Dharma students sitting here today, some of you may have died by this time next year. But since we do not have clairvoyance, we do not know whether this includes you or me.

Some individuals only focus on the present and do not care about what will happen at the moment of death and after. Even worse, when death is mentioned, they immediately dodge the subject and lack the courage to face it. In fact, now is not the time to avoid death; instead, we must confront it and prepare for it with Dharma practice as soon as possible.

A practitioner who has practiced impermanence well can easily accept anything, including death, when it occurs to themselves or others. As we often see, good practitioners do not cry in agony when losing a loved one, and they may even smile at the moment of their own death because they have long understood that life is as uncertain and fragile as a candle in the wind. In comparison, many worldly people feel devastated when faced with their own death or the death of a loved one; such a reaction is primarily due to their lack of practice.

Every one of us encounters many causes of death in life, as stated in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*:

The causes of death are so many;
Those of staying alive are so few,
Which too can become causes of death.

⁹⁷ Uttarakuru (Skt.; Tib. ལྷ་ཁི་རུ་རྒྱལ་, Draminyen; Wyl. sgra mi snyan; Eng. 'Unpleasant Sound') is one of the four island-continent that surround Mount Meru according to the cosmology of the Abhidharma.

Therefore, we should always perform the practices.⁹⁸

There are so many causes of death, and sometimes even essential factors for staying alive, such as food and medicine, can lead to death. The fact that we fall asleep at night and wake up still alive is, indeed, a wondrous thing.

Regarding the verse “In deep sleep, breathing in and out; How miraculous to wake up in the morning!”, one master says it means, “To attain great realization between this breath and the next is truly wondrous.” However, this explanation is not accurate. Given the content preceding and following this verse, the text discusses impermanence, so it doesn’t make sense for the author to suddenly introduce the concept of “great realization.” If that were the case, then it could indeed be considered a “wondrous thing.”

Therefore, when you teach others, you should have received the transmission and fully understand everything in the text; otherwise, you risk creating misunderstandings.

Although we all know that one day we will die, we do not really allow our attitudes toward life to be affected by the “uncertainty of death.” The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said it is crucial that we generate conviction that the time of death is uncertain. Those performing the practice of impermanence, especially practitioners in the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages, place great importance on this specific meditation. If one generates conviction about this, they will surely practice diligently and will not become lazy day after day.

As Master Lianchi, the eighth patriarch of the Chinese Pure Land tradition, said in his *Essays by the Bamboo Window*, if a worldly person has a hobby, they will spend all their time on it and devote themselves to it day and night. Master Lianchi described worldly people’s indulgence in antiques, drinking, poetry, chess, and more, and added that although there are hardly any monastics addicted to drinking, some monastics cannot avoid becoming attached to other hobbies. What a great pity that one squanders precious time on such things!

Nowadays, many practitioners who have not practiced impermanence well are driven by fabricated thoughts and busy themselves with many activities. However, whether those activities are of any value for their next lifetime is truly hard to determine.

⁹⁸ Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion Publications, 2007, verse 278, page 21.

If we have conviction about impermanence, we may find ourselves constantly contemplating the possibility of death occurring at any moment. If we lack this conviction, we may end up constantly planning for things decades ahead—“What am I going to do for a living fifty years from now? How will I live my life then?”

We constantly cling to the notion of a permanent livelihood, as if we were going to live forever. As such, we squander our precious human lives by fretting over our own gains and losses. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is extraordinary! I hope you will read the content we cover each day over and over again and truly grasp its meaning. By doing so, a sense of aversion toward samsara will be compelled to arise in your mind, and you will come to understand that everything is impermanent. As a result, you will no longer cling tightly to things like family, relationships, fame, and wealth.

A Buddhist once told me, “What you taught us is absolutely true! Just like the ants, who can lose all the food they collect due to a hailstorm, we may also lose the wealth we have accumulated throughout our lifetime because of a financial crisis. When everything is gone, we can only look at the boundless blue sky...”

Those who practice impermanence well will think of the corresponding teachings when encountering adversity, whereas those who do not practice well will grumble and even think, “How unlucky I am! What should I do? Should I consider jumping off a building or overdosing on sleeping pills?”

Without understanding the impermanent nature of everything, a person may feel that life is unfair when faced with sudden adversity. In fact, this is not the case. Everything that is happening to us is the result of past actions we have committed. This is the undeniable law of cause and effect.

We stay completely immersed in the exhausting pursuit of well-being, happiness, and fame—until suddenly, we are confronted by the Lord of Death holding his black rope, clenching his teeth, and baring his fangs.⁹⁹

At the time of death, even if you are the head of government surrounded and protected by a brave army, you still cannot escape the clutches of death. However powerful you are—even if you are the president of a country and loved by all the citizens—when death comes, there is nothing you can do. So, when death arrives,

⁹⁹ Khenpo Sodargye’s comment on the appearance of the Lord of Death: In both Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, the Lord of Death is depicted like this, which can be seen by some beings at the moment of death; some see this before the breath ceases and some after. But it is not everyone who may see the image of the Lord of Death.

nothing can help us. No valiant army, no ruler's decrees, no abundant wealth, no scholar's eloquence, no beauty's charms, no swift galloping steeds—none of it is of any use.

If money could buy deathlessness, billionaires would have traded all their wealth for it. I have seen rich men request a heart or liver transplant at a hospital. They showed no concern about the cost; as long as they could extend their lives by a few years, they were willing to spend all their money.

Once, in a Shanghai hospital, I came across a sad story about a wealthy entrepreneur. Judging by his attire, it was evident that he was financially well-off. He repeatedly pleaded with his doctor, saying, "As long as I can live, even if there's only a glimmer of hope, you can try whatever you think might help. The cost is not an issue at all!" But there was really nothing the doctor could do, so he told the entrepreneur, "We'll see. You should go back and rest first."

If a patient is told, "You should go back and rest first," this may imply bad news. In such a situation, the patient may consider arranging for the service of phowa, the transference of consciousness at the time of death, from a monastery. That patient may not necessarily feel the need to cry out for help from doctors and nurses.

Practitioners with a belief in impermanence react to death very differently from ordinary people. As I told you before, I once took a senior practitioner to see a doctor at Barkam Hospital, and he was diagnosed with liver cancer. Although the doctor did not tell him the diagnosis, he could tell the severity of his illness from the doctor's expression.

Then the practitioner told me, "Let's not waste time here. I would like to return to the monastery. You do not need to feel sad for me. There is nothing to be miserable about." Since he had requested to go back, I informed him of his diagnosis. Upon hearing it, his facial expression did not change at all, and he simply said, "There is certainly nothing they can do. It is fine. Let's go back." This is how a true practitioner reacts to death.

When death arrives, we might seal ourselves inside an impenetrable iron chest, guarded by hundreds of thousands of brave warriors armed with sharp weapons, with the tips of their arrows and spears pointed outward in defense; it still cannot provide the slightest protection or shield against fate.

Most worldly people do not want to die, whereas some practitioners desire the opposite. In particular, some seniors who practice the recitation of Amitabha

would be willing to leave this world at any time once they feel confident in their practice. In fact, some even wish to die sooner so they can meet the Buddha Amitabha. As long as they remain in the physical body, they will not be able to see Amitabha. Such practitioners are confident about having a good death and a favorable next life. In contrast, worldly people find it hard to accept death; they believe that living in the human realm is the happiest experience, making them very reluctant to die. Moreover, they cannot fathom the bliss a practitioner may experience after their death.

Once the Lord of Death places his black rope around our neck, our face begins to pale, our eyes glaze over with tears, our body stiffens, and we are dragged onto the path of the next life.

At that moment, death cannot be fought off by any warrior, ordered away by the powerful, or paid off by the rich. Death leaves nowhere to run, no place to hide, no refuge, no defender or guide. Not even the boundless compassion of the noble ones can provide shelter, and even if the Medicine Buddha himself were to descend, he could not prolong a life that has reached its end.

A dying person cannot escape death, even if he hides in every corner of the world. If one could be exempted from death in America or Canada, then all the wealthy would have already immigrated there. However, even Americans and Canadians are afraid of death. When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited America, he noticed that Americans fear death as much as Asians do, perhaps even more.

Once, an AIDS patient told us that he would be willing to spend more money on medicines that could prolong his life and that he had been searching for treatment everywhere in the world. However, when the causes and conditions for living have exhausted, nobody, including this patient, will escape death.

People who are new to Buddhism often ask, “Why does a person still die after receiving blessings from a tulku or from the guru?” This question is quite naive. The *Treasury of Abhidharma* lists four kinds of beings, including those whose merit is exhausted but whose lifespan is not, and those whose lifespan is exhausted but whose merit is not. If your life has run out, even if the Medicine Buddha appears, he will not be able to delay your death. However, if your merit has run out but your life has not, performing recitations or other *pujas* can be of help. Therefore, the answer to the question is, “it depends.” We should not hastily jump to a careless conclusion.

So, we must never be lazy or procrastinate again and again. Instead, we should sincerely practice the supreme and authentic Dharma that will truly benefit us at the moment of death. The biggest obstacle to our practice is our laziness. If you are very lazy, no matter how long you live, your practice will not progress. Therefore, diligence is very important. Even if you practice diligently just for one day, the benefit you can receive is incredible. The *Dhammapada* says:

Instead of living up to a hundred years old and being immoral
and vicious,
You should rather live for only one day being diligent and
virtuous.

Therefore, we should never slack off; otherwise, given our short lifespan and the many distractions on the path, when can we succeed in our Dharma practice?

The Treasured Instructions of Chan Temples Says:

The teachings and realization of noble beings cannot be
assimilated within a day.

Therefore, realization cannot be accomplished in just one or two days; it demands diligent practice every single day of the year for many years. Some people wonder, “I have been practicing for three years, so why have not I attained any enlightenment?”

You may claim you have practiced for three years, but have you ever considered how many hours you have actually dedicated to practicing Dharma during those three years? It is unlikely you have devoted all your time to Dharma practice without eating, drinking, or sleeping. Therefore, it is possible that you have spent a maximum of one month in three years on Dharma.

Even if you have dedicated an entire month to practicing Dharma, it is hard to determine whether you have practiced effectively. For example, every morning you get up and practice impermanence for half an hour, but have you really abided in the corresponding state during the meditation? Some people spend the first fifteen minutes feeling drowsy, then perform a bit of analytical meditation, and later start mind-wandering. In such cases, although they claim they have practiced for half an hour, the duration that truly counts as practice might be fewer than ten minutes. By doing so, how can they even expect to attain enlightenment?

Spiritual practice cannot be approached with laziness or slackness; otherwise, we will easily get exhausted from studying and practicing Dharma. *The Sutra on the Mahayana Practice of the Six Perfections* says:

An idle person is like a wooden pestle that has two characteristics:
First, it is unable to activate itself and it wears down when used;
Second, it cannot stand on its own, so once placed on the
ground, it simply falls and gradually becomes worn out until
it can only be burned by fire.

If a person slacks off, they lack the motivation to practice Dharma, and at the same time, they are unable to practice independently. The biggest obstacle to our practice is laziness, which prevents us from practicing diligently. Not practicing diligently reveals our lack of belief in impermanence, leading to oversleeping. Thus, we may inevitably sleep late into the morning.

Past eminent masters were not like this. Motivated by their conviction in impermanence, they were always driven to practice diligently. As a result, they refrained from excessive sleep at night and remained undistracted throughout the day, rendering themselves immune to meaningless pursuits.

Compared to earlier times, many people are making great progress in the practice of impermanence. They used to live deluded lives and fritter away their time on indulgences, feeling no remorse after spending decades in this way. Now, although they sometimes still get distracted, they feel ashamed after idling, saying, “Alas! I did not practice well all day today! I am really a bad person!” Some may even start to pull their hair, pinch, or punch themselves as a form of punishment, which can be an effective way to motivate themselves to practice Dharma. We should strengthen our mental resolve while practicing Dharma. Many eminent masters have inspiring life stories in this regard.

If your practice on impermanence is not well established, it will be difficult for you to make good progress in other practices. So even if you cannot fully emulate past eminent masters who devoted all their time to practice, at least you should start behaving differently from how you did in the past and avoid slacking off. Otherwise, you cannot succeed in either mundane or transcendental matters.

With a solid practice on impermanence, you will naturally develop a drive for practice. In fact, as you progress on the path, there comes a point where you

should begin practicing voluntarily rather than out of obligation. It should not be due to pressure from your teacher or tutor that you start to practice; without their prompting, you may not practice on your own. It will be hard for you to make progress if you are like this.

For instance, if a child is not interested in learning and is forced to do homework solely out of fear of punishment from their parents and teachers, when the adults are not around, they will instead choose to play outside or watch TV rather than study. Similarly, we ordinary people are like that child; without the guidance of a qualified teacher, we will remain idle and lazy every day. Therefore, we must pray to the guru and the Three Jewels for the conviction of impermanence to truly arise within us. Then, we will not dare to slack off in our practice.

We should understand the teaching above and then put it into real practice.



Lesson 30

“In the present Good Kalpa, ... which are always positive. With this in mind, meditate on impermanence.” [page 42–44]

Now we are studying the chapter on “the impermanence of life,” which consists of seven meditations. Today, we will cover the third one.

2.1.2.3. The Impermanence of Holy Beings

In the present Good Kalpa, Vipashyin, Shikhin, and five other buddhas¹⁰⁰ have already appeared, each with his own circle of shravakas and arhats in inconceivable number. Each benefited countless sentient beings through the teachings of the Three Vehicles. However, now only the Buddha Shakyamuni’s teaching remains; apart from this, all other buddhas have passed into nirvana and all the pure Dharma teachings they gave have gradually disappeared.

Take Buddha Shikhin for example: We know how to chant this Buddha’s name, but there is no longer a written record of how he turned the Dharma Wheel. Now we only have the Canon of Buddha Shakyamuni—the Tripitaka. Unfortunately, the canons of other buddhas are not available to us, except for a very few verses spoken by the past buddhas that have been preserved in some Buddhist scriptures. Apart from that, we have never encountered their teachings.

These days, we only have the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, as recorded

¹⁰⁰ Of the seven Buddhas, the first three, including Vipashyin, Shikhin, and Vishvabhu, appeared in the past Glorious Kalpa, while the other four, including Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kashyapa, and Shakyamuni, appeared in the present Good Kalpa.

in sutras such as the *Vinaya* and the *Agama*. According to the sutras, especially during the fruit period,¹⁰¹ five hundred arhats and innumerable other holy beings appeared. One by one, the numerous great shravakas of the present dispensation, each with an entourage of five hundred arhats, have successively passed beyond suffering into nirvana without remainder.

For example, Mahapajapati Gotami, the foster mother and maternal aunt of Buddha Shakyamuni, who later became the first bhikkhuni, once saw the Buddha sneeze and prayed, “Long live the Buddha!” The Buddha responded:

You should not have said this. You should wish for the Dharma to live long. If the Buddha were to always remain in this world, beings who cling to the idea of permanence would not develop renunciation and aversion toward their mundane life.

Upon hearing the Buddha’s words, Mahapajapati Gotami entered parinirvana with five hundred bhikkhunis as a form of repentance. [When I gave you the teaching on the history of Buddhism, I mentioned that if an ordinary person initiates an untimely death, it is considered suicide, but this is not the case for an arhat. Since Mahapajapati Gotami and the bhikkhunis were arhats who had attained the state beyond birth and death, they could enter parinirvana at will.] With this dependent arising, a few years later, Buddha Shakyamuni entered Mahaparinirvana.

Some outward manifestations of Mahapajapati Gotami did not seem to carry favorable dependent arising; initially, her ordination as a nun appeared unfavorable for the duration of the Dharma in this world, and in the end, her parinirvana appeared unfavorable as well.

One day after Mahapajapati Gotami’s parinirvana, Maudgalyayana and Sariputra, the Buddha’s two chief disciples, visited the realms of hell and pretas and witnessed the suffering of a tirthika teacher. The teacher asked the two noble monks to tell his disciples to abandon his religion and instead follow the doctrine of Buddha Shakyamuni when they returned to the human realm.

When they returned, Sariputra first forwarded the message to the tirthikas, who did not hear it due to their lack of karmic connection with Sariputra in

¹⁰¹ During the period immediately following the promulgation of the teachings, those who practice them attain the fruit almost straight away. (Source: Notes of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*)

previous lives. Then Maudgalyayana delivered the message again. Upon hearing it, the tirthikas became furious and beat Maudgalyayana nearly to death. Sariputra then wrapped Maudgalyayana's body in his monastic robe and carried him to Jetavana, moaning, "I didn't even want to hear about the death of my good friend Maudgalyayana, let alone witness it with my own eyes!" Subsequently, Sariputra and eighty thousand arhats passed into parinirvana, and soon Maudgalyayana also entered parinirvana with another seventy thousand arhats.

Later, Buddha Shakyamuni entered parinirvana. Some accounts state that eighty thousand arhats entered parinirvana following the Buddha. According to Sutrayana teachings, at this time the Buddha and his sublime retinue gradually disappeared from this world, and the Buddha's doctrine was like the smoke after an extinguished fire, in the sense that no one was imparting the teachings. This situation was ridiculed by celestial beings. Eventually, the compilation of the Tripitaka gradually began.

Therefore, no one can escape the rule of impermanence. The Buddha had attained full enlightenment and eradicated all obscurations, yet he still manifested parinirvana. Even noble beings such as Maudgalyayana—the foremost master of clairvoyance—and Sariputra—the foremost master of wisdom—could not avoid impermanence, let alone we ordinary people who are as fragile as ants. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche wrote in the *Song of Impermanence—the Melody of Waterfall*:

Although the buddhas, who have attained perfect freedom and
realization,
And the sublime beings had appeared in this world like stars in
the sky,
They passed into parinirvana for the purpose of revealing
impermanence.
Reflecting on this, we will understand deeply that everything is
impermanent.

In this Sahā world, there have appeared as many buddhas who have attained perfect freedom and realization, as well as bodhisattvas and other sublime beings, as there are stars in a night sky. However, to demonstrate the rule of impermanence to beings who cling to permanence, they passed into parinirvana one by one. If we

carefully ponder the meaning of this, we will come to understand that everything is impermanent, which cannot be changed by anyone.

In particular, when visiting India and witnessing the numerous sacred Buddhist sites, one may experience a profound sense of sorrow. *The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* says:

The World-Honored One has ten powers and radiant light,
He attained luminous and boundless wisdom,
And can liberate all sentient beings;
Now everything is in the void, and where can we find him?
Thinking of this, is there any wise person who is not saddened?

The Buddha taught about impermanence throughout his turning of the Dharma Wheel, from start to finish. As mentioned in Kadampa's instructions, when the Buddha turned the first Dharma Wheel and taught the Four Noble Truths at Sarnath, he first taught "dukkha," the transitory, impermanent, and ever-changing nature of everything.

When the Buddha completed the third turning of the Dharma Wheel and was about to enter parinirvana, he taught the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* and then said:

Bhikkhus, everything arises dependent on particular conditions.

Then the Buddha loosened the upper part of his robe, allowing his disciples to see his tathagata's body, and said, "The birth of a Tathagata is like the bloom of the udumbara flower; you should always contemplate that all conditioned things are impermanent."

After saying this, the Buddha proceeded to a grove of sala trees. Between two mighty trees, he lay down on his right side in the lion posture, with his head facing north, and passed into parinirvana.

The *Agama Sutra* also says that shortly before the Buddha passed into parinirvana, he spoke to his disciples:

Bhikkhus, in this world, there is nothing that can be relied upon.
You should renounce worldly pursuits and seek tranquility and
nirvana, where there is no birth, aging, sickness, or death, and where

there is no attachment or separation. You should always contemplate the truth of impermanence.¹⁰²

Therefore, the Buddha's last words urged us to always remember the truth of impermanence, which carries the most profound meaning in the Buddha's teachings.

This is why many past and present eminent masters have emphasized the importance of practicing impermanence. Regardless of whether you are a monastic or a lay practitioner, you should strive to cultivate a constant awareness of impermanence. Of course, it is not enough for awareness to simply arise; you should also prepare for your next lives through diligent practice. By doing so, your practice can be successful. Without having cultivated conviction in impermanence, even if you pursue higher teachings, you may not attain any actual realization from your Dharma practice.

No one, whether a holy being or an ordinary person, can escape impermanence. Without exception, everyone will eventually be consumed by impermanence. [Of course, a holy being's death is merely a manifestation.]

It is said that when a past buddha was about to enter parinirvana, he left a verse:

All conditioned things are ephemeral, like clouds;
The wise should not believe them.
When the vajra of impermanence arrives,
It will dismantle the Noble Lord and the King of Mountains.

Of course, when referring to the Buddha passing into parinirvana, we cannot say, "The Buddha passed away or died." When giving relevant teachings, some Dharma teachers' wording has been inappropriate. Some said, "The Buddha passed away at the age of eighty," as if describing an ordinary old man. Others said, "The Buddha died at the age of eighty, when he was old and weak—truly pitiful." Depicting the Buddha in this way is not appropriate. As you should know, the Buddha has a vajra body that is beyond birth and death, and his apparent entry into parinirvana was simply a way of reminding sentient beings about the truth of impermanence and motivating them to practice Dharma diligently.

Some scholars have not used appropriate wording to describe the Buddha in their research papers. They regard Buddha Shakyamuni simply as a prince who

¹⁰² The translation is based on Khenpo Sodargye's paraphrase.

left the world at eighty years old. In their depictions, the Buddha seems not much different from Confucius or Mencius, except that he was wiser and provided more teachings. This is a significant misunderstanding.

We Buddhists must understand who the Buddha was in the accounts of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, respectively. By doing so, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the Buddha. This also explains why I decided to translate *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*. I hope you can grasp the “whole picture” of the Buddha and come to know his great aspirations and deeds over his countless lifetimes. Otherwise, many of you may think like those who only treat the Buddha as an ordinary person and consider his parinirvana no different from an old man dying. This perspective is simply incorrect.

In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the Buddha said:

O noble man! The body of the Tathagata is the eternal body, the indestructible body, the vajra body, the body not sustained by various food. It is the Dharma body.

That the Buddha passed into parinirvana in front of others was just his manifestation. In fact, the real Buddha is the Dharmakaya. Therefore, we should understand “the Buddha” from multiple perspectives.

There are not many people who know and understand Buddhism. Therefore, as Buddhists, we must study historical accounts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Buddha and the Dharma. For example, to understand Tibetan Buddhism, one must be familiar with the lineage history of each major school in the Tibetan region; to understand Chinese Buddhism, one should know the Dharma activities and life stories of the lineage masters in each school, such as the Pure Land School and the Chan school.

However, in the current degenerate age, many people know nothing about Tibetan Buddhism, and they carelessly defame it. Some individuals are completely ignorant of Buddhism as a whole, yet they fabricate incorrect views, and slander Buddhist views and practices. How unwise!

We have just discussed the impermanence of the Buddha and his retinue.

In India, there once lived five hundred arhats who mastered all attributes of the paths, levels, clairvoyance, and miraculous powers and compiled the teachings of the Buddha. Historical accounts such as Taranatha’s *History of Buddhism in India*

record the activities of arhats who had mastered all attributes of the paths, levels, and clairvoyance, and who compiled the Buddha's teachings. These arhats compiled the Buddha's teachings three times, known as the three Buddhist Councils.

In general, the first compilation of shastra is the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra*, which, according to Sutrayana, was compiled by many arhats. The first compilation of sutra, according to many historians, is the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, or *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*, which first appeared in the palace of Candraraksita, who became king shortly after the time of King Mahapadma. The tantric version of this sutra is believed to be the *Summation of the Real*. In *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, Dudjom Rinpoche wrote:

It is said that this (*Transcendent Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses*) was the first appearance of the greater vehicle in the human world after the teacher's nirvana. This must be held to have occurred before the third council. Therefore, the position universally adhered to by most contemporary scholars, namely that all the transmitted precepts were committed to writing during the third council, must be erroneous, for it is contradicted by this report.¹⁰³

There is a tradition in my hometown, which may or may not be similar elsewhere, for each household of lay practitioners to obtain a copy of the *Transcendent Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses*. I asked some seniors why this was the case, but they did not know, simply saying it was a tradition. During the Cultural Revolution, Buddhism basically disappeared from every household; but when the state religious policy began to loosen up, the Sutra became available for purchase again, and it was said that copies sold out rather quickly. When a Tibetan starts a new family, they would first obtain a copy of this Sutra for their new household.

In addition to the arhats who participated in the three Buddhist Councils, there were the Six Ornaments and Two Supreme Ones, the Eighty Siddhas, and many others.

Who were the Six Ornaments and Two Supreme Ones?

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the three founding authors of fundamen-

¹⁰³ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, translated and edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein, Wisdom Publications, 1991, page 441.

tal texts were Nagarjuna, the Second Buddha, who is widely considered the founder of the *Madhyamaka* (the Middle Way) school of Buddhist philosophy; Asanga, the founder of the Yogachara¹⁰⁴ school; and Master Dignaga, who had a direct vision of Manjushri and is the founder of Buddhist logic.

Their three commentators were: Aryadeva, the commentator on Nagarjuna's work, who was born miraculously from a lotus; Vasubandhu, the commentator on Asanga's work, who could recite nine hundred and ninety thousand verses; and Dharmakirti, the commentator on Dignaga's work, who attained freedom and ease and had a direct vision of Manjushri.

Usually, Nagarjuna and Asanga are esteemed as the Two Supreme Ones, while the Six Ornaments consist of the remaining four, along with Guṇaprabha and Śākyaprabha, the author and the commentator on the *Vinaya*.

Some historical accounts consider Guṇaprabha and Śākyaprabha to be the Two Supreme Ones, with the remaining six masters comprising the Six Ornaments. These eight great masters, who propagated the Buddha's teachings in the human realm, are highly revered in Mahayana Buddhism and are referred to as the Six Ornaments and Two Supreme Ones. Additionally, Candragomin and Shantideva are celebrated as the "two marvelous masters."

In addition, there were the Eighty Siddhas in India, including Sarahapa, Virupa, Lawapa, and others. The life stories of these Siddhas, sometimes referred to as Mahasiddhas meaning "great perfect ones," can be found in books such as Taranatha's historical work on the lives of tantric Mahasiddhas and the *Legends of the Eighty-Four Mahasiddhas*.

The Great Mahasiddha Lawapa, also known as Sri Prabhat (Glorious Light) or Kambala (Yogin of the Black Blanket—because Lawapa was always dressed in the black blanket that was his only covering), often manifested miraculous signs in public. Once, mara girls cast a rain of stones at Lawapa, who immediately entered the generation stage and established a guardian boundary—a protective circle created through visualization—so that the stones fell elsewhere and did not harm him.

Lawapa then thought, "If the generation stage is this powerful, then the completion stage may be even more powerful!" So, he began practicing the

¹⁰⁴ Yogachara is an influential tradition of Buddhist philosophy and psychology that emphasizes the study of cognition, perception, and consciousness through the interior lens of meditative and yogic practices.

completion stage, and the falling stones suddenly stopped in midair. It is said that today those stones are still suspended in the air!

On another occasion, Lawapa went to sleep for twelve years right at the door of the royal palace. Anyone passing by who did not prostrate before him would have stiffened legs and would not be able to walk. Therefore, everyone, including the king, had to prostrate when passing by.

Later, when Lawapa was practicing tantric extraordinary activities at a charnel ground, five hundred mara girls from the country of Oddiyana searched for him, intending to create obstacles. When the mara girls arrived at the cemetery, they found no one, only the black blanket left by Lawapa. After a discussion, the mara girls began to tear the blanket into five hundred pieces, each swallowing one piece.

Then Lawapa suddenly appeared and cast a spell, turning the mara girls into five hundred sheep. The flock of sheep ran up to the king and all said, “We were witches before. The monk who is the lord of the charnel ground has done this to us. Please subjugate him and release us, Your Majesty!”

The king then came to the charnel ground and petitioned Lawapa, who stood up naked because his only covering had been eaten. Lawapa told the king, “Your Majesty’s witches have eaten my blanket. I am going to summon those witches.” Through his summons, all but three mara girls came to Lawapa.

Lawapa pointed his index finger at each of them menacingly and transformed them into creatures with various types of heads. He ordered them to vomit up the piece of the blanket they had eaten. The pieces were then sewn together, but three parts were missing. Lawapa knew the three mara girls were living in the king’s harem, so the king sent someone to bring them to Lawapa. They were duly summoned and vomited up the pieces, just like the others. The blanket was then completely restored, and Lawapa wrapped it around his body.

Even these great Mahasiddhas could not escape impermanence, and eventually, they all appeared to enter parinirvana. None of them are still alive today, and only their life stories remain in this world.

Here too in Tibet, the Land of Snows, when the Second Buddha of Oddiyana—Padmasambhava—turned the Wheel of Dharma to ripen and liberate sentient beings, there lived all his followers, like the Twenty-Five Great Accomplished Masters of the King and Ministers and the Eighty Siddhas of Yerpa (and hundreds of thousands of other followers who are not in the literal accounts).

Someone may wonder, “How is Padmasambhava the Second Buddha? How can there be two buddhas?” Well, Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu are also esteemed as “the Second Buddha,” and Master Zhiyi, the founder of the Tiantai tradition of Chinese Buddhism, is referred to as “junior Shakyamuni.” If a master is called “junior Shakyamuni,” it is reasonable to refer to other masters as “the Second Buddha.”

If you understand what Padmasambhava did for Buddhism and his extraordinary power during the degenerate age, you will definitely develop faith in him. It is because of the blessings of Padmasambhava that Tibetan Buddhism remains intact and flourishing, despite the turmoil of the five turbidities.

Later emerged the Ancient Tradition (Nyingma) masters of the So, Zur and Nub clans,¹⁰⁵ Marpa, Milarepa and Dagpo of the New Traditions, and other learned and accomplished beings.

The life stories of the masters of the So, Zur and Nub can be found in *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, though many people may not know their stories yet. This year,¹⁰⁶ I hope to finish translating this history book, and I encourage each of you to read it; doing so will enhance your understanding of the history of Tibetan Buddhism.

Why are many people familiar with the life stories of Jetsun Milarepa? In the 1960s, Chengji Zhang translated *The Life of Milarepa* into Chinese, which helped to popularize his story. In contrast, Nubchen Sangye Yeshe, one of the masters of So, Zur, and Nub, remains largely unknown. Therefore, I believe it is crucial to understand these historical figures. By recognizing the great achievements of these eminent masters, you can avoid harboring doubts or misconceptions about them.

Most of them attained realization and could freely command the four elements. They demonstrated extraordinary miracles, such as turning the tangible into the intangible and vice versa. Fire could not burn them, water could not drown them, earth could not bury them, and they remained unharmed in perilous situations, completely beyond the limitations of the four elements.

Once, for example, Jetsun Milarepa was meditating in silence in Nyeshang-

¹⁰⁵ So, Zur and Nub (Tib. སོ་ཟུར་ནུབ་སྐུ་སྐུ་མཆོག་, so zur nub sum, Wyl. so zurgnubsgsum) are the family or clan names of three great masters of the Nyingma school who were the early holders of the Nyingma lineage of Kama. Their names are: So Yeshe Wangchuk, Zurchen Shakya Jungné, and Nubchen Sangye Yeshe. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

¹⁰⁶ 2008

katya Cave in Nepal. A group of hunters arrived and asked, “Are you a human or a ghost?” Milarepa remained silent, gazing into the void. The hunters then began shooting a barrage of poisoned arrows at him, but none hit their mark. They proceeded to drag him into the water and throw him off a cliff, yet he leaped back effortlessly and returned to his original seat. Finally, they piled wood on him and set it on fire, but the flames refused to ignite.

There have been many beings who attained such powers. But in the end, they all chose to demonstrate that everything is impermanent, leaving behind only their stories.

Therefore, we should contemplate this carefully and generate a conviction about impermanence. Potowa¹⁰⁷ used to have more than two thousand disciples, of whom five hundred, through the practice of impermanence, developed aversion and disenchantment toward worldly life and attained the sign of achievement. How many of us truly perceive that everything is impermanent?

We first learned about the impermanence of the outer universe in which beings reside, as well as the impermanence of the beings living in the universe. Here, we also learned about the impermanence of holy beings, particularly of the great Mahasiddhas, who achieved high levels of accomplishment and mastery over the four elements, yet could not live forever, let alone ordinary beings like us.

In fact, we can easily sense impermanence when examining historical accounts. For example, after reading the life stories of eminent masters in India and Tibet, we gain insights into impermanence. We might reflect, “Everything is indeed impermanent. So many great masters have appeared in this world, and their miraculous powers and levels of realization were beyond our imagination, yet none of them remain with us now.”

The same applies to the masters of Chinese Buddhism. Take the Pure Land School, for instance: from the first patriarch Huiyuan¹⁰⁸ (334–416) to the

¹⁰⁷ Potowa Rinchen Sal (1027–1105) was one of the three main students of Dromtönpa, and the one who particularly received all of his main writings. His main students were Geshe Sharawa Yönten Drak and Geshe Langri Thangpa, who were known as the ‘Sun and Moon of Ü’.

¹⁰⁸ Huiyuan (Wade–Giles: Hui-yüan; 334–416 AD) was a Chinese Buddhist teacher who founded Donglin Temple on Mount Lushan in Jiangxi province and wrote the text *On Why Monks Do Not Bow Down Before Kings* in 404 AD. He was born in Shanxi province but, after a long life of Buddhist teaching, he settled in Jiangxi province, where he died in 416. Although he was born in the north, he moved south to live within the bounds of the Eastern Jin dynasty.

thirteenth patriarch Yinguang (1861–1940), all the lineage masters have passed into parinirvana. All that remains now are their teachings and stories.

Similarly, the lineage masters of the Vinaya school, from the first patriarch Daoxuan (596–667) of the Tang dynasty to the eleventh patriarch Hongyi (1880–1942), have also departed.

As for the Huayan School, the Buddhist teachings it primarily follows were initially transmitted from the Indian master Asvaghosa to Nagarjuna, and later to its first patriarch Dushun (557–640), who founded the school in China. From there, the teachings were passed on to the six successive patriarchs. Now, these seven patriarchs exist only in history books.

The Chan school of Chinese Buddhism, which continues to thrive today, is no exception. Bodhidharma, the twenty-eighth Indian patriarch in a direct line of transmission from the Buddha, came to China to propagate the teachings and establish the Chan school.¹⁰⁹ The traditional list of Chan patriarchs extends until Huineng (638–713), the sixth patriarch. Subsequently, as Bodhidharma prophesized, the Chan school continued through mind transmissions without the transmission of the robe and bowl,¹¹⁰ resulting in no seventh patriarch. The Chan school was further developed into the Five Houses of Chan—the Guiyang, Yunmen, Fayan, Caodong, and Linji lines—whose Dharma lineage is still being passed on. Nevertheless, all the lineage masters have passed into parinirvana.

In fact, many eminent masters of Chinese Buddhism are embodiments of buddhas and bodhisattvas. For instance, Master Dushun, whom I just mentioned, as the founder of the Huayan School, demonstrated many miraculous manifestations in his life and was regarded as the embodiment of Manjushri.

How did people recognize him as the embodiment of Manjushri? Dushun upheld high moral standards and did not pursue worldly endeavors. Each day, he farmed the land and returned to his temple at night to recite the *Flower Ornament Sutra*.

I truly admire such dedication! It may seem ordinary and unremarkable on the surface, but it is, in fact, immensely beneficial to one's practice. A practitioner

¹⁰⁹ It is known as Chan in China, Zen in Japan, Sŏn in Korea, and Thien in Vietnam. These names correspond to the pronunciation of the Sanskrit word *dhyana* (“meditation”) in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, respectively.

¹¹⁰ When the robe and bowl are transmitted from the master to the disciple, it symbolizes the master's confirmation of the disciple's enlightenment.

should remain consistent and adhere to a single practice routine. Otherwise, the mind may wander aimlessly. For example, today you encounter a guru and ask him, “Dear guru, you are truly like a wish-fulfilling jewel. Do you have any guidance for me? I am eager to learn from you.” The guru imparts teachings, but after some time, your enthusiasm wanes, and you seek out another guru.

In this way, throughout your life, you first pursue a guru who is an embodiment of Manjushri, then another guru who is an embodiment of Avalokiteshvara, and later a third guru who is an embodiment of Mahastamaprapta...

You are always busy searching for yet another new guru, and as a result, you become completely lost and forget what you have learned and how much you have forgotten. This is unwise. From the day you develop faith in your guru and the teachings with which you have karmic connections, it is essential to maintain unwavering devotion until the end of your life. You should regard the guru and the teachings as your refuge and support throughout your life. This is very important.

Speaking of Dushun, he had a disciple who followed him to study Dharma for over ten years. This disciple had great faith in him at the beginning, but gradually his faith waned. The disciple noticed that his master spent the days farming the land and recited the *Flower Ornament Sutra* at night—nothing extraordinary! Feeling he could learn nothing from Dushun, the disciple decided to go on pilgrimage to Mount Wutai and pray to Manjushri for wisdom.

He asked his master for his opinion, and Dushun said, “You do not have to go. Practicing here is the same as going to Mount Wutai for Manjushri.”

The disciple did not understand what his master really meant, so he pleaded, “Dear master, I have longed to go on pilgrimage to Mount Wutai. Please be compassionate and grant me permission.”

Seeing that his disciple was very determined, Dushun agreed. Before the disciple’s departure, Dushun gave him two letters: one for Lady Qing and the other for Old Mother Pig, asking him to deliver them.

The disciple took the letters and set out immediately. During his journey, he inquired about the address and found Lady Qing. To his surprise, he discovered that Lady Qing was a prostitute. He thought, “Why does my master have a friend who is a prostitute?” However, the envelope was clearly addressed to her, so he delivered the letter. The prostitute opened and read the letter, then said, “I understand. My work is done. It’s time to go.” She then sat down and died.

Puzzled, the disciple picked up the letter, which read, “Avalokiteshvara, my work is done, and I am about to leave. Please go with me!” So, in reality, Lady Qing was the embodiment of Avalokiteshvara! Yet the disciple still did not realize that his master was extraordinary.

He continued his journey and found Old Mother Pig, following the address on the second letter. The recipient was indeed a pig. Old Mother Pig received the letter, opened it with her nose, read it, and died immediately as well. Once again puzzled, the disciple looked at the letter, which said, “Samantabhadra, my work is done and I am about to leave. Please go with me!” But the dim-witted disciple still did not grasp the underlying meaning.

Later, he arrived at the foot of Mount Wutai and met an old man who asked him, “What are you doing here?” The disciple replied, “I came here for Manjushri.”

The old man said, “Your master is Manjushri! You do not venerate your master, yet you travel from afar to venerate Manjushri—how foolish!” Then the old man disappeared.

At last, the disciple understood. He turned around and rushed back to see his master. But when he returned to the temple, he found that his master Dushun had passed into parinirvana.

As you can see, Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and Samantabhadra adopt different forms to liberate and guide beings. The emanations of buddhas and bodhisattvas are truly remarkable. They can manifest as animals, prostitutes, or eminent masters. However, many people remain unaware of this.

Venerable Longchenpa also said, “While I am still alive, you may not generate faith in me, and my teachings may not thrive.” Indeed, a great master is often unrecognized during his lifetime, and his disciples may remain unaware of their teacher’s remarkable qualities. Once the master departs from this world, however, the disciples begin to appreciate the greatness of their teacher, yet they can never see him again and are left with feelings of remorse.

Not only will the emanation of Manjushri pass into parinirvana, but the emanation of Amitabha cannot escape impermanence either. Chan Master Yongming Yanshou is regarded as an emanation of Amitabha, based on the following story.

Master Yongming Yanshou was deeply respected by the King of Wuyue,¹¹¹ and esteemed as the royal teacher of the kingdom. One day, the king made meal offerings to a thousand monks. All monks were treated equally, allowing everyone come to partake in the offering.

Although the offerings were made on equal terms, the tables were arranged in a manner that still distinguished higher and lower seats. Nobody dared to sit in the top seat. Since Master Yongming Yanshou was the royal teacher, he was invited to take the top seat.

Master Yongming Yanshou, however, was very humble and declined the invitation. While others were still urging him to take the seat, a monk dressed in a ragged robe with large ears approached, went directly to the top seat, and sat down.

Seeing this, the king felt a bit awkward and was at a loss for what to do. “The royal teacher didn’t take the top seat,” he thought, “but a monk I didn’t know did.” Nevertheless, the king remained silent since it was a meal offering for all the monks.

After the meal offering concluded, everyone departed. The king asked Master Yongming Yanshou, “Was there any noble being who came to receive the meal offering today?”

Master Yongming Yanshou Replied, “Yes! Buddha Dīpankara Came Today!”

The king asked, “Which one was that?”

Master Yongming Yanshou said, “The monk with big ears who sat in the top seat.”

Hearing this, the king was very happy and immediately sent his men to find Dīpankara. They searched everywhere and finally found the monk in a mountain cave. They prostrated before him and invited him back to the palace. The monk with big ears said, “Amitabha talked too much!” Then he passed into parinirvana.

The men sent by the king were in great awe and did not know what to do. They reflected on the monk’s words and realized that Master Yongming Yanshou was Amitabha, so they hurried back to tell the king, “Buddha Dīpankara has gone, but Amitabha is still here.”

The king was overjoyed and went to see Master Yongming Yanshou right away. When he was almost at the door of the master’s room, a person rushed out in a

¹¹¹ Wuyue, 907–978, was an independent coastal kingdom founded during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–960) of Chinese history. It was ruled by the Qian family, whose family name remains widespread in the kingdom’s former territory.

flurry and nearly bumped into the king. The king asked, “Why are you in such a hurry?”

The Person Responded, “Master Yongming Yanshou Has Passed into Parinirvana!”

When an emanation of a buddha or a bodhisattva passes into parinirvana, many other eminent masters will follow and pass into parinirvana as well. There are many such stories throughout history.

From the above analysis, we learn that many eminent masters from India, Tibet, and China have come to this world, but they have all eventually passed into parinirvana. Only their life stories remain, and some of them have no life story left today.

In particular, many tertöns (treasure revealers) appeared in the Tibetan region to benefit countless beings, and their life stories are remarkable. As Padmasambhava said, “The tertöns who appeared in various places are all my monuments.”

Even in small counties like Sertar and Luhuo, there appeared some tertöns who revealed many termas,¹¹² but were not addressed in historical accounts. Dudjom Rinpoche’s *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* did not include any tertöns from our region. Consequently, many great realized practitioners have emerged in the past, yet we have never even heard of some of them.

Due to the karma of our past misdeeds, we are swept along by the winds of negative conditions, bound by harmful habits, and our minds remain attached to this impure physical body, which is merely a temporary aggregation of the four elements.

Even Great Siddhas must eventually depart from this world, let alone we ordinary beings, whose minds and bodies are far from reliable. It is as if an exquisite product made by a certified manufacturer is easy to break, not to mention a similar product made in a grandmother’s garage without any quality control.

As we cannot predict when or where this illusory body will perish, it is important that from this very moment onward we should diligently engage in virtuous deeds and cultivate merit with body, speech, and mind. With this in mind, meditate on impermanence.

¹¹² Terma (Tib. གཏེར་མ་, Wyl. gter ma) — 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 tertöns.

A disciple of Gampopa¹¹³ was widely recognized as a great realized master in Tibet. Once, a practitioner from the Kham area heard of his fame and came to request teachings. However, the master did not give him any teachings.

The practitioner did not give up and repeatedly pleaded, so the master grabbed the practitioner's hand and sincerely said, "I will die. You will die too! That is all my guru taught me. I guarantee you: no instruction is more supreme than this!"

Hearing this, the Kham practitioner diligently practiced according to the instructions and eventually attained realization.

If it were today and a guru told a person, "I will die. You will die too," that person might not be satisfied. He might think, "I already know this! You don't have to tell me!" However, a faithful disciple can attain realization just through this instruction.

In conclusion, we should read more history and learn about the past eminent masters. Then we should reflect, "However vast these masters' Dharma activities were, they could not escape impermanence, let alone we ordinary people! I will certainly die, and the only thing that will be of help when I die will be the Dharma of liberation. Therefore, as of now, I must meditate on impermanence and diligently practice the Dharma that brings freedom."

¹¹³ Gampopa Sönam Rinchen (1079–1153/9) is credited with founding the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.



Lesson 31

“There are magnificent and illustrious gods and ... how you could have thought that those things would last forever and never change.” [page 44–45]

We’ll continue to study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

This time I am teaching the text fairly slowly to ensure that you put the teachings into practice. Many people have practiced well and gained valuable experience, and I encourage you to keep up the good work. Of course, ngöndro is different from other tantric practices such as tummo, fire puja, tsok offering, and so forth, which many people enjoy engaging in. These tantric practices can indeed bring benefits if the practitioners have already reached the generation stage and completion stage, but I suggest that beginning practitioners first complete ngöndro practice.

When you first started ngöndro, I repeatedly stressed the importance of practicing the common preliminaries well; otherwise, it will be difficult to have a good practice with the uncommon preliminaries. If you do not practice the uncommon preliminaries effectively, the more profound tantric states will not arise within you. Therefore, many Tibetan enlightened masters have diligently practiced the common preliminaries.

One of my former school classmates, who also took ordination and is now a khenpo, currently pursues Dharma in a monastery located in Qinghai Province. He recently came to stay with me for a few days. During our conversation, he talked

about a lama from his monastery named Tsultrim from Golok, Qinghai. This lama is in his 60s and has completed sixteen rounds of uncommon ngöndro practices; the last round he completed was when he was sixty years old.

Lama Tsultrim mentioned that it had never been difficult for him to practice ngöndro, except that doing prostrations at sixty years old was slightly challenging. He has extremely strong confidence in both the common and uncommon preliminaries, and once every few years, he would repeat the ngöndro practices. He remained committed to practicing ngöndro and never stopped, even during the Cultural Revolution.

Lama Tsultrim upholds pure precepts. He became a monk at a very young age. Despite the turmoil in the Tibetan region during the chaotic period, he never disrobed; instead, he continued to practice the common and uncommon preliminaries repeatedly in a covert manner. With this perseverance, he successfully completed sixteen rounds of ngöndro!

My classmate stayed at the monastery for quite a long time, so he knows many of Lama Tsultrim's life stories. I genuinely rejoiced upon hearing them. There are many such Tibetan practitioners, but we are often unaware of their existence.

Therefore, we should strive to complete and perfect both the common and uncommon preliminaries. We should not merely “talk” about ngöndro or focus solely on the number of repetitions and practical formalities. Instead, we should cultivate true feeling and conviction for each practice. Only in this way can the practice truly impact us; as a result, we will remain motivated to engage in it.

Of course, during this process, some Dharma students may give up midway, and various challenges may arise. However, I still hope that everyone, myself included, will persist in the practice. Why do I join prostration practice with you every day? It is because this opportunity is extremely rare and precious, and I do not want to let it slip away with various excuses. Nowadays, many people only talk about *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, while only a few actually put the teachings into practice. This is not good. No matter who you are, you must place great importance on ngöndro practice.

As for me, I have not completed ngöndro many times—only once. Back when I was just a novice monk, I focused solely on the number of repetitions and did not engage in many meditations on the common preliminaries. However, this time,

before I give teachings each day, I carefully reflect on the content, which helps me generate very strong feelings about the common preliminaries.

For example, when teaching “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages,” I truly feel in my heart that the most important thing is to practice the Dharma with this human form, above all else. When teaching “the impermanence of life,” I strongly believe that every instruction in the text is undeniably true. Although I may not express myself well, and I may not be able to articulate everything in my mind, I do generate strong feelings while preparing for the teachings. I also have sincere and pure faith in the lineage masters, the buddhas, and the bodhisattvas.

I hope that by practicing ngöndro this time, you will experience a significant transformation in your life and reap great benefits in this life and in many lives to come. This is my aspiration for initiating the current ngöndro group practice. Therefore, we should always engage in self-reflection during the practice, thinking, “In this diverse society, different circumstances may arise one after another. However, the utmost priority must be given to my ngöndro practice. Other matters can be temporarily set aside.”

In the previous section, we learned that holy beings, including buddhas, bodhisattvas, and eminent masters, cannot escape death. Today, we’ll study the fact that beings with power, wealth, and status also die, and that none of them live forever.

2.1.2.4. The Impermanence of Those in Positions of Power

Even the celestial beings and rishis, who can live for countless eons and possess perfect virtues and merits, cannot escape death.

Once, during a Buddhist ceremony, a Japanese Dharma friend told me, “People living in Japan also need the Dharma because we Japanese also have to deal with suffering, including birth, old age, sickness, and death.” His words resonated deeply with me.

In fact, everyone in the world needs the Dharma. Why is this? Take me, for example: I do not need to take first and second-grade courses in elementary school because I have already graduated; I do not need to attend medical school because I do not practice medicine. However, I do need the Dharma, as I must confront birth, old age, sickness, and death.

Consider this: every patient must take medicine for treatment. Similarly, every being—whether Japanese, Chinese, American, a celestial being, or a hell being—must rely on the Dharma to be freed from the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death in samsara. Therefore, I sincerely hope the Dharma spreads to every corner of the world and nourishes the hearts of all.

Let's reflect on this: Does the President of a country need the Dharma? Definitely! Do beggars in the street need the Dharma? Absolutely, because everyone faces birth, old age, sickness, and death, and everyone risks suffering if they fall into a lower realm in their next life.

Thus, we conclude that there is not a single being who does not need the Dharma; rather, some beings are temporarily unwilling or unable to accept it. For example, an animal certainly needs the Dharma to uproot its strong afflictions. However, it cannot understand the teachings, even if we try to impose them directly on the creature.

Let's get back to the text. Those who've studied the *Treasury of Abhidharma* know this: Worldly lords such as Brahma, Indra, Vishnu, Ishvara and other great gods are said to have lifespans of many kalpas. Their majestic forms are measured in leagues¹¹⁴ or earshots,¹¹⁵ and they possess a power and resplendence that outshine the sun and moon. Yet, they too are not exempt from death.

Take Indra, for example. Here is the story from the *Dhammapada*:

Long ago, Indra realized through his clairvoyance that he was about to die and be reborn into a potter's family as a donkey. As his body began to deteriorate, he became so worried that he thought of the Buddha—the only protector in the Three Worlds. Thus, he sought refuge and protection from the Buddha.

The Buddha was meditating in a stone house at Vulture Peak, immersed in a deep meditative state. Upon seeing the Buddha, Indra prostrated and wholeheartedly took refuge in the Three Jewels three times. His life ended before he could rise, and he then entered the womb of the potter's donkey. At that moment, the donkey broke free from the ropes that bound her, dashed away, and destroyed many pots. In his anger, the potter struck the donkey, harming her womb. As a result, Indra regained his life and returned to his role as a celestial god. The Buddha emerged

¹¹⁴ Here, "league" actually corresponds to yojana which is a measure of distance that was used in ancient India. A yojana is about 12–15 km (i.e., 60 kosh = 1 yojana and 1 kosh is 200 m).

¹¹⁵ Here, "earshot" actually corresponds to króśa which is a measure of distance that was used in ancient India. A króśa may equal 1/4 yojana.

from his samadhi and praised Indra. “Excellent, Indra! Your negative actions were purified when you took refuge in the Three Jewels at the end of your life, and you will no longer suffer.” The Buddha also imparted the teaching of impermanence to Indra. Hearing this, Indra attained the sotāpanna stage (stream-enterer).

Thus, even the celestial gods cannot escape death. Some practitioners of Taoism aspire to achieve immortality and eternal life. In fact, what they truly desire is a significantly prolonged lifespan, which does not necessarily mean they will never die. As *The Treasury of Qualities* says:

Even Brahma, Indra, Maheśvara, and the universal monarchs
Cannot escape the Lord of Death.

How many of you listening to this teaching will still be in this world a hundred years from now? Take a moment to reflect on this. In fact, death is not far away from us. Although we may not like the idea of death, we cannot stop it because the nature of everything is impermanence.

Furthermore, not even divine or human ṛishis with the five kinds of clairvoyance,¹¹⁶ and the power to roam freely through the sky, can escape death. *The Letter of Consolation* says:

Great ṛishis with their five-fold powers
Can travel far and wide in the skies,
Yet they cannot reach the realm of deathlessness.

Here is a story from the *Dhammapada*:

When the Buddha was living in Rajgir, there were four Brahmin brothers who had attained the five kinds of clairvoyance. They could turn the sky and the earth upside down, dim the sun and the moon, move mountains, and overturn the oceans—there seemed to be nothing they were incapable of doing.

One day, through their clairvoyance, they realized they would die seven days later, so they gathered to discuss how to escape death.

One brother said, “I will dive into the ocean. I will neither surface nor sink to the bottom. I will float in the middle, so the Lord of Death won’t know where I am.”

¹¹⁶ The five kinds of clairvoyance include: divine vision, divine hearing, knowing others’ thoughts, knowing past lives, and the ability to perform miracles.

Another brother said, “I will enter Mount Meru and seal the entrance, leaving no opening, so the Lord of Death won’t know where I am.”

A third brother said, “I will hide myself in midair, so the Lord of Death won’t know where I am.”

The last brother said, “I will conceal myself in a noisy and crowded bazaar, allowing the Lord of Death to randomly choose anyone. He doesn’t necessarily need to find me.”

After their discussion, they hid according to their plans.

Seven days later, the brother who hid in midair fell to the ground like a ripe fruit from a tree and died; the brother who hid inside Mount Meru died; the brother who hid in the ocean died and was devoured by fish and turtles; and the brother who hid in the bazaar died in the crowd.

Upon hearing their stories, the Buddha told the sangha, “These four individuals were so ignorant that they did not understand the truth of life. Is there anyone who has truly escaped death? Sentient beings desire to live forever, but they simply cannot.”

Therefore, once a person reaches the end of their lifespan, even if they still wish to live and seek help from everyone, including doctors, statesmen, and even Buddha Shakyamuni, no one can do anything about it.

As recorded in some historical accounts, when King Virudhaka¹¹⁷ attacked and annihilated the tribe of Shakyas, to demonstrate the incredible and unfailing law of karma, Buddha Shakyamuni hid several Shakyan children. Two children were placed on the moon, two in the ocean, and two in an alms bowl. When the massacre was over, all six children had already died of natural causes, although they were not harmed by Virudhaka.

Therefore, when our life is to end, wherever we live or flee, death will surely arrive. Even Buddha Shakyamuni cannot change this karmic result, let alone worldly doctors.

We must carefully contemplate this text during our practice. Although the literal meaning is easy to understand, many people rarely associate impermanence

¹¹⁷ Virudhaka (Sanskrit: Virūdhaka; Pali: Viḍūḍabha) ruled the kingdom of Kosala during the Buddha’s time. He was the son and heir of King Pasenadi (Prasenajit).

with themselves due to their ineffective practice. As a result, they feel great pain when they have to face their own death or the death of a loved one.

If people have a conviction about impermanence, whatever happens, they will feel it is normal. They can then confront it with peace and calmness, so they will not experience excruciating suffering. Therefore, those who have studied Mahayana Buddhism, and especially those who have practiced impermanence, are brave in the face of death. In contrast, worldly individuals become completely lost and suffer immensely at the moment of death, regardless of how knowledgeable or intelligent they are.

We have just learned that gods and ṛishis could not escape death. Now, let's examine powerful figures in the human realm.

According to historical accounts such as Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India*, there have been universal emperors in our human world who possessed immense wealth and power and held the highest position. In the holy land of India, starting with Mahāsammata, innumerable emperors ruled over the entire Jambudvīpa.

According to the *Red Annals*, Mahāsammata was the first monarch of the world. At the very beginning, humans were hardly attached to the concepts of "I," "me," or "mine," so they shared their wealth, and their bodies emanated halos of light. As time passed, people's merit gradually diminished, leading to differences in gender and the need to distribute wealth, which resulted in conflicts. In response, people held discussions and eventually elected a king with the title Mahāsammata ("the Great Elect," one chosen by the people).

The first king of the world was selected through a democratic election. Thus, the democratic elections of our modern era can be traced back to the time of Mahāsammata.

Subsequently, the king's throne was passed down to his descendants until the time of Śuddhodana, the father of the historical Buddha.

Later, the three Pālas,¹¹⁸ the thirty-seven Chandras,¹¹⁹ and many other rich and powerful kings reigned in both eastern and western India. Afterward, with

¹¹⁸ The three Pālas refer to Sādhupāla, Gunapāla, and Prajñāpāla.

¹¹⁹ The thirty-seven Chandras refer to rulers of the Chandra kingdom, including Mahataing Chandra, Bahubali Chandra, Raghupati Chandra, Dvenchandra, Nitichandra, Dharmavijaya Chandra, and so forth.

the Indian monarchy abolished, humanitarians such as Mahatma Gandhi assumed leadership in India. But now, all those in positions of power can only be found in the glorious history, and none of them are alive today.

Hence, from the history of Indian emperors, we can easily understand the principle of impermanence.

In the snowy land of Tibet, the first king, Nyatri Tsenpo, a descendant of Mahāsammata, was an emanation of the Bodhisattva Nirvaranaviskambhin. Nyatri Tsenpo was born in what is now India, with hands and feet webbed like a swan's. The locals believed the child must be of non-human origin, so he was banished. Driven by his karma, he wandered on foot and eventually ended up in Tibet. There, he encountered some shepherds. When they inquired about his origins and identity, he pointed up at the sky. The shepherds assumed he must be a god who had descended from the heavens and appointed him their chief. They built him a throne from earth and stones that they carried on their shoulders, and he came to be known as Nyatri Tsenpo, which means “king of the Throne on the Shoulders.”¹²⁰

Starting from Nyatri Tsenpo, there reigned seven heavenly kings called Tri, six earthly kings called Lek, eight middle kings called De, five linking kings called Tsen, and thirteen generations of the Fortunate Dynasty, including the five of the Extremely Fortunate Dynasty (but now they no longer exist).

When I was studying at the Normal School of Garzê, I developed a strong interest in the history of Tibet. I remember that while my teachers were lecturing on Chinese or music, I would read history books at my desk and begin memorizing the names of the kings.

Why are the kings referred to as “the seven heavenly kings called Tri?” This is because they ascended to the sky when their lifespans ended, leaving no trace of their physical bodies—similar to the attainment of the rainbow body. As a result, some Tibetans believed that the kings had ascended to the heavenly realms. Therefore, it has been suggested by some that Tibetans originally believed in God.

Not long ago, an American visited Beijing. While on the subway, he asked passengers if they believed in God, and some responded that there was no God at

¹²⁰ Patrul Rinpoche covered this story of Nyatri Tsenpo in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Yale University Press, 2010, page 341.

all. This person became very angry, exclaiming, “How can you not believe in God? What kind of person are you? You are as foolish as an animal!”

Why are “the six earthly kings called Lek?” This is because their tombs were constructed between a stone hill and a grassy hill, suggesting the key term “earthly.”

Why are “the eight middle kings called De?” This is because their tombs were built in the middle of rivers, indicating the key term “middle.”

The tombs of “the five linking kings called Tsen” were situated in locations that connected them to the country.

“The thirteen generations of the Fortunate Dynasty” began with Trinyen Songtsen, the direct descendant of Lha-Thothori Nyentsen. The Dharma first emerged in Tibet during the reign of Lha-Thothori Nyentsen, when the *Sutra Designed like a Jewel Chest* and the *Sutra of a Hundred Invocations and Prostrations*, along with a cubit-high crystal stupa, fell onto the palace roof. It was prophesied that five generations later, during the reign of Songtsen Gampo, someone would grasp the meaning of the sutras. This marks the beginning of Buddhism in Tibet.

During the reign of thirteen kings from Lha-Thothori Nyentsen to Ralpacan, Buddhism thrived in Tibet. For example, Songtsen Gampo married two princesses who brought numerous representations of the Buddha’s body, speech, and mind, including statues of Buddha Shakyamuni. Meanwhile, Thonmi Sambhota invented and introduced the Tibetan script. Additionally, Minister Gartongtsen, an emanation of Vajrapani, visited many countries, thereby enhancing diplomatic relations. For these reasons, these leaders are referred to as “the thirteen generations of the Fortunate Dynasty.”

The later period of “the thirteen generations of the Fortunate Dynasty” was marked by the five Extremely Fortunate Dynasties, spanning from Trisong Detsen to Ralpacan. For example, King Trisong Detsen invited 108 pandits to Tibet, including Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita, organized the translation of the Tripitaka, and oversaw the construction of temples, including the first temple in Tibet—Samye Monastery. Consequently, Buddhism flourished during this time.

King Ralpacan also held Buddhism in high regard. He often divided his long hair into two strands and spread it on the ground, asking the tantric yogis to step on one side and the monks on the other. In addition, he made significant contributions to Buddhism.

The great achievements of these kings were also reflected in the extent of their

territories. According to historical accounts in the *Red Annals*, the *Blue Annals*, and the *White Annals*, during his lifetime, the Dharma King Songtsen Gampo, an emanation of Avalokiteshvara, relied on his magical army to conquer vast territories, extending from Nepal in the south to China in the north.

[Songtsen Gampo indeed had a remarkable reign, but the territorial issue has always been quite sensitive, which is not our topic of discussion. Here, we are primarily examining it from the perspective of impermanence.]

King Trisong Detsen also ruled two-thirds of Jambudvīpa.

[Those historical accounts are quite reliable; in particular, Gendün Chöphel's research is esteemed for its accuracy. Although Gendün Chöphel did not live long—he passed away in his 50s—his research was authoritative and is recognized internationally.]

During the reign of Ralpachen, an iron pillar was erected on the banks of the Ganges, marking the boundary between India and Tibet.

[Gendün Chöphel covered this event in the *Guide to Sacred Places in India*. He also noted in his travelogue the *Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler* that Dharmasvamin, a Tibetan monk and pilgrim who traveled to India in the thirteenth century, spent one night at the iron pillar during his journey and the next day crossed the Ganges to arrive in India.

Therefore, it appears that the border between India and Tibet at that time was along the Ganges. Later, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited India with us, we inquired about the location of the iron pillar, but the Ganges is so extensive that we were unable to find it.]

Tibet exercised power in many regions of India, China, Gesar, Tajikistan (today's Iran) and other countries. At the New Year banquets, envoys from all those countries were required to spend one day in Lhasa for the ceremony of offering gifts and paying tribute. [In historical accounts of how eminent masters of Tibetan Buddhism propagated the Dharma, one can find information about the territory of Tibet and its relationship with neighboring countries during the reign of Ralpacan.]

Such was Tibet's power in the past. However, it did not last. Apart from the historical accounts, nothing is left.

It is the same for the history of the Han area of China. There were many

powerful kings and emperors of Chinese dynasties, including Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, the Three Kingdoms, Jin, the Northern and Southern Periods, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing. Many of these rulers had remarkable capacities, such as Emperor Qin Shi Huang, Emperor Wu of Han, Emperor Taizong of Tang, Emperor Taizu of Song, and Emperor Kangxi of Qing, who are regarded as some of the greatest leaders. Nevertheless, none of them are still alive, which also reflects the principle of impermanence.

We have also learned about history, geography, astronomy, and other areas of knowledge, which help us reflect on impermanence. For example, physicists such as Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton are no longer alive. Also gone are paper inventor Cai Lun, astronomer Zhang Heng, mathematician Zu Chongzhi, geographer Li Daoyuan, agronomist Jia Sixie, and others. These individuals made their mark on the world, but now they are all gone. We can only learn about them from historical accounts.

Putting aside these “big names,” if we examine the people around us, we can see what has changed over the years. In my hometown, when someone refers to a family, they typically use the father’s name. Therefore, when I was a child, families were addressed under the names of my father’s generation; a few years ago, it was under the names of my generation; now, when I visit my village, the names of my generation have been replaced by those of the younger generation. The new generation replaces the old, much like flowers blossoming and withering. Impermanence is evident before our eyes.

However, although we constantly experience the changes of seasons and the transition between days and nights, many of us still cling to the idea of permanence and fail to understand the truth of impermanence. Therefore, we must have conviction about impermanence. As many great Kadampa masters have said, “If one practices impermanence well, all the other practices will go well.”

If we contemplate the above reasoning, compared to the great splendors of the past, the houses, possessions, relatives, and power we now have—which we consider so superior—are as fragile as a beehive. What permanence or stability can there be in such worldly pleasures?

Someone builds a cabin thinking, “What a nice house I have,” and decorates the interior with thangkas. This person finishes furnishing the house and feels very happy, believing they are now living in a Potala.

However, what they have built and furnished is not very solid. It is like bees are happy when they finish building a beehive; however, it is hard to predict what will happen to it in winter. Therefore, the Buddha says,

Alas! All conditioned things are impermanent in nature;
Once born, death inevitably follows—
A wise person should be well aware of this.

Generally speaking, ordinary people have a particularly weak awareness of impermanence. Only those with a virtuous root cultivated from previous lives may naturally possess a sense of impermanence.

Last night, I was not feeling well and could not sleep, so I began to read the *Biographies of Eminent Masters of the Song Dynasty*. One of the masters was Chan Master Zhixuan, who lived to be seventy-three and greatly contributed to Chinese Buddhism. When he was still a child, he already had a profound insight into impermanence. At the age of five, his grandfather asked him to write a poem in praise of flowers, and his work was:

When the flowers bloom, the tree is all red;
When the flowers wither, the branches become empty;
The only flower that still remains
Will surely be gone with the wind by tomorrow.

The poem implies that while we are alive in this world, everything may appear thriving on the surface. But when death arrives, everyone has to die, and even if one or two people remain in this world, they cannot live forever—sooner or later, they will also die.

Here is a story about another Chan Master, Lingyu, who passed into parinirvana at the age of eighty-eight. At that time, Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty held him in high regard and invited him several times to become a national master for the imperial court. However, Master Lingyu always found an excuse to decline.

Eventually, the Emperor realized he could not persuade the master, so he made generous material offerings to him and also built a temple in the mountains in his honor. Master Lingyu devoted his entire life to propagating the Dharma, and when he was about to leave this world, he wrote a poem that says:

Today I sit in a hall with a high ceiling,

Tomorrow I will lie down beneath the long thorns;
 This life is already over,
 Who knows what my next life will be?

A few days after composing this poem, the master passed away.

If we can deeply engrave the concept of impermanence into our minds as these eminent masters did, our practice will become easier. These great masters devoted their entire lives to the Dharma; they did not pursue fame and wealth, and they practiced earnestly throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, we are not like this. Many of us remain very attached to worldly concerns. We may claim that we want to practice the Dharma, but in reality, we struggle to free ourselves from various temptations. Hence, when reading the biographies of great masters of Chinese Buddhism, we cannot help but feel embarrassed.

In *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, Dudjom Rinpoche also covered the life stories of many tertöns, tantric yogis, and other practitioners in Tibet. You may reflect on how they spent their lives and consider how we spend our own. By comparison, we'll realize that contemporary practitioners, whether lay practitioners or monastics, cannot be compared to our predecessors.

Master Chengguan¹²¹ (738–839), also known as the national master of Qing Liang, made ten aspirations. The following is a paraphrase of his aspirations: “1) always stay in a ten-square-meter room and keep no other possessions except my three Dharma robes and alms bowl; 2) abandon fame and wealth as one would throw away snot; 3) do not look at women; 4) do not socialize with worldly people; 5) recite the Lotus Sutra regularly; 6) frequently read classical texts of Mahayana Buddhism and greatly help others; 7) teach the Flower Garland Sutra regularly; 8) never lie down during the day or night for my entire life; 9) never deceive beings for the sake of gaining fame; 10) never withdraw my compassion and bodhicitta.”

I assessed myself against this list: I cannot “never lie down during the day or night”; I cannot “have no other possessions except my three robes and alms bowls”; I cannot “abandon fame and wealth as one would throw away snot” ...

Compared to our predecessors, we possess less mental strength, which is truly embarrassing. Nevertheless, we should still have confidence in ourselves and strive

¹²¹ Chengguan is identified as the fourth patriarch of the Huayan School because he studied under Fashen (718–778), who was a student of Fazang's student Huiyuan (673–743).

to study and practice the Dharma. We must firmly believe that aside from practicing the Dharma and benefiting beings, nothing else, including mundane pleasures, is meaningful in this world. Therefore, we should aspire to do our utmost to benefit sentient beings through the Dharma. When we have time, we should practice the Dharma, particularly focusing on impermanence.

Reflect on and meditate deeply and ask yourself how you could have believed those things would last forever and never change. Gendün Chöphel says in his *Instructions to the Practice*:

This impermanent body holds no substantial meaning,
So it should be used to diligently practice the extraordinary
Dharma.

This instruction is crucial for every practitioner.

We should always pray to the guru and the Three Jewels so that the state of impermanence will soon arise in our minds. If we do so, neither will we be interested in worldly concerns, nor will we procrastinate about studying and practicing the Dharma.

A lay practitioner often receives calls from his vajra friends, who say to him, “Can you join in the teaching? Don’t give up your studies.” If this layperson is motivated by their understanding of impermanence, they will recognize the futility of worldly concerns and prioritize the Dharma. Consequently, they will willingly attend the teachings.

Conversely, if this layperson lacks an effective practice regarding impermanence, he will be like a mischievous child who requires constant supervision. Despite others’ best efforts, it will remain challenging to guide him onto the right path. Only when he truly understands impermanence can he begin to practice independently; only then will his practice become effective.



Lesson 32

“As an example of impermanence, consider the cycle of growth ... with authority and are powerful and wealthy. Nothing stays the same forever.” [page 45–46]

This time, I am providing extensive teachings on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It may take two or three years to complete the entire text. I sincerely hope that all Dharma students at Larung Gar or elsewhere will follow these teachings from beginning to end. If someone has to leave Larung Gar for another location, they should continue studying the text. Thanks to virtual learning tools and in-person meetings at centers across the country, anyone wishing to study Dharma can easily access the teachings.

A duration of two or three years for this teaching is not long in a person’s lifespan. If you cannot complete the study of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* within this timeframe, it will be extremely difficult for you to engage in virtuous actions and overcome obstacles throughout the three great countless eons. Therefore, we should all aspire to complete the study; otherwise, given the turmoil of this degenerate age, what we see and hear may present various obstacles that can hinder our practice of the Dharma.

I also frequently pray to be able to complete teaching this text so that this important task can be accomplished. Of course, during the turmoil of the five degenerations, it is quite challenging for both teachers and Dharma students to fulfill this significant undertaking. Nevertheless, we shall all move forward with determination and perseverance.

It should be noted that the content of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is not

contradictory to the teachings of any Buddhist school or lineage. Therefore, it can be studied by monastics and laypeople from all traditions. For example, the teachings in the text are accepted by all schools of Chinese Buddhism, including the Tiantai School, Pure Land School, and Huayan School. If you disagree, please specify your concerns: Is it “the impermanence of life” or “the defects of samsara”? Scrutiny will reveal that all schools of Chinese Buddhism accept the teachings in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

This is also true for the various lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Except for some differences in pith instructions, the teachings are very similar across lineages. As we have learned from other lineages, including Sakya, Gelugpa, Jonang, and Kadampa, their biographies reflect that eminent masters of the past did not exclusively favor their own lineages.

Recently, some people have been asking me questions regarding prostration practice, such as, “May I visualize my own guru instead of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche?” or bluntly stating, “I really do not have faith in you. May I visualize another guru instead?”

My answer has been, “From the very beginning, I have never asked anyone to pray to me or to venerate me. It is simply that I have great faith in the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, which is why I encouraged you to pray to him. However, if you do not feel a close affinity with Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, or if you do not have strong faith in him, you may visualize your root guru. The tantras do not state that one can only pray to a specific guru.”

Here is the metaphor I mentioned before: if there is no magnifying glass between the sun’s rays and a bundle of dry grass, the grass cannot ignite. Similarly, if there is no guru between us and the Buddha, we cannot receive the true blessings of the Buddha. Of course, the magnifying glass must be genuine; if it is fake, it cannot concentrate the sun’s rays. Likewise, the guru should be a true teacher. According to the *Vinaya* and tantric teachings, the guru should possess genuine qualities. Any qualified teacher, whether Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian, or from other countries, is acceptable. Some people think, “Gurus from a certain ethnic group are good, but those from my own ethnicity are not.” Such a perception reflects ignorance. In fact, the guru is not bound by ethnicity or nationality. As long as the guru has compassion for sentient beings and comprehends the teachings on emptiness, they can serve as a representative of the Buddha.

You should place great importance on this text. Some of you have practiced well—setting aside trivialities and devoting yourselves to the Dharma with single-minded focus, while others practice “seasonally,” studying the Dharma casually when time permits and putting it aside when it does not. Although in the latter case, you can still benefit from the Dharma to some extent, it cannot penetrate deeply into your minds.

Take your daily prostration practice, for example. Lazy practitioners do not like to “exercise” and prefer to lie down, making it quite a challenge to complete two hundred to three hundred prostrations daily. In contrast, diligent practitioners recognize the rarity of this precious human life, allowing them to do two thousand to three thousand prostrations a day, while still feeling the urge to do more.

The progress goals I have set for your ngöndro practice are not based on the standards of those who are exceptionally diligent. Nevertheless, you should not idle too much either, perceiving everything as a sort of pressure, except for eating, drinking, and other indulgences. I often think that for ordinary individuals, engaging in good deeds is as challenging as climbing a mountain. Even if we need to prostrate for only fifteen minutes daily, some of us constantly check the time, wishing it to be over soon. By contrast, when we engage in unwholesome activities or maintain a neutral state, fifteen minutes passes quickly, and we do not even notice the time. It is akin to chatting with a friend—two or three hours can fly by, let alone fifteen minutes.

Therefore, it is very easy for us to squander precious time on meaningless pursuits, while it is quite challenging to dedicate time to the Dharma. Many lay practitioners, especially those in urban areas, previously knew little about Buddhist doctrines. Now that you have begun to gain a deeper understanding, it is crucial that you do not just talk the talk; instead, you must allow the Dharma to permeate your minds. By doing so, the Dharma will be integrated into your daily lives, so that in whatever you are doing—be it walking, sitting, or lying down—you will never part from the compassionate blessings of the buddhas.

Some monastics at Larung Gar are truly impressive; they once had status, fame, and wealth, but they chose to renounce everything, leaving behind a life of comfort to pursue the Dharma in this remote and austere valley, where the climate is harsh and the living conditions are limited. Such a determined aspiration is truly admirable.

However, occasional renunciation in an ordinary person is difficult to sustain. Some individuals, after more than a decade, not only do not regress in their spiritual commitment but also strengthen their determination in the pursuit of Dharma. This is something we should aspire to. Some individuals had fervent faith at the very beginning; they cried tears of joy for two or three days after encountering the guru, and I worried they would exhaust their “reservoir of tears,” leaving them with none for the future. Such a person sheds tears of joy because a connection from a previous life has awakened, and the seed of merit in their mindstream has begun to sprout.

However, I believe it is perfectly fine if one does not have great faith at the outset. As the old saying goes: “The friendship of a gentleman is as insipid as water; that of a petty man, sweet as rich wine.” If faith begins too strong, it might soon wane very quickly.

In short, it is not easy for us to practice ngöndro, but the practice is very important. Without ngöndro, even if you have received the highest empowerment and pith instructions, it is difficult to determine whether you will gain any real benefit from them.

It is certain that ngöndro practice can benefit everyone. However, some individuals cannot complete the whole cycle as they are heavily burdened by afflictions; others struggle to integrate the teachings into their practice and life, leading them to despise themselves, thinking, “I am so incompetent! I really cannot practice well,” to the point that they even strike their own heads. This is not necessary at all. After all, we are not noble beings, and we are often entangled by greed, anger, ignorance, and the other 84,000 defilements.

Nevertheless, studying the Dharma can make a significant difference for you; after studying the Dharma, your attitude and perception of life will change considerably. Therefore, it is important that your determination in the pursuit of the Dharma does not regress. It is not a major issue if your faith is not strong at the very beginning but ensure that you always retain faith in the Dharma.

Now we’ll study the fifth aspect concerning the impermanence of life.

2.1.2.5. Other Examples of Impermanence

Here we practice impermanence by contemplating various examples and their meanings.

Certain examples in life can genuinely help us meditate on impermanence. Milarepa employed eight similes to illustrate impermanence in one of his songs of realization:

The gold painting fades when it is completed—
This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

The lovely flowers of turquoise blue
Are destroyed in time by frost—
This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

The flood sweeps strongly down the vale above,
Soon becoming weak and tame in the plain below—
This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

Rice grows in the vale below,
Soon with a sickle it is reaped—
This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

Elegant silken cloth
Soon with a knife is cut—
This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

The precious jewel that you cherish
Soon will belong to others—

This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

The pale moonbeams
Soon will fade and vanish—
This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

A precious son is born,
Soon he is lost and gone—
This shows the illusory nature of all beings,
This proves the transient nature of all things.
Think, then you will practice Dharma.

These are the eight similes I sing.
I hope you will remember and practice them.¹²²

Worldly people who have never studied impermanence do not think in such a way. I also notice that some monastics and lay practitioners know nothing about impermanence; they seem to believe the world will never change and that they can live for thousands of years. In fact, this is merely their illusion.

If you have practiced impermanence, your attachment to everything will be relatively weak, and you will not be caught off guard or panicked when a significant event of impermanence occurs. For example, when a loved one suddenly dies or a significant other drastically changes their behavior, those who have never studied impermanence may struggle to accept reality and could collapse mentally or even commit suicide. Therefore, it is essential for worldly individuals to understand the truth of impermanence.

I recently reviewed the profiles of those attending these teachings and found that the majority are over forty or fifty years old. In fact, people in their 20s and 30s would greatly benefit from learning about the truth of impermanence, as many are

¹²² *Sixty Songs of Milarepa*, translated by Garma C. C. Chang, selected and introduced by Bhikkhu Khantipalo, first published by Buddhist Publication Society (BPS), 1996.

attached to romantic relationships. If something goes wrong with their partners, they may experience unbearable pain. However, if they understand the truth of impermanence, even if they lose a beloved partner, they will be mentally prepared, recognizing that everything is impermanent and that they can cope with the loss.

According to the statistics I reviewed, fewer than ten percent of Dharma students are between twenty and thirty years old, for reasons that remain unclear to me. In fact, young adults today are often emotionally attached to their romantic partners to an extreme degree. Some may even commit suicide when their relationships fail. In such cases, they would be better off studying the truth of impermanence. If they truly acknowledge the impermanent nature of everything, understanding even a single piece of scriptural evidence could prevent them from resorting to sleeping pills or rat poison.

Let's proceed to the root text:

As an example, the cycle of growth and decline over a kalpa also embodies the nature of impermanence and change. [It is difficult for us to grasp the concept of “kalpa,” as our lifespan is extremely short in comparison to its length. Using our brief existence as a reference point to contemplate such an extensive duration of time is indeed quite challenging.]

Long ago, in the first age of this kalpa, there was no sun or moon in the sky. Human beings relied on their own radiance for illumination and used divine powers to travel through the air. Their bodies were several yojanas tall, and they lived on nectar, enjoying bliss comparable to that of celestial beings. However, due to their afflictions and unwholesome karma, their merits gradually declined, ultimately leading to the current state of existence. As said in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*:

At first, sentient beings were like living in the Rūpadhātu,¹²³

Then gradually they started to cling to tastes.

Later, the good fortune of humanity continued to decline, and people began to cling more tightly to the concepts of “I,” “me,” and “mine.” They also started to develop male and female traits, and humanity's intrinsic radiance faded. Crops of grain began to grow on the land, and gradually, things devolved to today's state.

What is the situation today? Human lifespan is less than a hundred years, and

¹²³ Rūpadhātu, or form realm, is one of the three realms of existence within Buddhist cosmology. This realm is characterized by the internal bliss of absorption.

everyone is deeply attached to the notions of “my country,” “my family,” “my group,” and so forth. People are preoccupied with protecting their fame, wealth, politics, economy, and more, which leads to unceasing wrongdoing. Such changes are not recorded in general historical accounts. The International History and Chinese History you have learned only cover human civilization over the past few thousand years, and these records do not extend beyond that. In contrast, the accounts in Buddhism differ significantly in terms of their timespan.

Even today, people’s afflictions are becoming increasingly coarse and intense, inevitably leading to a decline in merit, shorter lifespans, and, ultimately, a time when human lifespan is reduced to just ten years. At that point, plagues, wars, and famines will reach their peak, nearly driving the sentient beings of Jambudvīpa to extinction.

During the period of plague, epidemics will spread everywhere within seven months and seven days. People will perish from the illness, no medicine will prove effective, and hardly anyone will be left untouched. Ultimately, very few individuals will survive.

During the period of war, it will not be a single country that initiates an invasion. Instead, humanity will become so cruel that their only thought will be to kill others. Anyone they encounter will appear as an enemy, and whatever they can seize will become a lethal weapon with which they will attack whomever they see. The massacre will endure for seven days and seven nights.

During the period of famine, for seven years, seven months, and seven days, there will be no rain, resulting in a severe drought. Consequently, wells and rivers will dry up, no crops will grow, the five flavors will vanish or become stale, and provisions, treasures, and homes will gradually deteriorate. Due to unbearable hunger, people will even excavate the bones of those who lived when human lifespans reached one hundred years. They will make soup from the bones and consider it highly nutritious.

Last year, I met a person from Hongyuan County in Aba, a Tibetan region in northwestern Sichuan, who told me, “During the famine of the 1950s in the Tibetan and Han areas of China, some people also dug up bones from cemeteries. If they found human bones, they would take them home and boil them into a soup. After consuming the soup, they would gain energy and feel warm for two or three days.”

In comparison, we are now living a happy life with food and clothing. However, some worldly individuals or rusty practitioners remain unsatisfied with what they have; they constantly complain about lacking this or that, and the gap between their possessions and desires is impossible to bridge.

In the end, as stated in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*:

The periods of war, plague, and famine
Gradually conclude in seven days, seven months, and then seven
years, respectively.

After enduring a period of war lasting seven days, a period of plague lasting seven months and seven days, and a period of famine lasting seven years, seven months, and seven days, 99 percent of the human race will have been wiped out. Many places will be left with only abandoned buildings and possessions, bereft of owners. Everywhere will become desolate, devoid of any human presence.

At that time, the emanation of Bodhisattva Maitreya will appear to teach the survivors the wondrous Dharma of abstaining from killing.

[No-killing is indeed a great virtue. If most people in this world choose to become vegetarian and refrain from killing, it will avert the occurrence of armed conflicts and wars. People's minds will be purified, bringing harmony to the entire world.]

At that time, humans will be as tall as a forearm. From then on, their lifespan will increase to twenty years and then gradually extend until it reaches eighty thousand years. At that point, Lord Maitreya will appear in person, become Buddha at the Vajra Seat where all one thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa attain perfect enlightenment, and turn the Wheel of the Dharma.

When eighteen such cycles of growth and decline have taken place and the lifespan of humans reaches immeasurable years, the Buddha Infinite Aspiration will appear and live for as long as all the other thousand buddhas of the Good Kalpa put together. His activities for beings' benefit, too, will be equal to the combined activities of those thousand buddhas.

For an ordinary person, it is hard to imagine what we just learned. For someone who is faithful, even if they do not doubt this teaching, it may still be difficult for them to develop a comprehensive understanding. It is similar to describing the galaxy, the solar system, or even the earth to someone who knows nothing about

astronomy or geography; that person may struggle to grasp what you are talking about.

When I was in junior high school, a teacher named Wang taught us geography. Many of the Tibetan students could barely understand basic Chinese, let alone terminology related to geography, so we just stared at him, confused. When the teacher mentioned “the earth,” we had no idea what he was saying. In the end, he was quite disappointed, so he drew a circle on the blackboard and said, “As long as you know the earth is round, that’s fine.”

Similarly, when we mention the concept of “kalpa” to those who lack faith in Buddhism or do not possess a forward-thinking mindset about the future of the cosmos, it can be difficult for them to believe. Nevertheless, the cycle of growth and decline of a kalpa unfolds as we have described. Finally, this Good Kalpa will disappear without a trace. Examining such changes, one can see that even on this vast scale, nothing escapes the fundamental nature of impermanence.

Therefore, nothing is substantial. Nothing is inherently existent. Everything, whether it be the external environment or sentient beings, is always subject to the nature of impermanence. *The Lalitavistara Sutra* states:

The Three Worlds are impermanent,
Like the clouds in autumn.

It also says in another sutra:

The Three Worlds are impermanent, like clouds in autumn;
The birth and death of all beings are like performances in
theaters.

The constant changes of the Three Worlds resemble the white clouds of autumn, which some people in metropolitan areas may not see due to pollution. In some cities, one cannot even see the sky, let alone white clouds. Particularly in northeastern China, along the highways, one can only see black smoke from large factories, with no trace of white clouds. India might have been better in the past, but today it resembles some areas of China.

In the Tibetan region, we can still clearly see clouds in all seasons. These clouds appear and disappear in an instant. Similarly, everything in life comes and goes like clouds, a truth we should all understand well.

It is easy to grasp the literal meaning of impermanence, yet generating conviction about impermanence requires personal effort. Although many of you are listening to the same teaching, the benefit you derive may vary greatly due to differences in personal affinity and capacity. This is also true when we study worldly knowledge: while the same teacher imparts the same lesson, different students may learn different things, and some may even come away with resentment toward the teacher. Various outcomes can occur.

In fact, it is very necessary to study the Dharma. If you are able, you should first understand the teachings and then pass them on to anyone with whom you have affinity. Some people hesitate to become Dharma teachers because they believe it lacks social status, but I personally feel that the position of a Dharma teacher is highly esteemed.

The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche dedicated his entire life to imparting teachings without pursuing worldly status. Historically, many eminent masters, such as Venerable Atisha, Lama Tsongkapa, and Shantarakshita, also devoted their lives to being Dharma teachers, thereby making significant contributions to the world. Therefore, Dharma teachers and tutors should share the profound teachings of impermanence under the guidance of bodhicitta.

Recently, when I visited a secular school, I heard some teachers discussing the principle of impermanence, and from the students' facial expressions, it seemed they understood it well. I thought, "How wonderful would it be if the principle of impermanence were taught in every school? Then, as children grow up, they will not become consumed by thoughts of money and will not have life goals limited to earning. If they have even a basic understanding of the Dharma, they will learn how to live a meaningful life. Otherwise, they may become greedy and undisciplined when they can afford indulgences and will start to complain and blame others when they fail to get what they desire. Such individuals live in fear and pain, devoid of true happiness."

Given the current situation, the only elixir that can help and save all beings is Buddhism. Taming our minds through the Dharma brings all benefits without harm. Of course, not everyone can accept Buddhism; this was the case even at the time of Buddha Sakyamuni, let alone in the current era of turmoil.

Therefore, we should strive to understand the doctrines, and especially those with wisdom and capacity should delve deeper into the subtle and profound

teachings of the Buddha. If you do not possess such vast and deep wisdom, at the very least, you should master the basic principles of making a living, as well as the essential instructions on how to attain liberation and avoid unfortunate rebirth.

Next, we will examine the constant change of the four seasons:

Observing the changing seasons separately also reveals the impermanence of nature. In summer, all the grasslands are lush and green, and the rain falls like sweet nectar. People indulge in the refreshing and delightful scenery, while colorful flowers bloom in vibrant competition, creating a magnificent display, as if in a heavenly realm.

The Tibetan region in summer resembles a celestial place, and nothing is more joyful than sitting among the colorful flowers and admiring the beautiful forest, rivers, springs, blue sky, and white clouds.

Perhaps due to my personal preference, when spring and summer arrive, I enjoy going to a river, sitting there, listening to the soothing sound of the water, and appreciating the beauty of nature. During these moments, the joy in my heart is beyond description. Recently, I visited the river with a few Dharma friends, and I told them, “If I were to die, I would prefer to do so in winter rather than in spring or summer. This is because the scenery during spring and summer is so beautiful that I would not want to leave this world.”

The scenery is beautiful in summer, but in autumn, the chilly wind turns the green fields yellow, and all the flowers and plants gradually wither and fade. Leaves fall everywhere in autumn, which brings people a great sense of desolation. At this time, we deeply feel impermanence.

By winter, the ground is frozen as hard as stone, and water has turned to ice. The piercing cold wind sweeps through, and you could ride for days in search of a single flower from summer, but none can be found.

However, it can be a different story these days due to advancements in science and technology. In winter, if you fly to Hainan Province, the southernmost point of China, you will experience a stark contrast. Here in the Tibetan region, we have ice everywhere, while there, flowers bloom in abundance; it feels like entering a different world.

In the Tibetan region, the four seasons vary greatly from one another, making the seasonal changes so pronounced that you can easily sense the impermanence of everything. There is also a corresponding verse in Chan Buddhism that states:

There are flowers in spring, and the moon in autumn,
Cool breezes in summer, and snow in winter.

This verse illustrates the principle of impermanence. Thus, as spring passes and autumn arrives, as cold gives way to heat, the seasons—autumn, winter, spring, and so on—appear in succession. Everything that manifested in the previous season transforms into something entirely different. These are clear examples of impermanence that we witness with our own eyes. Therefore, those who have contemplated impermanence will view the changing of the four seasons as a helpful reminder of this concept, whereas those who have never reflected on impermanence may not share the same perspective.

Similarly, if we reflect on yesterday and today, this morning and tonight, this year and the next... everything is constantly changing, moment by moment. Therefore, nothing in this world is permanent, reliable, or steadfast.

Everything is constantly changing. For example, yesterday we aimed to practice well, but today we no longer have that intention. We set a plan for next year, but when the time comes to execute it, we may have already changed our minds. We might want to go somewhere this year, but eventually, we may not be able to make it. Given all this, nothing is permanent, reliable, or solid.

Especially in the cities, villages, and temples where we live, we can clearly observe this truth:

People who were once wealthy and prosperous may now have fallen into decline, some even facing complete ruin. Conversely, those who were once impoverished and struggling may now have risen to wealth and power.

All these changes are inseparable from the nature of impermanence. Therefore, the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche says in his *Song of Impermanence*:

When examining everything internal and external,
(One can tell) they indicate the impermanence of life.

If we examine everything inside and outside with our wisdom, we'll find that everything—be it the four seasons, our loved ones, or our homes—serves as noble teachers, illustrating the impermanence of life. This includes our Dharma friends in the same group; we can observe how many were present at the beginning, how many have left, and how many have recently joined us—the group continues to

change. Therefore, from the things around us, we can easily perceive the shadow of impermanence.

The Taj Mahal in India, listed as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, also exemplifies the principle of impermanence through its story.

The Taj Mahal was commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan to house the tomb of his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It is said that Mumtaz Mahal was an exceptionally beautiful woman who married at age nineteen to Prince Khurram (later known by his regal name, Shah Jahan). The couple shared a loving marriage and were inseparable. Mumtaz accompanied Shah Jahan's entourage throughout his earlier military campaigns and the subsequent rebellion against his father. After a bloody battle, Prince Khurram ascended to the throne and received the title Shah Jahan, meaning "King of the World."

Mumtaz Mahal died during the birth of their fourteenth child when she was only thirty-nine years old, while accompanying her husband in a campaign in southern India. Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan had fourteen children during their eighteen-year marriage, but only four boys and three girls survived.

Before her death, Shah Jahan held Mumtaz Mahal tightly in his arms, asking if she had any final wishes. Mumtaz Mahal expressed that her only hope was to have a unique tomb.

Shah Jahan was devastated by Mumtaz Mahal's death. In her memory, he invested the resources of the entire nation, spending vast amounts to construct the tomb. It took the efforts of 22,000 laborers, painters, embroidery artists, and stonecutters to shape the Taj Mahal, which took twenty-two years to complete.

After the construction was finished, Shah Jahan had the craftsmen's thumbs cut off, as he remembered Mumtaz Mahal's wish for a unique tomb. He did not want to see a similar mausoleum built elsewhere in the world. It is also said that the craftsmen's thumbs were buried alongside Mumtaz Mahal.

Initially, Shah Jahan intended to build a similar tomb for himself in black marble on the opposite bank of the river and to connect the Taj Mahal with a half-black, half-white marble bridge so he could face his beloved wife.

However, shortly after the Taj Mahal's completion, Shah Jahan was deposed by his son Aurangzeb and placed under house arrest at nearby Agra Fort. During the next eight years, Shah Jahan could only view the reflection of the Taj Mahal in the distant river through a small window. Eventually, his eyesight deteriorated,

and he could only see the Taj Mahal through the refraction of a gem until he died of depression.

Shah Jahan, once very powerful, became melancholic in the end, illustrating that nothing is permanent in this world. The same can be said for Saddam Hussein. When he was first elected, the entire nation rejoiced; every household displayed his photo, many admired him, and even the main airport was named after him. However, later, when he was imprisoned and ultimately executed by hanging, people celebrated with joy and laughter.

Therefore, as the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche said, everything is a noble teacher revealing the truth of impermanence. If you can reflect and meditate on them, you will see that all manifestations in the external environment and among sentient beings are examples of impermanence. If you do not reflect on them, no matter how profound the pith-instructions in books may be, you may regard them as irrelevant. This will not benefit your mindstream. Therefore, I hope you can deeply understand the profound meaning of impermanence by reflecting on the things around you.



Lesson 33

“forever. In your own family, each successive generation of ... with your cheek against a stone or tuft of grass, your hair bespattered with earth.” [page 46–47]

As I have emphasized repeatedly, the literal meaning of the ngöndro teaching is not as difficult to comprehend as the teachings of the Middle Way, Buddhist logic, or prajnaparamita; however, fully grasping and internalizing the true meaning of ngöndro is not easy. Therefore, it is essential for us to integrate the study and practice of the ngöndro teaching over an extended period.

I often reflect on this: currently, I am providing you with a fairly extensive teaching on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Although I cannot predict whether impermanence will intervene during my teaching, I am genuinely pleased with the progress we are making. For many of you, regardless of which lineage you previously followed or whether you are studying Sutrayana or Vajrayana teachings, it is in your best interest to study this text. Thus, I believe this learning opportunity is invaluable for everyone, and I always approach my teaching with great seriousness. Each time I give this teaching, I experience profound bliss in my heart, as I truly believe this text is very important!

Anyone fortunate enough to receive this teaching should continually assess its significance to them. At first glance, it may appear that anyone can discuss the stories and scriptural evidence in the text. However, to provide accurate explanations, a teacher must possess their own practical experience. I do not mean to boast, but I take pride in my teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*; I am confident in my ability to convey its message.

If you were to ask me to teach the main practice of the Great Perfection or the Middle Way of emptiness, I might not be able to teach it effectively because I have not practiced them thoroughly. In contrast, I have engaged in ngöndro practices, such as “the difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages” and “the impermanence of life,” not just for a day or two, but for many years. Thus, I can confidently say I have developed genuine conviction. Given this conviction, I believe I am qualified to teach you *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Please ensure that you do not merely hold onto the words in the text. Instead, you should genuinely feel and experience the profound meaning and engage in sustained practice. In fact, each instruction in the text benefits practitioners of all lineages. Therefore, when studying this text, we do not need to label which lineage we belong to at this moment.

It is akin to a person who is about to starve to death and is offered food. In that moment, the person would not claim, for instance, “I belong to this ethnic group or that religious group, so I can only eat tsampa and not rice.” Such a claim simply does not make sense.

Similarly, we are starving for sustenance in the desert of samsara. When we finally encounter the treasures of the Dharma, we should willingly and joyfully accept them.

During my extensive teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, if I teach you incorrectly, you may stop listening to me, but what is covered in the text is indispensable to each of us. These days, many gurus often bestow empowerments or provide pith instructions, which may bring those with sharp faculties directly to the fruition of Buddha Samantabhadra,¹²⁴ as demonstrated in the history of Chan Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism. However, given the disposition of most practitioners, generating conviction through ngöndro practices is more important.

If you truly believe that life is impermanent, you will not have great interest in many things, leading to significant changes in your life. In the past, you may not have realized that only Dharma can provide great help at the time of death. Now that you understand the truth of impermanence and the nature of life, you will not cling tightly to this life’s fame, wealth, and status. Consequently, your practice is more likely to succeed.

¹²⁴ Samantabhadra (Skt.; Tib. ཀུན་ཏུ་བཟང་པོ་, Kuntu Zangpo; Wyl. kun tu bzang po) — In the Dzogchen teachings, our true nature, that state of the Ground, is referred to as the Primordial Buddha.

Thus, our aversion to samsara primarily arises from recognizing impermanence. Without a solid understanding of this, even if you appear to be a practitioner, you may find yourself preoccupied with worldly affairs daily, lacking awareness of how to attain liberation.

We should feel immense joy at having the opportunity to listen to this teaching. Those living in urban areas may need to invest time, money, and effort to attend the teachings; nevertheless, I still believe it is worthwhile. Since beginningless time, especially in this very life, how much effort have we expended on meaningless pursuits? Each of us should be acutely aware of this. Therefore, it is worthwhile to forgo something now to receive the profound Dharma that can lead us to liberation.

During this process, we should cultivate a joyful mind. As you may know, the power of our mind is inconceivable. If you feel blissful, the twenty-kilometer journey between Larung Gar and Sertar seems very short; however, if you are unwilling, even a short trip may feel exhausting. As the old saying goes, “It’s nothing to feel tired in the body; it is concerning to feel tired in the mind.”

Indeed, if we are not truly determined, studying the Dharma can become very tiresome. Conversely, if we approach it with joy, even when faced with poor health or other obstacles, we can confront them with courage and make our best efforts to overcome difficulties and persevere in our studies. Therefore, it is extremely important to embrace the Dharma with a joyful attitude.

Yesterday, we discussed the changes of the four seasons, villages, and the monastic community. Now we’ll focus on further examining the people around us.

In our own family, generation after generation, our ancestors, parents, and elders have all passed away, leaving behind only their names. Many of our brothers and sisters have also departed from this world. As time passes and circumstances change, at this very moment, we have no way of knowing where they have been reborn.

Everyone may reflect on this: In your own families, how many people from past generations have passed away? Some of them may even be unknown to you. Chinese families used to maintain a genealogy archive, but now people no longer pay attention to this, so you may not know who the great-grandfather of your great-grandfather was. If you could trace back along your family tree, there must have been an emperor and a princess in every family who brought great glory;

yet generation after generation, they have been gradually forgotten by their descendants.

Many of our siblings, classmates, neighbors, and Dharma peers from this life have also passed away. Recently, a khenpo told me that he could not find anyone he used to know who is still sitting in the Dharma hall now. When he looked across the audience in the Dharma hall, all he saw were new faces; many of his Dharma peers who were here ten years ago have either died or left Larung Gar, and hardly any of them are still here.

Therefore, impermanence is with us at all times and in all places. Ordinary people are blinded by defilements, so they always regard things within a continuum as permanent (e.g., the chair in your living room today is the same chair you saw yesterday). Let alone the subtle impermanence that occurs every split second, they can hardly recognize the more obvious impermanence that happens each year.

There is a telling story about the impermanence of family in *The Life of Milarepa*:

Once, Milarepa decided to go home for a visit. At dusk, no one was around, so he first went to the river alone and cried bitterly. As soon as it was dark, he returned to his village, but he noticed that the land nearby was overgrown with weeds and thorns, and the once-gilded house and shrine were now in ruins.

Stepping inside the house, Milarepa saw that a copy of the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels* mud stains from the wall and bird droppings and had nearly become a nest for mice and birds. Seeing this, he reflected on the past, and a pang of sadness overcame him.

Close to the entrance, he noticed a large pile of dirt with weeds growing everywhere. He dug through the pile with his hands and discovered a collection of human bones. For a moment, he was perplexed, but then he realized it was his mother's remains. Devastated, Milarepa fainted to the ground.

After a while, Milarepa regained consciousness. He immediately remembered the pith instruction of his guru Marpa, so he entered the state of Mahamudra and integrated his mother's consciousness, his mind, and his guru's wisdom in his visualization. After performing this practice for seven days and nights, Milarepa had a direct vision, seeing his parents freed from the lower realms and attaining rebirth in the Pure Land.

Seven days later, he gathered his mother's bones, planning to make a Buddha

statue from them. He also swept away the bird droppings from the copy of the *Sutra of the Great Heap of Jewels*, finding that the rain had not caused too much damage and that the text was still legible. Then he carried his mother's bones and the sutra with him, making an aspiration to diligently practice day and night at the Drakar Taso cave. He vowed, "If I fail to persist in my practice and am swayed by the eight worldly concerns, I would rather commit suicide than succumb to temptation. If I have the slightest desire for comfort and pleasure, may dakinis and Dharma protectors end my life!"

[According to Tibetan tradition, when an important family member dies, parents or children are often very saddened and will make an aspiration in front of the deceased, saying, "As you have left this world, I will become a monastic and dedicate the merit to you," or "I will recite this or that sutra for you." Recently, a person decided to become a monk due to the loss of a loved one. Perhaps he also made such a vow in front of the deceased.]

Later, Milarepa said, "When I visited my hometown, I saw my house reduced to ruins and my family dead, which deeply impressed upon me the impermanence and illusion of life. People work so hard to acquire a house, but it is simply an illusion or a dream, leading me to generate great renunciation. The house people reside in happily is no different from a house on fire. Only those who have never experienced pain in life, or those who've forgotten that death is certain, and the next life is fraught with suffering, seek worldly pleasure. In contrast, those who recognize the nature of life will disregard poverty, hunger, and insults from others and will resolve to practice for their own benefit and for all living beings until the end of their lives.

We all should do the same. Whatever happens, whether losing a loved one or being deceived by someone we trusted, we should truly recognize that nothing is reliable and then make a firm aspiration regarding our spiritual practice. It is often mentioned in *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher* that when making aspirations, we must earnestly pray for the compassionate blessings of the guru and the Three Jewels, wishing for our aspirations to come true. Otherwise, if we just mindlessly recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's Aspiration to Excellent Conduct* without visualizing according to the text in our minds, although such recitation is virtuous and carries merit, its power will not be very strong. It is due to the strength of their aspirations that many past Kadampa and Nyingma practitioners achieved significant progress in a short period of time.

Regarding the impermanence of everything, when you visit your family and notice their changes, you may also cultivate a sense of renunciation. For example, you might reflect on how they were when you were still a student compared to who they are now. You will see that everything has changed significantly, illustrating that impermanence can manifest at any time. In this regard, those who do not actively engage with the concept of impermanence tend to focus solely on the literal meaning of the text, leading to limited success in their practice. Conversely, those who are convinced of impermanence will not cling to worldly trivialities, making their practice more fruitful.

Recently, a lay practitioner told me, “Studying Dharma has both positive and negative impacts on my life.” When I asked him why, he explained, “I lived an upside-down life in the past, but now I have stopped associating with toxic friends. As a result, my business has suffered, which is the negative impact. The positive aspect is that I no longer drink, smoke, or kill animals for food, and I now lead a quiet and simple life free of wrongdoing.” He meant what he said.

Indeed, once the Dharma permeates our minds, we find no time for idleness and lose interest in trivial matters. It is akin to a person facing execution; how can they focus on entertainment, knowing their life is about to end? Therefore, if you truly recognize the impermanence of life, it is bound to bring significant changes to your existence.

In fact, impermanence is easy to find around us. For instance, many people who, in previous years, were wealthy and prosperous, shining like the glory of the human world, now have nothing left this year but their birth names. The rich and powerful individuals admired by many today—whether they will still be alive next year at this time, or even next month—no one can tell.

Forbes, a renowned American business magazine, recently released its list of “Forbes Billionaires 2009.” Due to the impact of the financial crisis, the number of billionaires dropped by nearly one-third—from 1,125 in 2008 to 793 in 2009.

A Chinese business magazine published a list of the richest individuals in China in 2009. There were eight individuals whose wealth exceeded 30 billion Chinese yuan in 2008, but none of them remained on the list in 2009. Additionally, there were twenty-six individuals with more than 20 billion yuan in wealth in 2008, but only one was left on the list in 2009. In just one year, the number of billionaires plummeted, and some fell from the peak to the bottom. This illustrates

that wealth and power are fickle; nothing remains steady. If they were permanent, such occurrences would not happen at all.

Impermanence is evident among the wealthy. Previously, the richest woman in Asia was Nina Wang, who built a major property development company with her husband. Later, her husband was kidnapped and eventually declared dead. She then engaged in a courtroom battle over her husband's fortune with her father-in-law for more than nine years, ultimately emerging victorious.

In July 1997, Nina Wang was listed by Forbes as Asia's richest woman, with an estimated net worth of US\$7 billion, making her seven times richer than Queen Elizabeth II. Professionals in Hong Kong estimated that her net worth was nearly HK\$40 billion, solidifying her status as the richest woman in Asia. However, a year and a half after winning the battle over her husband's fortune, she succumbed to cancer.

Cunlin Bao, a billionaire from Jiangsu Province who owned a company with an output value of 6 to 8 billion yuan, died suddenly in November 2008. As for the cause of his death, some claimed it was suicide, while others attributed it to different reasons. In any case, he had been so busy accumulating wealth throughout his life that all his money remained in this world after his death. Therefore, the pursuit of wealth is not worth it.

In *The Way of Living: The Precious Jewel that Attracts Divinity and Excellence*, Mipham Rinpoche says:

Human wealth is like lightning,
And the body is like a floating bubble,
Both embodying the nature of impermanence.

Mipham Rinpoche also says in *The Just King*:

The body is as fragile as a bubble.
Glory and wealth are as fleeting as clouds in an autumn sky.¹²⁵

However, worldly people are obsessed with fame and wealth, and very few truly understand the principle of impermanence. Master Hanshan says in the *Song of Awakening the World*:

¹²⁵ Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, translated by Jose Ignacio Cabezon, Snow Lion, 2017, page 219.

In spring, we see the green of willows,
 In autumn, we see the yellow of mums.
 Glory is just a midnight dream,
 While wealth the September frost.

We observe the vibrant green of willow trees in spring, and soon after, we notice the golden hues of chrysanthemums in autumn. The transition from green to yellow illustrates the impermanence of the changing seasons. Similarly, glory is akin to a dream at midnight, from which we will soon awaken, and wealth is like the frost of September, which will soon vanish. Therefore, we should often reflect on the teachings of these great masters. If we do not place undue importance on our own bodies and external wealth, it will not be difficult for us to practice Dharma.

No one can determine when we will die, whether it be today or tomorrow. *The Collection of Deliberate Sayings* states:

Many people can be seen in the morning,
 And some cannot be seen any longer in the afternoon.
 Many people can be seen in the afternoon,
 And some cannot be seen any longer the next morning.

Death can arrive unexpectedly. A lama in his 70s lived next door to me; he was well yesterday but passed away this morning. However, a practitioner's death is very different from that of an ordinary person. This lama had been a dedicated practitioner since the time of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Today, shortly after he finished reciting the *Sang Gyay Say Chig Tantra* (*The Seed Tantra that is the Sole Heir of All Buddhas*), he passed into parinirvana in the full vajra posture.

For the time being, we do not allow anyone to see the lama because the body of a Dzogchen practitioner should not be moved immediately after death, nor should it be viewed by many people or subjected to recitations. Their cabin should remain locked for seven or eight days.

Many Dharma friends at Larung Gar have received empowerment and performed tantric practices. When they die, it is advisable not to inform anyone of their passing for a certain period. A Khenpo recently told me, "Let me tell you in advance: if I die, it's better to keep my door locked for seven days and not open it!" I responded jokingly, "Don't say that; otherwise, you may soon really die."

As mentioned in *The Collection of Deliberate Sayings*, there were many people

in the morning, but some of them died by the afternoon. However, worldly people often overlook the instances of impermanence, so when they lose a loved one, they are caught by surprise. It is difficult for them to accept death, leading them to wail.

If they had ever contemplated impermanence, they would accept the loss of their mother or father, for in the vast expanse of samsara, each of us has died and been reborn countless times. Therefore, there is nothing to mourn, knowing that the cycle of birth and death is unceasing.

Even when observing the cattle, sheep, dogs, and other animals in one's own livestock pen—how many have died in the past, how many remain now, and what will eventually become of them—all this does not go beyond the nature of impermanence.

Especially in Tibet, this feeling is particularly strong. When I attended school away from home and returned after a few months, I often found that many yaks and sheep had already died. At that time, although I had not studied such profound teachings, perhaps due to past-life practice or some other reason, my awareness of impermanence was relatively strong, and I had some understanding of it from a young age.

None of the people who lived in this world a hundred years ago remain alive today. Likewise, within the next hundred years, every single person in Jambudvīpa will also inevitably pass away without exception.

Longchenpa also says in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*:

Think now about the past and future people of the world.
Of former generations, countless beings have already passed,
And most of those who now are on this earth
Within a century's time will surely be no more.¹²⁶

From the summit of the highest heavens to the very depths of hell, among all phenomena in the inner and outer worlds, none is truly permanent or unchanging. This can be summarized in the following stanzas:

Whatever is born will inevitably die.
Whatever is accumulated will eventually be depleted.

¹²⁶ Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind, The Trilogy of Rest*, Volume 1, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2017.

Whatever comes together will ultimately separate.
 Whatever is built will eventually collapse,
 And whatever rises high will inevitably fall.
 Furthermore, friendship and enmity, suffering and joy, the
 virtuous and the unworthy—all conceptual thoughts—are
 also impermanent.

If we combine “whatever is built...” and “whatever rises high...,” what Patrul Rinpoche mentions here are the four aspects of impermanence—the four ways to contemplate impermanence.

These four ways of examining impermanence can often be found in the sutras. For example, it is stated in the *Vinayavastu* (*Chapters on Monastic Discipline*):

There were four businessmen in the city of Shravasti who had different desires. One businessman sought to accumulate wealth, one aimed to build houses, one enjoyed gathering with friends and family, and the last was obsessed with health preservation. Later, the Buddha provided a four-verse instruction pertaining to their desires:

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.

Some of you have already studied *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*, the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*, and the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, so you may recall that these texts mention that the previous incarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni endured great hardships in his causal stages to receive the supreme teaching. Thus, simply reflecting on the four or five aspects of impermanence can already bring you incredible blessings.

Additionally, friendship and enmity, suffering and joy, the virtuous and the unworthy—everything that runs through our minds—is also impermanent. Two individuals may be close friends today but become enemies tomorrow; people may hate each other today but reconcile tomorrow; someone may spend the first half of their life doing evil but become virtuous in the second half..

We will explore more about the truth that everything—good or bad, friends or foes—is impermanent.

I often encounter the following examples of impermanence. A Dharma student may not listen, so I scold him; then I think, “Although I scolded him today, within a few days we may be on the best terms again.” Sometimes I have a favorable impression of a certain Dharma student, believing he possesses good qualities, but then I remind myself that he may disappoint me in a few days, so I should examine him further. Thus, our thoughts and behaviors are all impermanent. There is nothing in this world that remains unchanged.

Here are the further explanations:

“Whatever is born will inevitably die.”

No matter who a person is—whether they are as high as the sky, as powerful as thunder, as rich as a naga, as beautiful as a celestial being, or as dazzling as a rainbow—when death suddenly arrives, they have no freedom even for a moment. They can only leave this world naked¹²⁷ and empty-handed, abandoning everything behind.

Amid deep attachment to their wealth, food, loved ones, subordinates, disciples, and servants, they must let go of it all. Just like pulling a hair out of a slab of butter,¹²⁸ they depart alone.

“*As high as the sky*” refers to the fact that in this world, some individuals have attained exalted social status, such as the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the president of the United States, the President of China, or religious leaders. They wield great power and occupy a status above most people, but when they die, they are no different from any ordinary person.

Moreover, even after they are out of office, they remain no different from anyone else. I read a book about the presidents of the United States. For instance, it mentions that George Washington, the first president, devoted his time to his plantations after retirement, which were only minimally profitable, and that his other lands faced Indian attacks, with squatters refusing to pay rent. Ronald

¹²⁷ According to Khenpo Sodargye, here “naked” means we cannot bring anything with us at the moment of death.

¹²⁸ The butter does not stick to the hair. Only the empty impression of the hair remains.

Reagan, the fortieth president, suffered from Alzheimer's disease after retirement and largely disappeared from public view as the disease took its toll on him.

Hearing their stories, it is hard not to sigh with sadness. They once held immense power but later became so powerless. What a lesson in impermanence!

As for "*as powerful as thunder*," some individuals are quite fierce, such as Adolf Hitler, the principal war criminal of World War II, who was cold-blooded, aggressive, and responsible for the deaths of countless civilians and soldiers. During his regime, many people dared not even mention his name.

I have a book about Adolf Hitler, and sometimes I flip through the pages to understand the transient nature of his existence. Hitler executed a plan of genocide and orchestrated the Holocaust, resulting in the systematic persecution and mass murder of six million Jews, along with millions of other targeted individuals. Yet, from the photographs taken in the later stages of his life, one can observe that even a ferocious individual like Hitler cannot escape the reality of impermanence.

The same can be said for Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China, and Genghis Khan, the founder and first Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, both of whom were once mighty figures.

Take Qin Shi Huang, for example. He annexed six neighboring states, including Qi and Chu, putting an end to the Warring States period and achieving the unification of the country. For the first time, all Chinese lands were consolidated under one powerful ruler. He believed his accomplishments far surpassed those of the legendary Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, considering himself no longer a king in the traditional sense. Thus, he proclaimed himself the "the First Emperor," with his successors designated as "the Second Emperor," "the Third Emperor," and so forth.

Qin Shi Huang intended for his glory and legacy to endure for thousands of generations. However, the Qin dynasty lasted only a brief period and ended during the reign of the second emperor.

In fact, history serves as the best guide to understanding impermanence. Unfortunately, the history taught in schools is often dry and unengaging: students simply memorize who was born where and when, without any consideration of the concept of impermanence. Recently, I visited a school and attended a history class; when discussing the changes of dynasties, I had many thoughts about the rise and fall of different dynasties. However, it is unfortunate that the teacher did not

encourage the students to reflect on the concept of impermanence, constrained by the limitations of the educational system and the pedagogical approach.

Regarding “*as rich as a naga*,” there have been many extremely wealthy individuals in the past, and there are also many today, such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. Nevertheless, all of these individuals have faced impermanence or will eventually do so.

“*As beautiful as a celestial being, or as dazzling as a rainbow!*” However good-looking a man or woman may be, and however much they are admired by others, they will inevitably develop more and more wrinkles on their faces that cannot be removed by plastic surgery. These individuals should take inspiration from some Tibetans who find joy in being told they have many wrinkles and gray hair. It is futile to become very angry when someone says, “You are old.”

In short, regardless of who a person is, when death comes suddenly, they can do nothing but relinquish everything and be drawn to the next life by their karma. At that moment, they cannot take anything or anyone with them. No matter how reluctant they may be, they must leave this world and enter the next life completely alone.

The Amitayuh Sutra (The Infinite Life Sutra) states:

Being immersed in our desires,
We are born alone, die alone, come alone, and leave alone.

Shantideva also says:

And we must pass away, forsaking all.
But I, devoid of understanding,
Have, for the sake of friend and foe alike,
Provoked and brought about so many wrongs.

... ..

There I will be, prostrate upon my bed,
And all around, my family and friends.
But I alone shall be the one to feel
The cutting of the thread of life.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

When a person dies, they have to endure the pain of death alone. No matter how many family members and friends are present, no one can share in their suffering. They leave this world on their own, like a hair pulled from a slab of butter. Apart from reciting the Buddha's name, mantras, or sutras, which provide some comfort, everything else—including wealth, social status, and fame—offers no assistance, and the person has to leave it all behind.

Even the guru of thousands of monks cannot take a single disciple with him. Even the leader of tens of thousands of tribes cannot take a single servant or slave. Even the owner of all the wealth in Jambudvīpa cannot take a single needle or thread. Even one's most cherished and carefully protected body must ultimately be abandoned.

Whenever the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche traveled, many people followed him to countries like India and America, places like Xinlong, and sacred sites like Mount Wutai. For example, when Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited Mount Wutai, more than ten thousand Tibetans, both monastics and laypeople, accompanied him. When he visited Xinlong (when I first came to Larung Gar), more than sixty eminent masters joined him. In 1986, the year before Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche set forth to Mount Wutai with an entourage of twenty-five Dharma masters, he visited seventy-three monasteries in Tibetan areas such as Dawu County. When Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche traveled to India and America, he was also accompanied by many attendants.

However, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche passed into parinirvana, he did so alone, leaving behind all his disciples in this world. The same was true for Penor Rinpoche, the eleventh throne holder of the Palyul Lineage of the Nyingma School, who also passed into parinirvana. Penor Rinpoche oversaw several hundred monasteries of the Palyul Lineage in India and the Tibetan region and had tens of thousands of disciples; yet he too left this world alone during his parinirvana.

We must deeply understand that when death arrives, only Dharma can truly help us. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted this stanza from the *Sutra of Instructions to the King*:

When the Moment Comes to Leave, O King,
Neither possessions, friends, nor family can follow.
But Wherever Beings Come from, Wherever They Go,
Their actions follow them like their own shadow.

I hope each of you can memorize this stanza. Although it is an instruction to a king, it applies to all of us. When death arrives, neither possessions, friends, nor family will accompany us; but our karmas will follow closely, with good karma bringing happiness and bad karma bringing suffering.

The Thousand Character Classic states:

Misfortunes arise from the accumulation of negative actions;
Fortunes are shaped by the rewards of positive actions.

A schoolteacher dismissed this verse, claiming it is merely an outdated concept from the feudal system. I disagree with her, as she appeared to know little about the law of karma.

Some people, while alive, are dressed in silk, drink fine tea and wine, hold high positions, and are as beautiful as celestial beings. But after death, their bodies are nothing more than lifeless corpses, slumped over, evoking fear in those who see them.

When actor Leslie Cheung died in Hong Kong, some reporters remarked that his corpse looked unattractive; when singer Teresa Teng died in Thailand, some reporters who took photos claimed her corpse was unappealing. It is really not surprising, as no one looks good when they die.

There is a story in Chandrakirti's *Commentary on the Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*:

There once was a king who loved his princess consort very much. One day, his princess died. To prevent the king from being devastated, the courtiers told him, "The princess is not dead. She has become a devil, and her body has risen." The king was very frightened, so he ordered people to cut the princess's body into pieces. Soon the ministers informed him, "The princess is dead now." The king was very happy and instructed his courtiers to beat drums in celebration.

In fact, if you examine the anatomy of any individual's body, you will realize there is no difference between a living person and a dead body in terms of their component parts. As Milarepa said:

The corpse that evokes fear was once the body of the living.

The corpse frightens us when we see it; it is the same body that once breathed, that the deceased once inhabited. Some people dare not approach a corpse and

feel intense fear when they must watch over it before burial, fearing the body will suddenly rise. In fact, there is nothing to fear. You were not afraid when a person stood up while alive, so you should not be afraid now that he has simply “fallen asleep.”

According to Tibetan tradition and the instructions in the *termas*, when you die, your body should be bound with a rope and covered with a curtain, secured with earth and stones. Your bowl should be placed upside down on your pillow.

[Some Kadampa Geshes had meditated on impermanence so deeply that they would turn their bowls upside down before going to sleep, believing they might die during the night.¹³⁰ However, according to Tibetan culture, it is considered inauspicious for a living person to turn their bowl upside down, as it would upset their parents.]

No matter how dignified and lovable one may be in life, in the end, they will become something utterly miserable and repulsive. Once, they lay on soft, layered beds, dressed in warm lambskin, resting their heads on plush fur pillows. Even a slight discomfort upon waking would make them toss and turn. But after death, their body is placed on a slab of stone or a pile of straw, their head covered in dust.

Funeral homes offer mortuary makeup services these days, which can be quite costly. The deceased may never have worn makeup while alive, but after death, they are often painted with colors on their faces. Such a service holds no significant meaning for the deceased. Instead of spending money on mortuary makeup, it is better to make a lamp offering, hang prayer flags, or carve the mantra of Avalokiteshvara on stones, known as *mani stones*, in their name.

In Tibetan areas, when a person dies, their family typically hangs prayer flags or carves *mani stones* around the location where the ashes or body is placed. This practice ensures that the soul is not frightened, as it receives blessings and protection from the Three Jewels. This aspect is very important.

In the future, when a family member or friend passes away, you should send their ashes to a cemetery blessed by buddhas, bodhisattvas, or eminent masters, and hang prayer flags for them in various places. If you do not have their ashes, you may recite their name while hanging prayer flags or carving *mani stones*, which

¹³⁰ According to Tibetan culture, the bowl a person used during their lifetime is typically placed beside their pillow when they die.

will greatly benefit the deceased. This practice is specifically mentioned in various *termas* and *sutras*.

I am unable to finish today's teaching. What should I do? Some lay practitioners outside Larung Gar often express their fatigue, saying, "Ah! I am so tired from listening to teachings. We hope your class will be over soon, but you keep on talking. Why do you speak so much? Wouldn't it be nice if you dismissed the class earlier? I pray to the guru and the Three Jewels, hoping the class will end soon."

Unfortunately, I am unable to complete today's planned teaching. There is still one paragraph in the text that I wanted to cover. Well, let's just stop here.



Lesson 34

“Some of you who are heads of families or clan chiefs ...
Base your death on an empty, barren hollow.” [page 47–50]

We are covering the section “The Impermanence of Life” in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

“The impermanence of life” is a profound teaching that we should continuously practice throughout our lives. Of course, the conviction of impermanence does not arise easily and requires long-term practice, so be sure not to slack off or underestimate this, nor look down upon it because it is a preliminary practice. Otherwise, it indicates that you have not deeply engaged with mind training.

A truly great master always feels that their practice of impermanence is insufficient. Therefore, we must be disciplined in our daily practice because the conviction of impermanence will not arise effortlessly.

By reflecting repeatedly on impermanence, we will undoubtedly develop a sense of urgency, realizing that everything is impermanent and that there is no time to delay our practice. With this awareness, our practice is more likely to succeed.

Most people understand that they will die one day, yet they often feel that death is far off, leading them to procrastinate in their practice until it ultimately yields no results. This phenomenon is quite common today. I hope you will practice sincerely after receiving such a profound instruction.

Many Dharma students engage proactively, dedicating time and effort to the foundational preliminary practices, which brings me joy. I am teaching slowly this time, and very few other Dharma masters may teach in this manner. My approach

is both intensive and extensive, allowing each of you to build a solid foundation through ngöndro, making it easier for you to undertake any other Dharma practice.

Therefore, after careful consideration, I have decided to offer you a comprehensive commentary on the text, and I hope you will understand this and remain patient throughout the study. We can always complete our study of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* quickly; for example, I could dedicate two or three days to provide you with the oral transmission. This would simply involve reading the text to you, allowing it to be completed swiftly.

However, if you do not put the teachings into practice step by step and only receive the oral transmission, you will not gain any substantial benefit in your mindstream.

Some people will attain great benefits from listening to the entire teaching, while others may start diligently but gradually lose focus. How one engages with the teaching is closely related to their affinity, faith, and diligence. Therefore, I hope you will remain committed to being diligent and faithful.

Let's continue with the root text:

Some heads of households believe, "If something happens to me, my family will either starve, freeze to death, be murdered by enemies, or drown in floods. Everything they have—their wealth, happiness, and everything else—exists solely because of me. They cannot survive without me." Some abbots might also feel this way: "I cannot die; otherwise, everything will collapse. What will my disciples do if I die?" In fact, however, after these individuals pass away, their relatives cremate their bodies, cast them into the water, or abandon them in the charnel ground—after which they feel at peace and move on. There are many instances in this world when people, until their deaths, feel they are very important and indispensable to their families; however, after their death, others continue their lives as usual. Therefore, while we are still alive, we should not set aside or abandon our practice for others.

Some individuals say, "I can't become a monastic; otherwise, what will happen to my family?" or "I don't have time for the Dharma because I am the one who takes care of important matters at home." Many others share the same concern. However, one day you will inevitably die, and you cannot always be with your family members. Without you, they will continue to live in this world. Therefore,

while you are still alive, ensure you choose the best path for this life and many lives to come, and do not sacrifice your own liberation for others.

As mentioned before, when we die, it is like a hair being pulled from a slab of butter; you are utterly alone, drifting helplessly through the intermediate state, or bardo. The only thing one can rely on at that time is the true Dharma.

I do not know whether you have ever thought about it, but death is not far away from us. Death awaits us all, and when it comes, we have to leave everything behind and wander in samsara with our karma. Therefore, while death can be a dreadful experience, it can also serve as a significant opportunity for our liberation.

Many people hesitate to even mention the word “death,” and this mentality is not healthy. Each of us must face death, and at that moment, nothing but the Dharma provides refuge. What follows us life after life is only our good and bad karma. *The Sutra Requested by Shridatta* states:

Our beloved parents, siblings, children, and spouses,
 Servants, wealth, and crowds of friends and relatives,
 Will not follow us when we die;
 It is only our karma that follows us.

When we die, our parents, siblings, partners, and children will not accompany us. We cannot take our servants, possessions, or entourage with us, and, however reluctantly, we must leave our cherished body behind in this world as well. So, what is the only thing that follows us? It is our karma. Even if we have only recited the mantra of Avalokiteshvara once or performed a single wholesome deed, the merit of these positive actions will follow us like our own shadows.

It is truly unfortunate that many people today do not accept the existence of rebirth, let alone engage in good deeds for their next life. Even when they do something good, it is typically for the benefit of this life, as the notion of the next life never even crosses their minds. It is not only worldly people who think this way; a few Dharma teachers also pay little attention to the next life. They advocate a simple rule of cause and effect: In this life, virtuous actions bring happiness while vice results in suffering. Beyond this, they rarely consider the impact of their actions on their next life.

A lifetime seems very long in comparison to a day. Similarly, the endless samsara is extensive compared to a single lifetime. Therefore, even if we may not

care much about how we live this lifetime, we must carefully contemplate what it means for us to wander in the ceaseless cycle of life and death in samsara.

Therefore, from this moment on, one must wholeheartedly and diligently practice the true Dharma with utmost dedication; from now on, we must devote ourselves one-pointedly to the diligent practice of authentic Dharma. We should not just focus on formality or give false figures to the person responsible for recording our ngöndro progress.

Many people today study the Dharma merely to acquire materials or gain a good reputation, yet they never put the teachings into practice. Many of you can clearly assess your stance on this after self-reflection. You might consider the following: “Since the time I took refuge, how have I spent each day? How much time have I dedicated to the practice of impermanence? How did the past eminent masters and genuine practitioners conduct their practices? It is not that I lack time, but how often have I contemplated death? How effective is my meditation on impermanence?” You should examine yourself in this way repeatedly.

We just covered the first of the four ways to contemplate impermanence: “Whatever is born will inevitably die.” Next, we will move on to the second one:

“Whatever is accumulated will eventually be depleted.”

This is a natural law, and even the king who rules Jambudvipa may find himself in beggary. For example, during the reign of Emperor Wu of Liang, the nation was one of the most stable and prosperous of the Southern Dynasties. However, in his later years, he became a captive during Hou Jing’s rebellion, confined to the palace, where he eventually died of hunger.

Many enjoy abundance in the first half of their lives but starve to death in the latter half due to depleting their resources. Some had hundreds of yaks last year, but after heavy snowfall or other disasters, they have become destitute beggars this year. [This example is more relevant to Tibetans, whereas Han Chinese urban dwellers may have no idea what “hundreds of yaks” implies. A better example for them would be: Many entrepreneurs of large corporations became penniless in an instant due to the financial crisis or other disasters, and some even committed suicide.]

Someone who was a wealthy tycoon of high status yesterday may lose everything suddenly due to an enemy’s destruction and become a beggar today.

Shi Chong was a statesman of the Western Jin dynasty, best known for his

extravagant lifestyle. He accumulated immense wealth and was regarded as one of the ten richest individuals in ancient Chinese history. During the Rebellion of the Eight Princes,¹³¹ Sima Lun, the Prince of Zhao, took a keen interest in Shi Chong's wealth and intended to murder him.

As Shi Chong faced death, he lamented, "It is my abundant wealth that has led to my demise!" Sima Lun asked him bluntly, "If you knew your wealth could harm you, why did you not disperse it earlier?" Shi Chong sighed, "It's too late now."

Hu Xueyan, a successful merchant who was awarded a red-topped hat¹³² by the Qing imperial court, once led a prosperous life with thousands of acres of land, many consorts, and significant privileges. Despite his immense wealth and close ties with statesmen, he ultimately became a casualty of the political conflict between Zuo Zongtang and Li Hongzhang. In a short period, his business collapsed, leading him to file for bankruptcy, and a year later, Hu Xueyan died of depression.

From the rise and fall, success and failure, gain and loss of worldly individuals, we learn that everything is impermanent. Unlike the practice of the generation stage or completion stage, which requires deliberate meditation efforts, the practice of impermanence can be achieved by observing the events around us. For instance, we can grasp the truth of impermanence from the news.

During my hospital stay in the city, I often read newspapers. Some doctors curiously asked me, "As a monk, why do you care so much about state affairs?" In fact, I have no interest in the whereabouts of celebrities. While others may enjoy that news, I focus on reports that deepen my understanding of impermanence, such as disasters displacing countless people or corrupt statesmen being caught and imprisoned. Although it may seem trivial and have no profound implications, the

¹³¹ The War of the Eight Princes, also known as the Rebellion of the Eight Kings or the Rebellion of the Eight Princes, was a series of civil wars among the kings/princes (Chinese: wáng) of the Chinese Jin dynasty from 291 to 306 AD. The key point of contention in these conflicts was the regency over the developmentally disabled Emperor Hui of Jin. The name of the conflict is derived from the biographies of the eight princes collected in Chapter 59 of the Book of Jin (Jinshu).

The term "War of the Eight Princes" is somewhat of a misnomer: rather than a single continuous conflict, the War of the Eight Princes saw intervals of peace interposed with short and intense periods of internecine conflict. At no point in the entire conflict were all of the eight princes on one side of the fighting (unlike, for example, the Rebellion of the Seven States). The literal Chinese translation, Disorder of the Eight Kings, may be more appropriate in this regard.

¹³² A merchant with a red-topped hat refers to a government official who also acts as a businessman, combining the roles of civil servant and businessman.

content of these newspapers can indeed help us generate compassion and renunciation. Therefore, I am not idly wasting my time on newspapers; it is necessary to understand the impermanence present in worldly life, which in itself is a practice.

That all these things happen is something you can see for yourself; wealth and possessions cannot be owned permanently, so practice giving generously. Wealth and possessions are like summer dew and autumn clouds, which soon vanish. Therefore, we should practice generosity. However, those who do not grasp the principle of impermanence initially pursue wealth by any means necessary and then do their utmost to protect it. But no matter how hard they try, they inevitably lose everything.

Thus, if you are wealthy, you should enjoy your affluence without clinging to it, and when you lose your wealth, you will not feel sadness. This is how studying the principle of impermanence affects you.

Please contemplate the above instructions repeatedly. I have conveyed the verbal meaning of the text to you, but I am unsure how many of you will truly reflect on its content. I hope you will pay attention to each instruction and, whenever you have time, read the text and thoughtfully reflect on its meaning.

When I was studying *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I took it very seriously. I implemented its teachings not for just one day or two, nor for one year or two, but for an extended period. As a result, I still hold a conviction regarding the rarity of human life, the impermanence of life, and so forth. Such conviction cannot develop in a short time. It is only through long-term, sustained practice that the results of such efforts become more solid over the years. Eventually, one begins to gradually renounce worldly pursuits, such as fame, status, and wealth.

“Whatever comes together will ultimately separate.”

All gatherings will eventually disperse. Whether it is a grand marketplace or a great religious assembly that brings together thousands of people from all directions, in the end, everyone will go their separate ways.

This aspect of impermanence is also acknowledged by worldly individuals. In the prologue of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,¹³³ author Luo Guanzhong wrote, “Empires arise from chaos and empires collapse back into chaos. This we

¹³³ *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (pinyin: Sānguó Yǎnyì) is a 14th-century historical novel attributed to Luo Guanzhong.

have known since time began.”¹³⁴ In fact, historical accounts clearly demonstrate that such cycles have always occurred.

When a guru hosts a Dharma assembly, Buddhists from around the world gather for the event, but soon they will part ways again. This year’s Vajrasattva Dharma assembly will be held soon at Larung Gar, and many fourfold Buddhist disciples will arrive from various locations. However, eight days later, they will depart as each returns home.

The same is true for the Dharma friends present today. You are gathered in the Dharma hall for teachings, but in a few years, many of you may have left Larung Gar or even this world. Laypeople currently participating in a group and studying the Dharma, whether online or offline, will also separate from one another in a few years. It is akin to graduating from school, when you and your classmates part ways, leaving only good memories, as it is impossible to be together forever.

Even though we, as masters and disciples, lords and servants, patrons and fields of blessings, spiritual friends, brothers and sisters, or husbands and wives, may now cherish and live harmoniously together, in the end, no matter what, we cannot avoid separation.

In particular, some disciples have strong relationships with their gurus and do not wish to part from them. However, as some eminent masters have stated, it is impossible for disciples to be with their guru forever, even if the guru wishes to teach them in one place for an extended period. For example, Buddha Shakyamuni entrusted the Dharma to Mahakasyapa and Ananda, but the two heirs could only propagate the Buddha’s teachings within the earthly frame for thirty to forty years.

Therefore, in the present era, when the human lifespan is around one hundred years, a guru has limited time to propagate the Dharma, making it impossible for a disciple to consistently receive teachings from a qualified teacher. For instance, as disciples of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, we all wished to continuously receive his teachings and never part from him, but ultimately, we had no choice but to experience a great loss. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche suddenly passed into parinirvana and left us for the pure realm. We felt like a group of orphans in this world, experiencing the excruciating pain of loss.

Consequently, regardless of the relationship—whether between teachers and

¹³⁴ Luo Guanzhong, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, translated by Martin Palmer, Penguin Classics, 2018.

disciples or husbands and wives—it will ultimately end in separation. As the old saying goes about impermanence:

Parental love, however tender, will one day fade;
Marital commitment, however deep, will also come to an end;
We are like birds roosting in the same woods;
When the time comes, we scatter and fly in different directions.

Recently, I visited the place where I lived as a child: a herdsman's winter camping site. Before I started school, my family would stay there during the winters. Later, I attended elementary school, middle school, teacher training school, and the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute, and I had not returned there for many years.

This time, I went back with my younger brother and a few others. When we arrived at the site, the scene from more than thirty years ago returned to me, becoming clearer and clearer in my mind.

There was no major change in this place, but the neighbors were completely unfamiliar to me. I spotted a few rocks engraved with the mantra of Avalokiteshvara and discovered they were my work before I went to school, with the inscriptions still very clear. I brought a few of those rocks back.

Visiting where I used to stay, I truly felt that everything is impermanent. Thirty years from now, I will undoubtedly leave this world, and it is also difficult to say whether today's young people will still be alive by then.

Therefore, ensure you do not merely stay with the literal meaning of impermanence. If you only talk about it—for example, presenting the Four Dharma Seals¹³⁵ well—but never contemplate impermanence in your mind, I fear your practice may not succeed.

Many senior Tibetans have practiced impermanence very effectively. They always perceive life as transitory, thinking, “I will die this year” or “I will die next year,” which motivates them to perfect their mantra recitations or complete other virtuous deeds as soon as possible. In contrast, today's young people rarely hold such a view of impermanence; they often plan worldly pursuits even decades in advance, which is truly unwise.

¹³⁵ The Four Dharma Seals are said to be the hallmark of the Buddha's teaching, which are: All that is conditioned is impermanent, all that is tainted is suffering, all phenomena are empty and devoid of self, nirvana is peace.

We cannot even be sure that death or some other terrible event might not suddenly part us right now. If we suddenly encounter death or an unexpected misfortune, we will part ways at that moment—these events have no predictability.

In fact, even if you are healthy now, death may arrive unexpectedly. You will have no choice but to leave everything behind, including your loved ones, and move on to the next life. Nothing is steady or unchanging.

Thus, every happiness has its end. Even if many Dharma students wish to remain at a supreme center for teachings, this may not always be possible. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a renowned German literary figure, said, “Whoever a person is, his happiness always ends, and this end must come.” Goethe was not a Buddhist and had not meditated on impermanence using Mahayana pith instructions, but he deeply understood that no happiness lasts forever.

The companions, family members, and loved ones with whom we spend our days and nights will inevitably go their separate ways in the near future. Therefore, we must not be consumed by anger, engage in hurtful words, argue endlessly, or resort to physical conflict. Instead, we should recognize that our time together is not guaranteed to last, and that separation may come sooner than we expect. In this fleeting time we share, we should treat each other with respect, love, and harmony. As Padampa Sangye says:

Families are as fleeting as a crowd in a marketplace;
People of Tingri,¹³⁶ do not bicker or fight.

Couples should avoid quarrels. Otherwise, they not only bring suffering upon themselves but also annoy their neighbors. A Dharma master once told a story:

There once was a couple who owned a pastry store. They would lose their temper at the slightest annoyance and begin to quarrel with each other, depriving the neighbors of any peace. One day, the couple quarreled again. The husband said, “If you disobey me again, I will take a knife and kill you!” The wife retorted, “Then kill me! I don’t want to live anyway!”

The township chief tried to dissuade them but failed. The couple shouted louder at each other and fought harder. Then the township chief called out to the bystanders, “Come, everyone! There are plenty of cakes here. Take them for free!” Hearing this, the couple immediately stopped their fight and asked why he was

¹³⁶ Tingri is a county situated on the southwestern border of the Tibetan region.

doing this. The township chief replied, “Well, one of you wants to kill and the other wants to die; the one being killed will perish, and the one who kills will be imprisoned. So, what’s the use of keeping these cakes?”

The couple calmed down and realized the township chief’s words made sense. Ever since, they have stopped quarreling.

In fact, people often quarrel over insignificant matters that initially are just minor disagreements. For example, the husband wants two stir-fry dishes, but the wife insists on having only one. Because of this, the couple begins to bicker endlessly, and both become very angry.

However, if they understood that their relationship is impermanent and will not last long, they might simply accommodate and tolerate each other, leading to harmony in the family.

When the family is in harmony, society as a whole will be in harmony as well. A person who does not quarrel and maintains peace of mind is more likely to get along with others and brings no interpersonal conflict. In contrast, if an individual is very unhappy, they may also spread unhappiness to those around them.

Those who understand the truth of impermanence will truly appreciate the fleeting connections they have with others. Therefore, regardless of the situation you find yourself in—whether serving the sangha or studying with classmates or group mates—ensure that you refrain from backbiting and gossiping about others.

In all my years at Larung Gar, I have never quarreled with anyone over personal matters. I have only argued with others at times regarding public matters, especially management issues.

You should know that it is a very rare opportunity for people to come together, just as Su Shi and Chan Master Foyin treated each other.¹³⁷ Without pure perception, a person may regard everyone else as impure and as worthless as a pile of dung, whereas with pure perception, a person will see everyone else as a buddha or a bodhisattva.

In fact, individuals who enjoy quarreling and backbiting may not have practiced the Dharma sufficiently. Please avoid anger and disputes and cherish

¹³⁷ Su Shi was a Chinese poet, politician, and calligrapher of the Song dynasty. He became fascinated by Buddhism and often visited Chan Master Foyin at the Jinshan Temple. Once, Su Shi asked Master Foyin, “What do you think of me?” The Master answered, “A Buddha.” Su Shi then asked, “What do you think I think of you?” The Master was silent, and then Su Shi said, “I think you are like a pile of dung!”

your connections with others. It is due to the affinities formed in previous lives that you have all met in this life, so please appreciate one another.

Therefore, a Dharma practitioner should keep the guru's teachings in mind and reflect on them regularly, as this will eventually lead to positive changes. Studying the Dharma differs from learning Qigong, which can provide immediate experiences. Only when a Dharma practitioner's mind resonates with the Dharma can they gradually renounce worldly pursuits and strengthen their faith in the guru and the Three Jewels.

“Whatever is built will eventually collapse.”

All buildings constructed will eventually crumble and fall apart. In the past, prosperous villages and temples were managed and presided over by virtuous people, but now they are reduced to ruins, and they have become nothing more than nests for birds. Nothing can exist eternally. This follows the same principle that things will inevitably revert once they reach a culmination.

In India, the revered Buddhist learning centers Nalanda¹³⁸ and Vikramashila¹³⁹ flourished in the past as places where countless sages and great panditas resided, engaging in the study and discussion of the Dharma. Both centers significantly contributed to the spread of the Dharma, but now they have been reduced to mere ruins.

Even Samye's¹⁴⁰ central three-story temple, built by miraculously emanated craftsmen during the reign of King Trisong Detsen and consecrated by Padmasambhava and Khenpo Bodhisattva Shantarakshita, was destroyed by fire in a single night. It is said that the fire destroyed the entire structure of the temple, leaving only a few wall ruins. (Of course, there are different historical accounts of this.)

When the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche bestowed the pith instructions of the Great Perfection, he would often mention Samye because he was, in his previous life, one of the main twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava—Nanam Dorje Dudjom (meaning “Indestructible Subduer of Mara”). Whenever Jigme

¹³⁸ Nalanda was an ancient Mahavihara, a revered Buddhist monastery which also served as a renowned center of learning, in the ancient kingdom of Magadha (modern-day Bihar) in India.

¹³⁹ Vikramashila was one of the two most important centers of learning in India during the Pala Empire, along with Nalanda.

¹⁴⁰ Samye is the first Tibetan Buddhist and Nyingma monastery built in Tibet during the reign of King Trisong Detsen.

Phuntsok Rinpoche recalled Samye's former glory and splendor and compared it to its present state, he would appear sad and tearful.

Historical records show that Samye was a magnificent structure, but it suffered significant damage later, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Although it has been restored in recent years, its original architectural style has largely been lost.

During the time of King Songtsen Gampo, the Red Mountain Palace, which rivaled the palace of Indra, has now been reduced to nothing—there is not a single tile left, and even the foundation stones are nowhere to be found.

In fact, however magnificent a building may be, it will eventually be destroyed or collapse; it cannot exist forever. When I was still a student, I enjoyed the theme song titled “The Great Wall Will Never Fall” from the television series *The Legendary Folk*. Every night after our study sessions, my classmates and I would face the classroom wall and sing the song, or we would punch a sandbag while singing.

Back then, I believed the Great Wall would indeed never fall, but after studying the principle of impermanence, I realized it will eventually collapse. When I visited Beijing, I examined the Great Wall's structure, noting that it was made of bricks and stones that might be of lower quality than today's steel-and-concrete buildings. I also observed that many parts of the Great Wall are no longer very solid. Therefore, there is no such thing as a building that will “never fall.”

The original World Trade center was once the tallest building in the world, with 110 stories reaching 1,362 feet. During the September 11 attacks, two planes crashed into the twin towers, and the center completely collapsed. Thus, even a building made of solid steel and the best mortar will fall when impermanence strikes.

China's Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) in northern Beijing, once the pinnacle of imperial design, was initially constructed in 1707 during the reign of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing dynasty. It was further expanded and renovated during the reigns of other emperors, including Yongzheng, Qianlong, Jiaqing, Daoguang, and Xianfeng. The palace was vast: its land area was ten thousand square meters larger than that of the Forbidden City; its water area was equivalent to that of the Summer Palace (Yiheyuan) itself, and the total area was 8.5 times the size of the Forbidden City. Emperor Qianlong remarked, “It is a place full of treasures from the heavens and the energy of the earth, a place where emperors visit

to relax. Nowhere else is comparable to it.” Its fame spread to Europe, and it was considered the “Garden of Gardens” in its heyday.

The Old Summer Palace was not only a garden but also an imperial museum with abundant collections. Victor Hugo, one of the greatest French writers, said, “All the treasures of all our cathedrals put together could not equal this formidable and splendid museum of the Orient.”

However, in 1860, during the Second Opium War, the Eight-Nation forces robbed valuable treasures and then set the entire palace ablaze. The massive fire destroyed almost everything. Now, only ruins remain for our remembrance.

Not only are buildings known to the modern world bound to collapse, but also unknown structures from prehistoric civilizations could not escape impermanence. Because these buildings were constructed long ago, their glory eventually became a fictitious legend.

Take Atlantis, for example. It was first mentioned in Plato’s works *Timaeus* and *Critias*. According to Plato’s description, over ten thousand years ago, in what is now the Atlantic Ocean, there existed a prosperous and highly developed land called Atlantis, characterized by a pleasant climate and dense forests: palaces and temples adorned with gold, silver, and ivory; magnificent cities and busy ports with canals connecting everywhere. In short, Atlantis was the land of happiness during its thriving era, where the people lived in peace.

The people of Atlantis worshipped Poseidon, the god of the sea, seeing him as the ultimate ruler, and made constant offerings. Later, the people of Atlantis became corrupt—virtues were replaced by vices, and good qualities were overshadowed by greed, indulgence, and extravagance—which infuriated Poseidon, who unleashed violent earthquakes and floods, sinking Atlantis into the depths of the sea in a single day. This story may seem mysterious, but Plato stated several times that it was passed down through generations and was not fictional.

Some people believe Atlantis exists only in fantasy, while others think it may have existed but lack solid evidence. Over the centuries, archaeologists have tried to prove its existence, but to no avail. In recent years, researchers have found potential evidence regarding the location of the sunken island of Atlantis, and they are still searching for archaeological support. Nevertheless, a place whose existence we have yet to prove with available means is not necessarily something that never existed at all.

Recently, I revisited a Tibetan archaeological site. I remembered seeing the ruins of crumbled walls there when I was a child. I also used to find many ancient human bones and metal objects in the mounds. Reflecting on what this place was in its heyday, I could not help but feel that everything is impermanent. We are alive in this moment, but what will we leave behind when we die? This is a question that each of us should contemplate.

In fact, contemplating impermanence is a great joy for me, and I view everything around me as a qualified teacher that teaches me the truth of impermanence. Since everything is transient, what value is there in being so attached to and cherishing our cities, homes, and monasteries, which resemble insect nests? Some urban dwellers lead exhausting lives. To live more comfortably, they take out mortgages and bind themselves to the burden of installment payments on their houses. Similarly, some practitioners living in isolated retreat cabins are not much different from these urban dwellers. They devote a significant amount of time to maintaining their cabins—working on them this year and continuing next year—but they rarely focus on their minds. What benefit is there for a practitioner who only works on a cabin?

So why do we attach such importance to them? It would be better to follow in the footsteps of past eminent masters of the Kagyu lineage: leaving their homeland, journeying to distant places, residing in mountain caves, living alongside wild animals, and casting aside concerns for food, clothing, and reputation. Ultimately, they embraced the four basic aims of the Kadampas:

Focus your mind on the Dharma,
Ground your Dharma on a humble life,
Base your humble life on the thought of death,
Base your death on the desolate ravine.

A practitioner should not emulate today's worldly individuals who are quite demanding about their material lives. They desire luxury clothing and lavish food, which may lead them to commit significant wrongdoings.

What are the four basic aims of the Kadampas?

First, you should focus your mind one-pointedly on the Dharma, not on anything else.

Next, you should ground your Dharma in a humble life. The state of the

Dharma will manifest when you live humbly. If you constantly pursue an extravagant lifestyle, your practice will not succeed.

Of course, this does not mean you must rid yourself of all your possessions and become a pauper; you should find a balance in living a “humble life.” Moreover, living humbly should not be a temporary endeavor. For example, if someone starts as a monastic owning nothing but gradually becomes wealthier, eventually dying with considerable riches, it indicates that the Dharma has not truly penetrated their mind.

Many great Kadampa masters lived lives like Milarepa: they had few desires and were always content with what they had. They spent their entire lives this way and passed away peacefully in caves without worry. This is the third aim: “Base your humble life on the thought of death.”

In contrast, many monastics struggle in this regard. While it may be challenging for an urban dweller to emulate these Kadampa masters, they should strive not to be overly greedy.

Ultimately, you should “base your death on the desolate ravine.” You should die alone in a remote place free from disturbances, rather than in a city or even in a hospital. When realizing that death is imminent, some practitioners retreat to solitary places, which is a wise choice. If you have not achieved a certain level of realization, it is advisable to die in a Dharma place, such as a monastery.

Many past eminent masters, including great figures of Chinese Buddhism, followed this path. They would pass away either in a retreat hut or a cave, and when they were very ill, they avoided hospitals in the city. You can find many such stories in the *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*. Of course, it is still necessary to seek treatment when ill, but one should retreat to a solitary place when nearing death.

A practitioner should be persistent and remain steadfast on the path. For example, a monastic should uphold pure precepts from ordination until death; a layperson should live a humble life, refrain from evil deeds, and die in a state devoid of impurity. This is the greatest joy in life. If you initially renounce everything but gradually reclaim it piece by piece, becoming ensnared in desires and ultimately dying in a state of discontent, that is truly tragic!

In summary, everything in this worldly life holds little meaning, so we must follow the footsteps of past eminent masters, discipline ourselves according to their traditions and instructions, and make every effort to practice well from beginning

to end. Otherwise, our practice is unlikely to succeed. This is because obstacles become more prevalent during the degenerate age of Dharma. Additionally, as the teachings we receive deepen, the obstacles we encounter grow more severe.

Therefore, we must continually pray to the guru, the Three Jewels, and Dharma protectors for blessings, that we may encounter no obstacles, perfect our practice, and strengthen our bodhicitta. We should often make such aspirations. This is very important!



Lesson 35

“High estate and mighty armies never last. ... ever pleasure you might temporarily obtain, in the end your suffering will be infinite.” [page 50–51]

We are covering the fifth meditation on “the impermanence of life,” which includes other examples of impermanence.

The principle of impermanence is very important, yet many people remain unaware of it. Although our bodies and lifespans are inherently impermanent, we are blinded by our attachment to permanence, preventing us from seeing the truth of all phenomena. Therefore, during our study and practice of the Dharma, meditating on impermanence is essential. Many Kadampa practitioners dedicate themselves to the diligent practice of impermanence. Once a practitioner has conviction regarding impermanence, they can easily succeed in other practices.

Of course, we cannot merely pay lip service to impermanence. Instead, we should incorporate it into our daily practice. The literal meaning is easy to grasp, so anyone who is literate can read the text and understand its significance. However, putting impermanence into practice is not so simple. If you do not meditate on it, you may feel that the practice of impermanence is unremarkable. But once you begin to practice it, you will eventually realize how challenging it is to overcome the deeply rooted clinging to permanence in our minds.

Yesterday, we discussed the impermanence of the idea that “whatever is built will eventually collapse.” We also studied the four basic aims of the Kadampas, which we should contemplate and meditate upon carefully.

Now, let's proceed with the following text:

“Whatever rises high will inevitably fall.”

Exalted status and invincible armies will not last forever. Mandhatri, the universal king, ruled over the Four Great Continents as a Golden Wheel-Turning King; he held dominion over the Thirty-Three Heavens and shared the throne of Indra. On the battlefield against the asuras, he was undefeated. Yet in the end, he fell to earth and perished in the grip of insatiable greed.

Many sutras, including the *Sutra on the Causes and Conditions of King Mandhatri*, the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, and the *Madhyamagama Sutra*, discuss the universal king Mandhatri, whose merits were unparalleled to those of others.

In *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*, Mipham Rinpoche states:

A very long time ago, when humans had infinite lifespans, there lived a king named Yuvanaswa who reigned over 84,000 small countries and housed eighty thousand princesses. At one point, the king developed a protuberance on his head, from which a boy adorned with excellent characteristics emerged. Upon the boy's birth, many auspicious signs appeared across the nation, and milk flowed naturally from the princesses' breasts. The princesses all said, “Let the boy drink my milk.” Consequently, he was given the name meaning “King of My Milk” or “King of Head-Born.”

A fortune teller read the boy's face and predicted that he would become a universal king, turning a golden wheel that would grant him power over four continents. Upon growing up, he indeed reigned over the four continents: Jambudvipa, Uttarakuru, Purvavideha, and Aparagodaniya. He brought great happiness to living beings and preached the path to prosperity and pleasure for tens of thousands of years.

Later, Mandhatri decided it was not enough to rule only the human realm, so he set out for the celestial realm. Upon reaching the celestial realm, the sixty-two gates of the celestial palace opened for him automatically, and the gods prepared a throne for him that was lower than Indra's. Thus, Mandhatri made a vow: “With the power of my merits, I wish to sit at the same level as Indra.” In response to his wish, Indra immediately shared his throne with Mandhatri.

From the perspective of other beings, Mandhatri appeared the same as Indra

in looks, qualities, and manner of speech, except that Indra never blinked and walked slightly faster.

Mandhatri enjoyed the same five kinds of celestial pleasures as Indra, which lasted for a total of thirty-six Indras' lifespans. During the reign of the last Indra, asuras attacked the heavens of the gods. Unable to defeat the asuras, Indra fled to the celestial palace in a panic and shut the gate.

Mandhatri volunteered to fight the asuras. He rose into the air and positioned himself above them. Terrified by Mandhatri's prestige and merits, the asuras fled.

Witnessing the defeat of the asuras, Mandhatri felt a sense of pride, thinking, "My power has surpassed everyone's; I should no longer sit alongside Indra. I should drive him away and become the sole protector of both the human and god realms."

At that time, Indra was the past life of Buddha Kassapa, a highly revered figure. The moment Mandhatri harbored that malicious thought, his merit was completely destroyed. In the blink of an eye, he fell to the gates of the palace where he had once lived in Jambudvipa. Only then did he realize that the desires of all beings are endless, prompting him to speak some verses before his death. One of them is:

Though the rain of silver coins falls,
The greedy are not satisfied.
But the wise know that desires and pleasures are suffering,
And it brings no benefit to have more.

From this story, we learn that the desire for power and status can never be fully satisfied. Many people are discontent with what they have, always wishing for a higher status. In fact, even if they possess everything in this world, they remain unsatisfied, and this greed will ultimately lead to their downfall. As some masters have taught:

Desires destroy hope.

Before embarking on the Dharma path, many people relentlessly pursue worldly matters. After studying the Dharma, they begin to realize they have been living a life devoid of meaningful goals and direction and that their life is already half spent. They feel remorse for their past actions. Such reflections are especially

common among those who delve deeply into the Dharma and have developed conviction in the teachings.

In fact, the truth of “whatever rises high will inevitably fall” can be found everywhere in life. Throughout the course of human history, one can observe that rulers, religious leaders, and local officials—anyone who holds power, authority, or enjoys high status and wealth—cannot remain firmly in their position forever. Judges who sentenced others last year may find themselves in prison as inmates this year. This phenomenon is not uncommon. So, what is the value of a transitory position?

Impermanence has always surrounded us, but without receiving the relevant teachings and with our minds veiled by a clinging to permanence, we have failed to recognize the truth of everything.

There are two kinds of impermanence: coarse and subtle. Subtle impermanence refers to the changes that occur every split second, while coarse impermanence refers to changes that are easily noticeable, such as the rise and fall of one’s social status or the gain and loss of one’s wealth. Setting aside subtle impermanence, any mindful person can easily perceive coarse impermanence.

However, most people are oblivious to impermanence. They disregard it entirely, keeping themselves aimlessly busy with mundane matters, and when they cannot obtain what they desire, they experience great anguish. Why is this the case? It is because they do not understand the nature of everything.

One can observe that impermanence prevails everywhere. For example, the judge or statesman who imposed the law on others last year may find himself imprisoned this year due to misdeeds such as corruption.

Chen Liangyu, the former Communist Party Secretary of Shanghai, was sentenced to eighteen years in prison in April 2008 after being convicted of financial fraud, bribery, and abuse of power. According to the Chinese magazine *World Executive’s Digest*, a report submitted to the State Council by the investigation team of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection revealed that senior officials at the municipal, district, bureau, and county levels opened 1,322 bank accounts with a total value of more than 98.6 billion yuan using anonymous identities or aliases. Among these illegal accounts, Chen Liangyu had fifty-three anonymous accounts, with a total amount close to 300 million yuan.

On May 23, 2009, Roh Moo-Hyun, the former president of South Korea,

committed suicide by jumping off a mountain, reportedly due to the pressure of ethical and legal scrutiny. He had long pursued a clean, honest, and responsible government; yet many of his subordinates and family members were involved in corruption, which was a great irony for him. Eventually, he could no longer endure the situation and took his own life after leaving a suicide note. However, the reasons for his abrupt decision remain unclear.

Chen Shui-bian had been a Taiwanese politician and lawyer for many years and was later sentenced to a total of nineteen years in prison for two corruption cases. Although he was eventually granted medical parole, he remains prohibited from any public speaking.

Additionally, Cheng Kejie, former governor of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China, and Gao Yong, former director of the Chengdu Publicity Department, once wielded power and authority but have since faced severe legal sanctions. Their experiences embody impermanence. One can also easily grasp the truth of impermanence from the change of abbots in a monastery or the shifting attitudes of a lay practitioner.

Since everything is impermanent, we need not feel bad or get upset about what happens to us. Furthermore, when things happen to others, we can recognize them as manifestations of impermanence. Therefore, this practice is essential for all of us. If we internalize the principle of impermanence, we can clearly see that everything in our lives is like a dream or an illusion, and nothing remains unchanged.

The state of perfect Buddhahood, on the other hand, can never diminish or be tarnished and is worthy of offerings from both humans and gods. That is what you must cultivate to attain.

Knowing impermanence, what use do transitory status, wealth, and power hold for us practitioners? In today's competitive society, even within a small group of two or three individuals, there is often a fierce struggle for leadership. However, careful reflection reminds us that even state leaders eventually return to being ordinary citizens, so what is the point of pursuing such fleeting benefits in life?

Therefore, the only thing worth pursuing is eternal Buddhahood, and nothing else. This explains why so many Buddhists, after studying the principle of impermanence, show no interest in competing with others over worldly goals.

We must seriously contemplate and meditate on this teaching. If we truly believe in the principle of impermanence, we will know how to act accordingly in

our daily lives. This is very important. Many people may grasp the literal meaning of the principle, but it is difficult to say how many have developed true conviction in their minds through practice.

Now let's continue with the impermanence of friendship and enmity.

Friendship and enmity, too, are far from everlasting. One day, while the Arhat Katyayana went out to beg for alms, he saw a man holding his son in his arms, savoring fish meat, while striking a female dog gnawing on bones with a stone. What the master saw with his clairvoyance, however, was this:

The fish had been the man's own father in that very lifetime, and the dog had been his mother. An enemy—who had killed him in a past existence—had been reborn as his son to repay past karmic debts.

Katyayana cried out:

He eats his father's flesh, he strikes his mother,
He cradles on his lap the enemy who killed him;
The wife is gnawing at her husband's bones.
Such is the rare and wondrous law of *samsara*.

I never dared to eat fish when I was still a layperson. When the school canteen served fish, I would feel annoyed because I could only eat rice and nothing else that day. However, many of you, including some monastics, salivate at the mention of a fish dish. This indicates that your old habits have resurfaced, and most of you must have indulged in fish, right? The fish might have been your parent or another family member, so you should wipe your mouth and begin to repent.

Thus, beings with whom we had a strong affinity in a previous life may become our most disliked beings in this life. Those we are emotionally attached to are often enemies from a past life seeking to settle their karmic debts. From a Buddhist perspective, the person we are particularly fond of in this life is likely our enemy from a past life.

Frequently, young adults ask me, "I am in a close relationship with so-and-so. I cannot live without him, and I think about him every day. Can you tell me whether we were husband and wife in a previous life?"

I always respond, "You two must have been enemies in a past life!"

My answer is not just a random comment without any scriptural evidence. If

you cannot live without a person and would consider suicide if you lost him, this means your emotional attachment stems from karmic repayment from a previous life. In contrast, those you dislike in this life might have been family members to whom you were most attached in a previous life.

Not to mention past lives; even within one lifetime, mortal enemies can later become like-minded friends. They may even become part of each other's families, forming deep bonds and extraordinary connections. Such occurrences are not uncommon.

Therefore, do not consider the above story merely a legend and feel indifferent to it. You must be acutely aware of the impermanence of interpersonal love and hatred. With this understanding, your attachment to others will gradually diminish, which can significantly aid your practice. Otherwise, you may become firmly ensnared in the quagmire of worldly relationships and find it difficult to escape. As a result, you will struggle to practice effectively.

To deepen your understanding, I will share a few more Buddhist stories.

Here is a story from the *Vinaya*:

A father loved his son so deeply that he committed many misdeeds on his behalf. When the father died, he could not let go of his attachment to his son and was reborn as a bull in the family. Later, his son slaughtered the bull and consumed the beef. When the bull died, he was reborn as a bull in the same family once more, and his son again killed him. For a third time, he was reborn as a bull in the family. Just as the son was about to kill him again, Sariputra appeared at the front door.

With his clairvoyance, Sariputra heard the bull say, "I have been here twice, but you killed me. My dear son, now you are about to kill me again, which fills me with sorrow. I truly cannot endure this anymore, but there is nothing I can do." Sariputra conveyed this message to the son, who then set the bull free.

Thus, the meat we consume in our daily lives may come from our family members from a previous life.

There are many similar stories in the *Madhyama Agama*, which you should explore when possible. You ought to read inspiring books that help you understand the law of karma, so you know what actions to take and which to avoid. Do not emulate those who dismiss classical sutras and shastras in favor of fiction focused on war or romance. Such books offer no benefit and may instead cause great harm to one's mindstream.

In the *Madhyama Agama*, there was a man named Māna, whose father, Tuhti, died and was reborn as the family dog. There was another man named Chandar whose father was reborn as a beggar. Chandar broke the beggar's arm when he came to ask for food.

There are countless stories like this. Therefore, we should make generous offerings to beings with whom we have an affinity, whether they are friends, enemies, or beggars, and take good care of them. Meanwhile, we should dedicate the merit by reciting the mantra of Avalokiteshvara in our minds.

Here is a Tibetan tradition: If a person is surrounded by a bee or a mosquito, it signifies that their loved one is still in the intermediate state and not yet liberated, and the Lord of Death allows this loved one to take the form of this insect to seek help through virtuous actions. Thus, when you hear a buzzing sound near your ears, you should recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara and dedicate the merit or you may offer some food instead of swatting the bee or mosquito.

As stated in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the meat one consumes is closely related to one's loved ones from past lives:

I see all beings eat each other's meat,
And the meat is from their loved ones.

Therefore, when you eat beef, the cow was your loved one in a previous life; when you eat pork, the pig was your loved one in a previous life. Thus, it is better not to eat meat. By refraining from eating meat, the merit is immense. Please understand this.

If we can deeply comprehend that beings in the six realms are reborn repeatedly and constantly become each other's loved ones, we will develop aversion to the joys and sorrows associated with gathering and separation, and we will not become overly attached.

When I taught you the verse "Men who've fathered sons in turn are sons, and mothers likewise daughters" from Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*,¹⁴¹ I shared a story about Chan Master Baozhi in Chinese Buddhism:

Master Baozhi, regarded as the emanation of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, was the imperial master of Emperor Wu of Liang. Once, Baozhi was invited

¹⁴¹ Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*: with Commentary by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpoche, translated by Padmakara Translation Group, Snow Lion Publications, 2006, page 30.

to a wedding. Upon entering the house, he sighed and sang a song inspired by his clairvoyance: “Strange indeed! Strange indeed! The grandson marries the grandmother; the daughter consumes her mother’s flesh; the son beats a drum made from his father’s skin; pigs and sheep sit on the brick bed; the loved ones are stewed in the cauldron. People come to congratulate, but I must say: what suffering!”

Why did he sing this song?

It turned out that the groom was marrying the reincarnation of his grandmother. When his grandmother was nearing death, she held the hand of her beloved grandson¹⁴² and was very reluctant to let him go, passing away with a deep attachment to him. After her death, she was reborn as a girl who eventually became the bride of her grandson. That’s why Master Baozhi said, “The grandson marries the grandma.”

Master Baozhi entered the room and noticed a little girl eating a pig’s trotter. The girl’s mother had committed terrible wrongdoings and was reborn as a pig after her death. The pig was slaughtered for a meal at the wedding, so the little girl was consuming her mother’s flesh. That’s why Master Baozhi said, “The daughter is eating her mother’s flesh.”

In the yard, Master Baozhi saw a young man playing a drum made from donkey skin. This young man’s father had been reborn as a donkey due to his wrongdoings, and the donkey was skinned to make the drum the young man was striking. That’s why Master Baozhi said, “The son is beating a drum made from his father’s skin.”

Master Baozhi looked at those sitting on the brick bed. They were pigs and sheep that had been eaten in the past, now reborn as humans and relatives to one another, gathering together happily. The animals being cooked in the cauldron, however, were the groom’s family and relatives. That is why Master Baozhi said, “Pigs and sheep are seated on the brick bed; the loved ones are stewed in the cauldron. People come to congratulate, but I would say, ‘What suffering!’”

¹⁴² Khenpo Sodargye added:

“According to Tibetan tradition, when a person is about to die, it’s best not to hold their hand; otherwise, their soul may haunt you after death. Therefore, when someone is dying, if they reach out to you, make sure you don’t approach them; otherwise, they may appear in your dreams or manifest in other ways. Once, a person’s younger sister was about to die. She kept calling for her brother to come near, but he was very scared, so he called me, asking, ‘My younger sister is dying, but I dare not approach her. Will she grab me? If so, what should I do if her soul comes to haunt me?’”

Master Baozhi observed the wedding with his clairvoyance and found the satire of samsara to be truly absurd and filled with suffering. If we knew the truth, would we behave the same? Probably not. However, since we cannot remember our past lives and know little about the law of karma, we have committed many foolish acts. Therefore, we should embrace the principle of impermanence and reflect on the fact that many worldly pursuits hold no true significance.

There is a similar story in the *Dhammapada*:

There was a rich Brahmin in Shravasti who was very stingy. At every mealtime, he would keep the door closed to uninvited guests.

One day, the Brahmin was enjoying chicken with his wife and child, and the door was shut. The couple sat their child between them, serving him chicken from time to time.

Buddha Shakyamuni knew that, given the Brahmin's merits from previous lives, it was time for him to be tamed and taught. Therefore, the Buddha appeared directly in front of the Brahmin as a monk. Upon seeing the monk, the Brahmin became very angry and said, "How shameless you are! How can you break in without permission?"

The monk replied, "How ignorant you are! You killed your father, married your mother, and raised an enemy. How can you accuse me of being shameless?"

The Brahmin was confused and asked why the Buddha made such a statement.

The monk replied, "The chicken on the dining table is the reincarnation of your father. Due to his stinginess, your father was often reborn as a chicken in many of his lives. Your child is the reincarnation of a rakshasa, a flesh-eating devil who caused you harm in your previous life. Because you two are still connected by karma, he is reborn as your child for karmic repayment. Your wife is the reincarnation of your mother, who loved you so deeply that she was reborn as your wife in this life. You are foolish now and do not know your previous lives. Only I can discern them clearly."

The Buddha manifested his miraculous powers and revealed the Brahmin's previous lives. The Brahmin developed an aversion to samsara. The Buddha explained the teaching again to the Brahmin, and he immediately attained the state of sotāpanna (stream-enterer).

The sutras contain rich content on the law of karma, along with many similar stories in Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's work, *The Truth of Life*.¹⁴³

I shared several stories in my teaching so people with different predispositions may receive various benefits. As long as you remember one of the stories and find it inspiring, you will know what to do and what not to do in the future. Conversely, if you know nothing about the law of karma, you may fall deeper into the abyss of samsara.

Therefore, I firmly believe that understanding the Dharma is very important. However, acquiring such understanding takes time and cannot be achieved in a single day. It is highly unlikely that you will attain realization as quickly as a rock falls to the ground. Through long-term effort, we gradually establish right views, such as our understanding of the law of karma.

We just learned that sworn enemies could later be reconciled and become friends. On the other hand, even biological parents and siblings may harbor deep resentment and harm one another over trivial possessions or inheritances. Couples and relatives may turn against each other, even resorting to violence over minor disputes.

Worldly relationships can change for the most trivial reasons, as stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

One moment friends,
The next, they are bitter enemies.
Even pleasant things arouse their discontent:
Ordinary people—it is hard to please them!¹⁴⁴

Worldly people build relationships easily: two individuals can become close friends after one gives the other a gift, a few compliments, or just a smile. They can also break up easily. Two close friends or family members can stop talking to each other over a minor misunderstanding; for example, if one friend is in trouble and the other does not offer help, or if one friend uses an inappropriate word during a conversation, the other may become angry. Thus, it is hard to please a worldly person.

¹⁴³ This is a book written by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro in Tibet, which was later translated into Chinese by Khenpo Sodargye.

¹⁴⁴ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

Many such situations occur in our lives. For instance, when someone gives you something or offers you compliments, you both may become close, and you regard their gift as a priceless treasure. However, when that person gives something to someone else but not to you, it can turn you into enemies. As you can see, friendship and enmity are far from everlasting. Many people may resonate with this observation from their own experiences.

Seeing that all friendship and enmity are so ephemeral, remind yourself repeatedly to cherish all beings with a heart full of compassion. This is also the essence of Mahayana Buddhism, as those who have studied *The Way of the Bodhisattva* would agree.

Sometimes, when reflecting on the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's enlightened activities, my fellow Dharma practitioners and I feel a bit embarrassed about our own Dharma efforts. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche devoted himself entirely to propagating the Dharma and liberating all beings; he never thought of himself and consistently selflessly gave to others. His altruistic actions made an indelible contribution to the world.

Can we, the descendants of the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, emulate his greatness and selflessness? When I reflect on my own actions, I feel embarrassed, especially during times when I prioritize my own needs over those of others. In any situation, more afflicted thoughts arise if one focuses on "me! me! me!"

Therefore, all the monastics and lay practitioners present here should make this aspiration: "I will strive to emulate past eminent masters who treated everyone—friends and foes alike—with great compassion." Although it is challenging for an ordinary person to treat everyone equally, we should at least aspire to this approach. It is only by treating others with compassion that we can establish a solid and lasting connection with them. Otherwise, you may befriend one person today and reject another tomorrow, leading to fleeting friendships and rivalries.

Good fortune and deprivation are also impermanent. Some people are wealthy and joyful in the first half of their lives but descend into poverty and misery in the second half. Others endure unbearable suffering in their early years but later find happiness and fulfillment. There are even those who start life as beggars and eventually become kings. Milarepa's uncle, for instance, held a lavish wedding feast in the morning to celebrate his son's marriage, but by the afternoon, his house had collapsed, leaving him in anguish. The tragic scene was utterly unimaginable.

When his father died, Milarepa's uncle and aunt seized the family's wealth, forcing them to leave their home. At his mother's urging for revenge, Milarepa left home to study black magic. While his uncle and aunt hosted a lavish party to celebrate their son's impending marriage, Milarepa exacted his revenge by casting a spell that demolished their house, killing thirty-five people. Within half a day, a joyous wedding celebration turned into a tragedy.

How did this happen? During the party, many horses were tethered in the stables beneath the house. One stallion tried to bully a mare, which upset the other stallions and caused a commotion. The mare attempted to kick the stallion, but in the process, she struck a supporting pillar, leading to the collapse of the entire structure. Thirty-five people died, including Milarepa's cousin and his bride. The scene was filled with screams and chaos; it was truly tragic.

Milarepa spared the lives of his uncle and aunt so they could witness the consequences of their mistreatment of him and his family.

Numerous examples of impermanence exist in both joy and sorrow, such as the September 11 attacks. On what appeared to be an auspicious day, terrorists launched one of the deadliest attacks in human history. Thus, happiness is fleeting and does not endure, while suffering can arise at any moment. Similarly, suffering is not permanent, and happiness may soon follow. Both worldly happiness and suffering are impermanent.

However, the difference is that in seeking the Dharma, although one may temporarily endure hardships and face many trials, the suffering will eventually pass, leading to ultimate peace and bliss—just like the buddhas of the past and great masters such as Milarepa.

Some people accumulate wealth and enjoyment through negative actions. Though they may experience temporary happiness, in the end, they will inevitably face boundless suffering.

Therefore, it is commendable and worthwhile to endure hardship for the sake of Dharma. In particular, if we invest great effort into ascetic practices while we are young, we are sure to experience profound happiness in our old age, as well as in our future lives. This is also illustrated in *The Life of Milarepa*. There are few people in this world who do not praise Milarepa, including both Tibetans and Han Chinese, after learning of his ascetic practices and his significant realization, which benefited countless beings.

Without a doubt, Dharma practice leads to achievement. The key lies in the effort you put into it. In addition to Milarepa, some Tibetan and Han Chinese Dharma masters were also highly committed to pursuing the Dharma as soon as they embarked on the path. Since then, they have fully devoted themselves to study and practice, so that in their later years, they differ significantly from ordinary individuals in their states of realization and their altruistic minds. This is evident in the biographies of those masters.

It is natural that when a practitioner attains a certain state of realization, they will emanate the light of compassion and wisdom, which can bring boundless benefits to all beings. In contrast, if you have not achieved any insights or states of realization throughout your Dharma practice, then even if you attain a certain status or prestigious degree, any positive experience derived from it will be fleeting and ultimately fade away.

Therefore, regardless of your social status or identity, you must strive to attain states of realization through practice. Such states do not arise without reason. You must put in significant effort. Whether you are intelligent or not, as long as you are willing to work hard, you will reap what you have sown...this is certain!

I believe it is very meaningful to study *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. We should contemplate the text repeatedly. Some people do not give this text the importance it deserves; when they come to study at Larung Gar, they show little interest in obtaining a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Instead, they seek out texts on the most profound tantra. While they may acquire those tantra texts, if they do not understand the basic principle of impermanence, no matter how profound the tantra is, it is unlikely to benefit them significantly.

It is like this: An elementary school student who does not even know how to perform multiplication and division wants to obtain a mathematics textbook for undergraduate students. He may receive the textbook, yet without a solid foundation in basic mathematics, he cannot understand what is written in it. Even if he seems to grasp some concepts, it may not benefit his mindstream.

I hope you will first establish a solid foundation for your Dharma practice. I have emphasized this repeatedly. You must follow a practical sequence, which will ultimately lead to a fruitful practice.

Okay, that is all for today (*many new lay practitioners applaud*). Is my teaching

uplifting? I have been teaching for over twenty years in this valley, and I have never received such a response. Today is the first time (*they applaud more*).

Thank you, thank you! Applause is also impermanent. Look at those presidents—while in power, they receive endless applause, but when they step down, people applaud just the same. So, you should understand impermanence and not get too carried away.



Lesson 36

“Fortune and sorrow are so unpredictable ... subject to change, everything waxes and wanes.” [page 51–53]

We are still in the section on “other examples of impermanence.” Impermanence is a crucial practice for us practitioners. I have emphasized this repeatedly in previous classes. It is a very “sharp” pith instruction, and its practice can directly sever our attachment to this life.

To become a true practitioner, we must first renounce our current life. Of course, it is futile to merely pay lip service to this. We must earnestly cultivate the conviction that worldly pursuits, such as fame, status, wealth, and pleasures, are nothing but illusions and dreams without real meaning. Those who understand this can release their attachment to this life and inevitably develop faith in the Dharma. Therefore, both monastics and lay practitioners should diligently engage in this practice.

Many people either claim they are too busy to practice or too lazy to do so. This is because they have not cultivated a sense of urgency through the practice of impermanence; otherwise, they would not be idle and procrastinate on their Dharma practice. Thus, the teachings in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* are extremely important, especially the four common preliminary practices, which we should implement repeatedly.

Some people believe they have practiced enough, saying, “I have meditated for a month,” or “I have been practicing for over a year,” but their practice is far from sufficient. We must persevere in our practice month after month and year after year.

Through continuous, sustained practice, the meaning of the Dharma will fully arise in our minds, making our practice fruitful.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche shared that his root lama, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, always carried a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* with him throughout his life, no matter where he went. It was a long-standing routine for Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche to read a few pages of the text after each morning practice. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche also mentioned that he had received the transmission of this text more than ten times from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, several of which occurred when Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was teaching a large crowd and he was present, while the others happened at Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's agreement to his requests or for other reasons.

As you know, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was widely recognized as a great accomplished master and a highly realized yogi in both the Tibetan region and India. If a great master like him never took *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* lightly and did not consider the text to be basic or merely for beginners,¹⁴⁵ then we, the descendant practitioners, should not pay it little attention.

Sometimes when I went to see a doctor elsewhere, some people from Larung Gar visited me in the hospital. I often asked them, "What do you have in your bag?" Some hesitated to tell me—perhaps they had a stack of cash inside and were afraid I would "confiscate" it. Others replied, "It's a copy of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*." This response made me very happy. If a practitioner can place such importance on the text, they will inevitably receive some benefits, to a greater or lesser extent.

Consider this: If a great master like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche carried the text with him throughout his life, why shouldn't we give it great importance? Dharma practice is not merely a short-term endeavor or simply about receiving a transmission; it requires a lifelong commitment to studying and practicing the Dharma.

¹⁴⁵ Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche wrote in *The Excellent Path to Enlightenment*:

"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."

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. *The Excellent Path to Enlightenment*. Trans. The Padmakara Translation Group. Snow Lion, 1996, page 24.

There is a reason why Patrul Rinpoche listened to the ngöndro teachings many times from Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, who also heard the teachings repeatedly from Jigme Lingpa. Therefore, everyone should reflect on this carefully.

It is a precious opportunity that we are practicing the ngöndro together, so make sure to practice diligently and avoid idleness. In fact, ngöndro practices are not difficult to undertake; you can engage in both calm-abiding meditation and analytical meditation.

What is analytical meditation? You open the book and read through each instruction and example regarding the impermanence of life, then reflect on whether it is errorless. Ultimately, you will discover that the principle of impermanence is absolutely true: everything is transient, unreliable, and not everlasting. Consequently, you will realize that nothing in samsara is dependable. As some great accomplished masters have said, it is as if you were deceived by a close friend, which deeply saddens and disappoints you, leading you to lose interest in worldly affairs. If such aversion arises in you, it indicates that your practice of impermanence has yielded positive results. Therefore, you must never give up your study of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Throughout history, various masters have set different prerequisites for imparting tantric teachings. For example, some request ngöndro practices before granting empowerment, some directly bestow empowerment, and some do not even require empowerments. An example of the latter case is during his exile to the eastern Tibetan region, Vairotsana¹⁴⁶ met the eighty-year-old Pang Mipham Gonpo¹⁴⁷ and helped the old man attain realization swiftly.

However, according to the traditional sequence of practice, most people must begin with ngöndro. This is similar to the progression of worldly education—one starts in preschool and moves upward through elementary school, middle school, university, and so on—which aligns with most people's capacities. Likewise, the journey of spiritual practice should commence with the common ngöndro.

¹⁴⁶ Vairotsana or Berotsana (eighth-ninth centuries) is the greatest of all Tibetan lotsawas. Together with Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra, he was one of the three main masters to bring the Dzogchen teachings to Tibet. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

¹⁴⁷ Pang Mipham Gönpö, at a very old age, became one of Lochen Vairotsana's most important heart students and began practicing the Dzogchen teachings vigorously in his eighties. After meditating, with the aid of a stick to support his chin and a meditation strap to keep his legs crossed due to the challenges of advanced age, he lived well past the age of a hundred. He eventually attained the rainbow body.

When propagating Tibetan Buddhism, Dharma teachers should adhere to this sequential order, as it helps prevent the development of erroneous views. After all, ordinary individuals harbor deeply ingrained misconceptions that take time to uproot. It is only through step-by-step practice that we can gradually cultivate the corresponding spiritual experiences, ultimately having the opportunity to attain realization.

Therefore, practitioners must prioritize ngöndro. We cannot merely discuss it; rather, we must put each instruction into genuine practice through both calm-abiding meditation and analytical meditation. The Larung Gar sangha has been engaged in these common preliminaries for over one hundred days, and the results have been quite promising. However, we must continue this practice, as the longer we dedicate ourselves to it, the better the outcomes will be. If you successfully practice the common preliminaries, your future spiritual journey will resemble that of the lineage disciples of Lama Yukhok, who hardly regressed when encountering any obstacles or adverse conditions.

Now let's move on to the next part of this section: fortune and sorrow are so unpredictable.

Some may wonder, "Someone has committed heinous crimes, such as killing, yet it seems he does not suffer for this; instead, his business thrives, and his life appears very happy. Does this mean that the law of karma—virtuous actions bring happiness while vice leads to suffering—is failing?"

It is not. Upon careful examination, you will find that the negative actions he is currently committing may not yield immediate consequences, whereas the happiness he is experiencing now results from his past good deeds. Therefore, the law of karma never fails. If a person accumulates wealth through wrongdoing, although he may enjoy temporary happiness, he will ultimately face endless suffering.

Long ago, in the kingdom of Aparantaka, there was a rain of grain lasting seven days, followed by a rain of clothes for another seven days, and a rain of precious jewels for seven days more—and finally, a rain of earth fell, burying all the people beneath it. After death, they were reborn in the lower realms.

There is a true story quoted in *Buddhism and Science*.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ This is a Chinese book written by Khenpo Sodargye. The story was first published in *Awakening the World Periodical*, issue 318, 1988.

One day, a skilled doctor attended to a woman in her 40s at his clinic. The woman made clucking noises like a chicken and exhibited severe body tremors, with her hands extending outward like chicken wings. She complained of a sore throat and requested treatment.

The doctor, a devout Buddhist, did not find any issues with her throat but noted that her condition resembled that of a chicken being slaughtered. He inquired about her life, and it turned out that she and her husband were well-known chicken dealers in the area. The doctor informed her that there was no treatment for her symptoms. Upon hearing this, the woman flapped her hands like a chicken and moaned, “What suffering!” It was reported that she collapsed and died shortly after returning home.

There is a similar story in *The Truth of Life*:

A chicken farmer had been selling a large number of chickens to dealers who would slaughter them for profit. Later, the farmer’s wife gave birth to a daughter whose hands resembled chicken feet directly attached to her chest and whose intestines were exposed outside her body, which was quite unsettling. Sichuan TV station reported this, and many people saw the little girl.

From the above stories, we can see that if a person’s apparent happiness arises from wrongdoing, then that happiness is fleeting and will inevitably be followed by suffering.

In contrast, if a person endures hardships for the sake of practicing the Dharma, this difficult period is also temporary and will surely lead to a brighter future. Therefore, in our spiritual journey, we should not be discouraged by difficulties and obstacles.

Recently, some lay practitioners told me that their ngöndro practice faced many challenges from family and friends, especially when they were doing prostrations. Unlike monastics in remote areas who can practice freely and for as long as they wish, lay practitioners may not enjoy the same freedom.

When some lay practitioners study Buddhist texts, they can often do so discreetly without family members noticing. However, it is challenging for them to make prostrations without being observed. When they prostrate either at home or during breaks at work, non-Buddhists find it strange and may express concern, thinking they are practicing Qigong.

It is understandable why people think this way, but as long as we practitioners

speak and act in accordance with the truth of all phenomena, we will eventually inspire those around us. So please do not give up on your practice when encountering a bit of difficulty.

Regarding the ever-changing nature of happiness and suffering, we should not be overly attached to gains and losses. Happiness is inevitably followed by suffering, and vice versa. Thus, happiness and suffering occur in succession, indicating that neither is everlasting.

Instead, simply discard all worldly happiness and enjoyment as if they were spittle. For the sake of the true Dharma, we should willingly endure physical austerities and spiritual hardships, following in the footsteps of the Buddha and the great masters of the past.

The method for transcending the cyclical birth and death of samsara exists solely within the Dharma. It is impossible to acquire the Dharma easily without experiencing some pain. Not only ordinary individuals, but even the great realized Tibetan and Han Chinese masters faced numerous hardships in their pursuit of the Dharma.

However, the more obstacles we encounter in our practice, the more motivated we become, which can also enhance our state of practice. If we experience no challenges at all and our practice proceeds too smoothly, we may be inclined to regress on the path. Therefore, to become true practitioners, we must emulate the eminent masters of the past who persevered through difficulties and remained steadfast in their pursuit of the Dharma in this life. We should foster this aspiration in our minds.

I have read the forty-eight aspirations of Chan Master Laiguó, which are very inspiring. Practitioners must possess mental strength. If you are mentally strong, even if you appear physically weak, you can still achieve your spiritual goals. Conversely, if you are mentally weak, you will often focus on yourself: for example, “What am I going to eat?” or “How do I attain realization?” These thoughts lack true meaning.

We should carefully and wholeheartedly reflect on and meditate upon the teachings presented above.

Excellence and mediocrity are impermanent, too. This is explained in the contexts of worldly life and religious life.

In worldly life, even those who are eloquent, knowledgeable, and courageous

will face moments of utter defeat. When their accumulated merits are exhausted, their thoughts become confused, and nothing goes their way. They suffer in silence from ridicule, frequently endure mistreatment from others, and it seems as if the little virtue they once possessed has completely vanished, leaving them with nothing.

There are many such individuals around us. For example, the former chiefs of our neighboring county once lived a prestigious and sophisticated lifestyle. However, after retirement, they would spend their time in shabby teahouses, drinking inexpensive tea that they would not have even considered in the past. Some individuals who were once both competent and intelligent are now quite different when I reconnect with them. This manifestation of impermanence is truly lamentable. Such cases exist not only around us but also throughout history. For example, Lü Buwei, the chancellor of the Qin state, assisted Ying Zheng in ascending to the throne and later becoming Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of the Qin dynasty. Lü Buwei served as the emperor's effective regent and styled himself with the honorary title of Zhongfu (meaning "stepfather"). He grew increasingly arrogant and controlling, viewing himself as second only to the emperor. However, Lü Buwei was later implicated in the rebellion of Lao Ai,¹⁴⁹ and was stripped of his posts and titles, ultimately being banished to a remote location. Fearing eventual execution by the emperor, Lü Buwei committed suicide by ingesting poison.

There are many such occurrences in this world. It is sad that many people encounter examples of impermanence yet remain oblivious to them; as a result, they do not apply the principle of impermanence in their lives, let alone put it into practice. Some history teachers, including renowned professors, only describe the "when" and "what" of a historical event in their presentations, without guiding students to reflect on the meaning of impermanence.

The professors are quite successful from a worldly perspective, and many college students and intellectuals enjoy their talks. Therefore, at times, I like to listen to their recordings to understand their pedagogical approaches. However, it is unfortunate that these professors lack knowledge of the Dharma, which can make their explanations of historical events feel superficial and lacking in depth. For example, they outline the duration of a specific dynasty, the reigning rulers, and

¹⁴⁹ Lao Ai (died 238 BCE) was an imposter eunuch and official of the State of Qin during the late Warring States period.

the major events. While it is essential to know the historical account, what is more important is to develop a conviction about impermanence from it.

In fact, impermanence affects everyone. No matter how intelligent and competent you are now, in due time, you will become dim-witted and easily deceived. Therefore, before I reach that point, I am trying to seize the moment and translate the precious texts of Tibetan Buddhism into Chinese. Meanwhile, I am also working to compile those profound instructions. Otherwise, impermanence may arrive swiftly, and if I am not in good health or if something else happens to me, I may not have the opportunity to accomplish these tasks.

Impermanence manifests in various ways. A good person may become bad, and a bad person may become good. Others, once considered unwise and lacking insight, were often dismissed as frauds or hypocrites. However, when they acquired wealth and influence, they gained the trust of others and were seen as shrewd, capable, and knowledgeable individuals. As the saying goes, “An elderly cheat becomes the master.”

I know a geshe¹⁵⁰ from Dranggo, a large Geluk monastery in the Trango area of Kham. Twenty years ago, he was an illiterate lay practitioner working near the monastery. At that time, many people looked down on him. Later, he developed renunciation, went to India, and studied the Dharma for twenty years. Initially, he did not understand a word, but through diligent study, he attained a geshe degree.

When he returned to Trango, all the locals and the monastery’s sangha stood in a long line to welcome him and offer him khatas. Now he is the abbot of Dranggo and teaches the sangha every day. Once, he visited me, and we chatted about the principle of impermanence. He expressed his deep understanding of impermanence—had he not taken ordination and studied the Dharma, he would not have achieved what he has today.

This could also happen to people you know. Someone who was once in an inferior position, perceived to have little intelligence and poor conduct, can become wealthy, capable, and powerful within a few years, often becoming quite arrogant.

Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han, was born into a peasant family and

¹⁵⁰ 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. This degree is emphasized primarily by the Gelug lineage but is also awarded in the Sakya and Bön traditions. The equivalent geshema degree is conferred upon women.

frequently ran into trouble with the law. He relied on his brother for support, and his father called him “little rascal.” *The Records of the Grand Historian*, also known in Chinese as *Shiji*, described Liu Bang as a hooligan who was a lustful alcoholic.

Once, Xiang Yu, the Hegemon-King of Western Chu, who ruled a vast area of China, took Liu Bang’s father hostage and threatened Liu Bang. The king told Liu Bang to surrender, or he would kill Liu Bang’s father and cook parts of his body into soup. Liu Bang replied with ease, “If you cook him, please share a bowl of soup with me.”

Another time, when Liu Bang was being pursued by Xiang Yu’s men, he pushed his own daughter and son out of his carriage to lighten it in a desperate attempt to escape. Later, his son became Emperor Hui of Han.

Despite these atrocities, Liu Bang was enthroned as the first emperor of the Han dynasty. After his enthronement, Liu Bang invited his ministers for a celebration. He boasted to his father, “You used to call me ‘little rascal,’ saying I could not make money and did not have the same skills as my second brother. Now I am emperor. Tell me, who has a bigger career, my brother or I?”

Therefore, in a person’s short lifetime, significant changes can occur, with a good person becoming evil and an evil person becoming good. Some Dharma students were once very good at oral presentations and written exams, and many predicted they would become great Dharma masters, but I hesitated to say so. After all, the future is uncertain.

One monastic previously behaved very poorly, and many people strongly urged me to expel him from the sangha. However, I wanted to give him one more chance because he did not seriously violate the regulations of our Academy.

When I visited other places, I encountered individuals expelled from Larung Gar. They now have many disciples, substantial financial support, and large-scale Dharma activities. I received very warm hospitality from them. So, many things are impermanent.

In religious life, too, there is a saying:

In old age, sages seek knowledge, renunciants accumulate wealth, and Dharma teachers become heads of household.

“*In old age, sages seek knowledge.*” Some practitioners were in retreat and practiced diligently in their youth, speaking to no one for years. However, in old

age, they ceased their meditation and instead focused on hearing and contemplating the Dharma. This, in fact, is not beneficial.

When you are young, you should listen to and contemplate the Dharma well; whereas in old age, you should meditate on the Dharma well. Patrul Rinpoche said,

Those who meditate when young
And who hear and contemplate when old
Bring no benefit to themselves,
And become the subject of others' ridicule.

If you study none of the Buddha's teachings and only meditate in retreat during your youth, and then begin to listen to and contemplate the Dharma in old age, this not only offers no benefit to yourself but also invites others to laugh at you.

Some seniors are so advanced in age that they have lost their teeth, yet every day they still attempt to memorize the five great treatises by heart. This is unnecessary. Seniors should devote themselves to practice, either by reciting the names of the buddhas or by chanting the mantra of Avalokiteshvara.

"In old age, renunciants accumulate wealth." People who spent the first half of their lives renouncing all worldly affairs may devote the second half to getting rich and wealthy.

In October 2006, *Beijing Evening News* published a story titled "A Century-Old Monk Returns to Secular Life, Marries, and Runs a Factory," which surprised many people. The monk featured in the article was Shi Fayuan, who was 101 years old at the time of the interview. Shi Fayuan stated that he had been the abbot of a temple, but after it was flooded, he moved to another temple to serve as abbot there. However, that temple became desolate and received few visitors, so at the age of ninety-six, he decided to disrobe. At that time, he had been a monk for fifty-four years and had nearly three thousand disciples. Soon after returning to secular life, he married a fifty-three-year-old widow.

In 2008, *Jiangnan City Daily* published a similar story titled "A Ninety-Year-Old Man Disrobes and Marries After Seventy Years of Monastic Life." [Please do not take this only as news. Each of you should reflect on yourselves and learn something from it.] This man was born into a family that practiced traditional Chinese medicine. After becoming a monk, he practiced medicine to save lives and often treated people in the neighborhood.

Initially, he remained in the monastery. Later, for various reasons, he opened a clinic elsewhere and settled down there. He often recalled his mother's words: "You must live as a monk for seventy years so the family can be safe and sound." Therefore, after he had been a monk for seventy years, he began to grow his hair.

A disciple noticed that the man was getting older and living far from his hometown without family, so he suggested that the old man find a partner to care for each other. The old man then approached a marriage agency and found a forty-one-year-old woman.

When the woman consulted her family about partnering with the old man, her parents, brothers, sisters, and even her daughter strongly opposed the idea. However, the woman found the old man honest and trustworthy, so she withstood the opposition and pressure and chose to live with him. The woman earned a salary of 300 yuan per month. Since the old man had just settled in her town and had no income, she tightened her belt and gave him 200 yuan per month for living expenses. Two years later, they married and lived happily together. Currently, this old man enjoys drinking and smoking and is in good health.

It is clear that no one can predict what a monastic will become in the future, even if they have upheld pure precepts and remained in the sangha for many years. For a monastic, the most gratifying thing is to uphold pure precepts throughout their life and eventually leave this world as a monastic.

"In old age, Dharma teachers become heads of household." Others start out as acharyas (spiritual teachers) who teach and spread the Dharma but end up as hunters, thieves, or robbers. Learned Dharma teachers who kept all the Vinaya vows in their youth may, in their old age, have many children.

As I have mentioned previously, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was studying Dharma at Sershul, he received *Vinaya* teachings, including the *Vinaya* and the *Three Hundred Verses on Vinaya*, from a master. At that time, the master strictly upheld the precepts and exhibited impeccable conduct. Thubga Rinpoche spoke highly of him, and many disciples received precepts or Vinaya teachings from him.

Later, when the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche returned to Sershul in 1996, the master had returned to secular life and fathered a child. Upon seeing Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, he bowed to him, recognizing Phuntsok Rinpoche as a great Dharma master. Phuntsok Rinpoche also bowed to the master, acknowledging

that he had received his Vinaya teachings. Thus, the two of them bowed to each other in mutual respect.

I was not present for this event; it was one of Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's attendants who relayed the story to me. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often praised and expressed his respect for this master during his own teachings.

A Khenpo in my home monastery¹⁵¹ used to uphold pure precepts in his youth and was on equal footing with the abbot and tulku. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, he not only broke his precepts and fathered more than a dozen children, but also slandered the Dharma and beat his root lama during the struggle sessions. What a tragic transformation! He died a few years ago, and I heard that it was a very miserable death.

From what happens around us, we can see that everything is impermanent, including our spiritual practice. Therefore, there is no point in showing off our practice or thinking too highly of ourselves.

On the other hand, some people spend the first half of their lives solely creating negative karma, but in the latter half, they devote themselves entirely to practicing the Dharma and attain realization. Even if they do not achieve realization, they have already taken refuge in Buddhism and are reborn in a pure land after death.

Yesterday, a Dharma practitioner mentioned that he had worked as a butcher for two or three years and had killed many sheep. He realized that he must now purify his wrongdoings and practice diligently. Another practitioner shared that to repent for his negative actions, he undertook a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai, Mount Jiuhua, and Mount Putuo, performing full prostrations every three steps. Although he has not yet made the pilgrimage to Mount Emei, the final of the Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism in China, he has vowed to do so. By taking these steps, even those who have previously committed serious wrongdoings can still become good practitioners. Therefore, the manifestations of virtue and vice at present can change in an instant—nothing remains constant or unbreakable.

You might occasionally develop a fleeting sense of renunciation and worldly weariness, only to superficially practice a distorted version of the Dharma. Yet, worldly individuals regard them as remarkable figures. Later, when they attract benefactors and disciples who pay them great respect, they fail to examine their own minds carefully. Instead, they genuinely believe, "I have achieved something

¹⁵¹ Dhomang monastery

great.” Their arrogance clouds their judgment, making them restless and erratic. They begin to think, “I can do anything I want.” Such individuals are truly deluded and possessed by negative forces.

We must be aware that Patrul Rinpoche’s *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* is filled with pith instructions! During my teachings, I sometimes cannot provide extensive explanations due to time constraints. However, if you read these vajra words repeatedly, as Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche did every day, it will undoubtedly bring great benefits to your minds over time.

Unfortunately, some fraudulent practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism have caused a very negative impact in the Han area of China. Knowing nothing about Dharma, they are insatiable in their pursuit of fame and money, and they never consider how to benefit all sentient beings. In such cases, even if they teach in the name of “Dharma,” it will not be long before people recognize their true nature. After all, some individuals today are quite vigilant and discerning. They even disapprove of qualified teachers and develop various wrong views toward them, let alone point fingers at these charlatans.

Therefore, please pay attention to this. Otherwise, some individuals, once they acquire money and power, may begin to disrespect the guru and the Three Jewels. They disregard proper conduct, acting as if they are not bound by the law of karma. They have been completely deceived by negative forces.

Some individuals who once stayed at Larung Gar exemplify this behavior. They used to study the Dharma diligently and thrive on everything, but after leaving Larung Gar and settling elsewhere, they began to accumulate wealth and followers, ultimately developing inflated opinions of themselves.

Upon hearing of these charlatans’ deeds and witnessing their behavior, I feel pity for them. They have achieved no state of realization, yet they dare to boast of their “achievements.” When they are exposed in one location, they simply move to another and continue their deception. Some of their disciples, lacking clarity of mind, follow them everywhere in a daze. How sad!

A person once told me, “Some so-called tulkus from the Tibetan region are unreasonable for this reason and that.” I immediately countered, saying, “Some lay practitioners from the Han region of China are also unreasonable, as the prerequisite for following a guru is a mutual examination between the guru and the disciple.

One shouldn't follow a guru like a hungry dog encountering a piece of meat and devouring it immediately."

Some people treat the Dharma as a commodity, which leads to significant faults. I hope you will not be like this. To avoid being tricked by negative forces, you should frequently consult the pith instructions in this text and practice ngöndro while also sincerely praying to Padmasambhava and the twenty-one Taras. Even if you do not know other prayers, you should recite the Padmasambhava mantra and the Tara mantra. This is also the advice of many eminent masters from the past.

In my case, although I may not have fully implemented all the teachings given by my teachers, I have been praying to Padmasambhava for many years. This has allowed me to maintain my practice amid this age of great turmoil. Therefore, whenever you have the opportunity, you should also consistently pray to Padmasambhava. By doing so, you will not be deceived by negative forces, as stated in Orgyen Tendzin Norbu's *In Praise of Precepts*.

Before one has eradicated self-clinging and realized the wisdom of no-self to attain the sublime state of a noble being, the appearances of virtue and vice do not endure.

If you have attained the fruit of realization, you need not worry about any negative changes in behavior. However, if you have neither uprooted self-clinging nor developed the wisdom of emptiness, then both excellence and mediocrity are impermanent. It may be that today you wish to practice diligently, but later you might engage in a spree of wrongdoings, as if possessed by a demon. As mentioned earlier, it is quite sad if a monk chooses to disrobe in his 90s.

Contemplate constantly on death and impermanence. Examine the faults within your own mind and remain humble. A practitioner does not need great fame or abundant wealth; having basic living provisions is sufficient. A practitioner should always adopt a humble position and act in accordance with the Dharma. Patrul Rinpoche said:

Only by practicing the Dharma impeccably can we propagate
the Dharma and benefit beings.

However, some people are shameless; they are unaware that they are actually bad individuals and continue to boast about their greatness. Alas! A truly eminent

master or a practitioner with genuine realization will never brag about themselves; they will only reflect on their own faults.

Cultivate a sense of renunciation with samsara and desire for liberation. Our body, speech, and mind should be calm, disciplined, and cautious. We should meditate on the impermanence of all compounded things and reflect on the suffering of samsara, maintaining unwavering faith and deep renunciation at all times. As Jetsun Milarepa himself said:

In a cave in the desolate valley,
Always maintain a heart of renunciation.
With firm, unwavering faith,
I will never part from you,
My guru, Buddha of the three times.

When a true practitioner practices in an isolated cave, he becomes consistently disenchanted with samsara. He maintains unwavering faith in the Three Jewels, and this faith does not waver from day to day.

Faith and renunciation are the foundations of the Dharma. According to Kadampa teachings, there are four primary sources for cultivating faith: 1) following a qualified teacher; 2) associating with a good Dharma friend; 3) reflecting on impermanence; 4) studying Buddhist scriptures. We must adhere to these instructions and put them into practice. Otherwise, it is impossible to determine what one will become in the future, as temporary discursive thoughts are impermanent.

There was once a man who, after experiencing betrayal by close friends and abandonment by others, turned to Buddhism. Through diligent practice, he became an extraordinary monk named Tangpa Bhikshu, having control over his energy and mind, and the ability to fly in the sky.

One day, while making offerings to hungry spirits, he attracted a large gathering of pigeons. Seeing this, he thought to himself, “If only I had such a vast army, I could exterminate my enemies.” Because he failed to transform this negative thought, he later disrobed and became a military leader.

Sometimes, a fleeting thought can lead to a terrible consequence. Emperor Shunzhi of the Qing dynasty said in his *Verses of Ordination*:

Exchanging the purple Kāṣāya for a golden robe,
 Is all because of a single erroneous thought in the past.
 As I was originally an itinerant monk from the West,
 How did I end up being born into the imperial family?¹⁵²

In *The Record of Water Mirror Turning Back Heaven*, Master Hsuan Hua shared a story about Emperor Chongzhen, the sixteenth and last emperor of the Ming dynasty:

In his previous life, Emperor Chongzhen was a monk earnestly pursuing the Dharma. However, during his practice, this monk often indulged in fantasies of becoming an emperor in the future. Eventually, he died at a young age.

The abbot had his corpse tied to a horse's tail so that it would be torn to pieces until it was completely disintegrated. This was meant to alleviate his suffering in his next life.

However, two of his fellow monks did not understand the abbot's intention. Finding it difficult to follow the abbot's order, they secretly buried the monk's corpse. As a result, the monk was reincarnated as Emperor Chongzhen, who later hanged himself from a tree at Meishan, a small hill in present-day Jingshan Park in Beijing.

Therefore, during your practice, always reflect on yourself and strive to guide your mind along the path.

For now, we may rely on the support of good teachers and supportive friends to provide us with opportunities to practice the Dharma. However, the thoughts of an ordinary person are not dependable. Therefore, we should diligently practice the Dharma day and night and remain committed to our practice for as long as we live. As for "remain committed to our practice for as long as we live," it reminds me of a story about Su Shi, the Chinese poet of the Song dynasty, whom I mentioned in the previous teaching:

Su Shi enjoyed reading from a young age. He was gifted and clever, never forgetting anything he read. Each time he read an article, he could recite it without missing a single word. After years of diligent study, he was quite learned. One day, after a few drinks, he wrote a couplet—two lines of poetry—and had it posted on the front door. It read:

¹⁵² Translated by Yong Wei Kwong and Liew Yen Chong.

Read all the books on earth;
Know all the characters in the world.

A few days later, while reading at home, his servant reported that someone at the door wanted to see him. When Su Shi came out, he saw an old woman with white hair. She pointed to the couplet on the door and asked, “Have you really read all the books on earth and known all the characters in the world?”

Hearing this, Su Shi felt a bit annoyed. He replied haughtily, “Do you think I am lying?”

The old woman took a book out of her pocket and said, “I have a book here. Can you please read it and tell me what it is about?”

Su Shi took the book and flipped through the pages, but he could not recognize a single word. Feeling ashamed of his arrogant statement, he reached out and attempted to tear the couplet from the door.

But the old woman hurried forward and stopped him, saying, “Wait! I can edit this couplet.” She added two words to each line and changed it to:

Determined to read all the books on earth;
Aspired to know all the characters in the world.

The old woman told Su Shi, “Young man, knowledge has no limits.”

Therefore, when studying the Dharma, we should also remember that “knowledge has no limits.” We should never become conceited or complacent. Each of us should carefully reflect and meditate on this.

If you reflect deeply on the numerous examples provided here, you will come to firmly believe that from the top of existence to the lowest hells, there is not the slightest trace of permanence or stability. Everything is subject to change and transformation, and everything waxes and wanes.



Lesson 37

“Once born, every human in the world is sure to die ... a fire, they would never cover the embers for the night.” [page 53–55]

Let’s continue with the chapter on “the impermanence of life,” which consists of seven meditations. Today, we’ll cover the sixth one.

Each meditation on impermanence is crucial. If you regularly engage with the contents of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, put it into practice at all times, and consistently experience a sense of impermanence, then your practice will surely succeed.

We must fully integrate the Dharma we have learned into our minds, rather than simply adhering to its verbal meaning. While it is valuable to be extensively learned, if your mind is not tamed and peaceful, mastering thousands of sutras and shastras or memorizing all the Sutrayana and Vajrayana teachings will not offer you significant benefit.

When you face birth, aging, sickness, and death, and when you are about to leave this world alone without having put the teachings into practice, you may easily deviate from or even act contrary to the Dharma. Therefore, we practitioners should frequently reflect on these supreme vajra words passed down from the great masters.

2.1.2.6. The Uncertainty of the Circumstances of Death

We, the people of Jambudvīpa, from the moment of birth, are destined to

move toward death. However, the manner of death, the causes and conditions, and the exact time of death cannot be determined. No one can be certain when, where, or in what way they will die.

In the next one hundred years, most of us will likely be gone, and none of us will remain in this world. However, how we will die cannot be predicted: some may pass away in a hospital, others on the road, some may drown in a river, some may take their own lives, and some may perish in natural or man-made disasters, and so on. How are you going to die? Probably no one can truly say.

Furthermore, where we will die cannot be predicted. Many Dharma practitioners at Larung Gar strongly wish to die here, but this is what one says when in good health. Once you fall ill, given the poor medical conditions at Larung Gar, you would likely prefer to leave quickly to seek medical attention elsewhere. As a result, you may die in a different place rather than at Larung Gar.

When we will die is also unpredictable. If the time could be known, we would understand how many years we have left before our death, allowing us to arrange the rest of our lives accordingly. For example, we could plan how many meditation sessions we would conduct and how many mantras we would recite each day. But no one knows the exact moment of death.

So, what is the one certainty we can rely on? It is the fact that our time in this life is constantly diminishing and never increasing. As Shantideva says:

Never halting night or day,
My life drains constantly away,
And from no other source does increase come.
How can there not be death for such as me?¹⁵³

The bardo teachings and other practical guides use the following analogy about our lives: A man slips over a cliff and is falling to his doom when he grasps a clump of grass that halts his descent. He hangs there, and below him is a deep abyss with a beast opening its mouth ferociously. Soon, a white mouse and a black mouse appear and start nibbling on the blades of grass alternately, gradually leaving less grass in the man's hand. Meanwhile, honey drips from a bee's nest above him, and five drops fall directly into the man's mouth. Wow, how sweet it tastes! He savors the honey so much that he completely forgets the dangerous situation he is in.

¹⁵³ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

Our lives are as fragile as the clump of grass the man clings to. The white mouse represents day, and the black mouse represents night, symbolizing the inexorable passage of time by which our lives gradually diminish. The lower realm into which we fall after death is akin to the beast opening its mouth ferociously. Our lives approach their end, and the prospect of our next life is worrisome. However, people remain obsessed with the five worldly desires represented by the honey. How foolish!

Therefore, we should contemplate and meditate constantly on death and impermanence. Many people often create grand life blueprints for the future. For example, some lay practitioners who visit Larung Gar say, “I am not available now. I have to leave Larung Gar and go to work for money. Four or five years from now, I will return for my ordination, and then I will devote myself to practice.” However, after they return to their hometowns, many things happen—either they die or major changes suddenly occur—and their wishes are thwarted.

Not long ago, when we went on a pilgrimage to Mount Garuda near Larung Gar, a young Tibetan woman who had just graduated from Qinghai University School of Medicine came to see me. She had watched my teaching videos, including *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and had developed great faith in the Dharma. She truly recognized the rarity of human life and no longer wanted to waste her life on worldly pursuits, so she insisted on taking ordination at Larung Gar. Her mother also came to see me, expressing her support for her daughter’s decision.

Moved by their sincerity, I did not reject the young Tibetan woman’s request. With my permission, they were very happy and returned home to raise money to buy a cabin at Larung Gar.

Two days ago, her mother called me, crying. It turned out that her daughter had wanted to become a Buddhist nun as soon as possible, but a recent medical check-up revealed she had terminal cancer. Now she could not go to Larung Gar anymore.

The young Tibetan woman also called me, expressing her gratitude for having studied the Dharma before her death, which made her less afraid of dying. She said she had always wanted to become a nun at Larung Gar, but it had not worked out in this life. She vowed to take ordination under my guidance in her next life.

She also mentioned another wish. She had noticed that some senior nuns at Larung Gar wore ragged shoes, which I also mentioned in my book *Footprints*

on the Journey. She said that if anyone were to donate money for her medical treatment, she would arrange for the funds to be sent to me after her passing. This way, I could pass it on to senior nuns or use it to help others in need. She said she would dedicate the merit to all beings.

I felt sad upon hearing her news. She was only twenty-six years old, and impermanence came to her far too soon. She could not disregard everything and come to Larung Gar, as it was a long journey for her, and her father would not agree. Her father is a renowned doctor and had asked her to undergo chemotherapy as soon as possible. Although there is no cure for her cancer, he still wanted to give it a try.

In fact, impermanence occurs so frequently around us, yet many people do not take it seriously, believing it only happens to others and will never happen to themselves. In particular, those who have never studied Buddhism, as well as those who have studied it but have not delved deeply, tend to lack an understanding of impermanence. Thus, I hope that through this teaching, we can all contemplate the principle of impermanence, examining how the mountains, rivers, and four seasons are constantly changing, how our innate faith, compassion, greed, and anger are in constant flux, and how our most cherished body and life lack any permanence or stability. We must carefully reflect on these issues.

As past eminent masters have said, we should place our hands on our chests, close our eyes, concentrate our minds, and ask ourselves, “How much longer can I live in this world?” Sadly, millions upon millions of people have never contemplated impermanence; they only care about immediate benefits and blindly pursue pleasures in this life. What do they ultimately gain or lose? Many should ponder this.

In this world, the causes for life are pitifully scarce, while the causes for death are as numerous as the hairs on an ox, as the great master Aryadeva said:

Causes of death are extremely many,
Causes of life are exceedingly rare,
And even they may turn into causes of death.

As it is stated in Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland*:

The causes of death are many,
Those of staying alive are few,

These too can become causes of death,
Therefore, always perform the practices.¹⁵⁴

There are countless causes of death, such as fire, water, poisons, dangerous places, savages, and fierce beasts, while the causes of life are extremely scarce.

Every day, you can find news about disasters occurring all over the world, making human life constantly face threats. In addition to natural disasters, the imbalance of the four elements within us is also a significant factor that cannot be overlooked. Buddhist scriptures mention 404 types of human diseases, eighty thousand negative forces, and more, indicating that while causes of death are numerous, causes of life are few.

Moreover, what we consider causes of life, such as clothing and food, can also become causes of death. In particular, many people today are unaware of the law of karma, leading them to pursue money through unethical means, such as manufacturing large quantities of weapons and producing counterfeit, unsafe, and substandard goods that pose direct and indirect threats to people's lives. For instance, dietary supplements and fitness nutrition products intended to enhance health may contain toxic substances. Products made from genuine leather or real fur are often regarded as status symbols, but it is important to note that their production releases aromatic amines—chemicals harmful to human health that can cause skin issues or even cancer.

Consuming contaminated food, or even eating what is believed to be non-toxic with the hope of nourishing the body, may still result in poisoning or adverse reactions. Under certain circumstances,¹⁵⁵ it might also be the wrong food for a particular individual.

Many people consume expensive foods and supplements in the hope of improving their health. However, what they eat may be harmful rather than beneficial, leading to a variety of diseases. Some foods are healthy on their own but can become toxic or indigestible when combined with certain other foods. In fact, eating certain combinations can even be fatal, yet many people remain unaware of this risk. Additionally, some foods can produce unexpected toxins if they are not

¹⁵⁴ Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion, 2007, page 41.

¹⁵⁵ In Tibetan medicine, this expression refers to foods that are healthy on their own but can become toxic or indigestible when combined with certain other foods.

properly cooked or stored. For example, undercooked red kidney beans and green potatoes can be quite toxic.

Especially in our time, most people, due to their excessive craving for meat and unrestrained consumption of flesh and blood, seem almost certain to contract diseases caused by old meat¹⁵⁶ or harmful meat spirits. Moreover, countless individuals suffer from improper diets, leading to tumors, disorders of phlegm, dropsy, and other diseases, resulting in innumerable deaths.

Eating meat, in particular, can sometimes lead to severe health issues. In 2004, more than one million residents of Foshan, in the Guangdong Province of China, were infected with *Clonorchis sinensis*, a liver fluke that causes jaundice, indigestion, inflammation of the bile ducts, and serious liver problems. This outbreak was linked to the local habit of consuming raw fish. While enjoying this delicacy, they were unaware they were actually ingesting the host of liver flukes.

Tibetans also historically consumed raw lamb and beef, which harbored numerous bacteria, viruses, and parasites. Eating such meat can result in significant health problems. Additionally, some people in southern China enjoy eating monkey brains; however, medical experts have discovered that monkeys may carry a highly lethal virus (simian leukemia) that can easily infect humans through a monkey's saliva, to say nothing of its brain.

Today, many people are enthusiastic meat-eaters. They consume meat and blood without scruples and show little regard for the law of karma. Before Patrul Rinpoche was born, Tibetans were influenced by the traditions of Bön, the indigenous religion of Tibet, and relentlessly consumed meat and blood. Consequently, many Tibetans at that time suffered from diseases related to meat consumption, including arterial plaque and high blood pressure.

Chinese, especially those living by the sea, often eat raw seafood such as shrimp and crab, which can lead to infections from lung flukes, liver flukes, bacillary dysentery (an intestinal inflammation), hepatitis, and more. For instance, two outbreaks of hepatitis A occurred in Shanghai in 1983 and 1988; the former involved 20,000 individuals, while the latter affected 310,000. Investigations revealed that these outbreaks were caused by the consumption of raw blood clams.

Today's diners are not only interested in seafood but also in wild animals that

¹⁵⁶ sha sgrén refers to meat that is excessively old but not necessarily rotten. Food can be stored for long periods in Tibet due to the specific climatic conditions.

are on the national protected list. However, consuming wild animals is not always safe. For example, a lizard may carry nearly seven hundred parasites, which can be extremely dangerous if ingested.

Nevertheless, there are no such concerns if you avoid meat, so we should strongly promote a vegetarian diet. If you understand the law of karma and have read the *Shurangama Sutra* or the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, you will recognize the benefits of a vegetarian lifestyle. Even if you do not subscribe to Buddhist beliefs, there are still significant health advantages to becoming a vegetarian.

Recently, I read a book compiled by the Editorial Board of the Elderly of China, in which a journalist asked Master Benhuan, a renowned Chinese monk, “Most Buddhists do not eat meat, which, in my view, does not make sense. Our human bodies need nourishment!” Master Benhuan replied, “Look at me. I am 102 years old. Do I look like I’m lacking any nourishment?”

Indeed, a vegetarian diet is a cause of longevity. Tomotari Mitsuoka, a professor at Tokyo University, found that inhabitants of rural areas (with a median age of eighty-four) tend to live longer than those in urban areas like Tokyo (with a median age of sixty-eight), possibly due to a higher intake of dietary fiber in rural regions. Urban dwellers in Tokyo may have more affluence, allowing for greater meat consumption, while rural residents often adhere to a more vegetarian diet, which is high in fiber due to financial constraints.

Why does meat consumption harm one’s health? The carnivorous diet can damage the body’s immune system. Individuals who eat meat excessively may develop acidosis, a condition that increases acidity in the blood and other body tissues, potentially leading to irreversible cell damage and weakening white blood cells’ ability to fight infections. Furthermore, meat consumption can result in the accumulation of various residues in the large intestine, promoting the growth of gut bacteria that release harmful toxins, which can be cancerous and detrimental to health. Consequently, Professor Mitsuoka and his colleagues concluded that eliminating meat from one’s diet and adopting a vegetarian lifestyle can lead to a longer and healthier life.

Thus, humans are not well-suited to consume meat, as it can lead to various diseases that shorten our lifespans. This may also explain why centenarian monks outnumber centenarian non-Buddhists in China. Therefore, those who wish to live a long life may want to adopt a vegetarian diet. If it is challenging for you to fully

commit to vegetarianism, you might consider reducing meat consumption. For instance, you could refrain from eating meat on special Buddhist days each month, gradually cultivating the habit of enjoying vegetarian meals. Our lives are already relatively short, and they may become even shorter if we do not eat properly.

Nowadays, many diseases and deaths are caused by improper diets. Similarly, in the pursuit of wealth and fame, people meet their demise—whether by marching onto the battlefield, encountering ferocious beasts, or recklessly crossing rivers. Such occurrences are too numerous to count.

Throughout our lives, we are constantly surrounded by causes of death that are difficult to avoid. Therefore, we should always reflect on death and impermanence, whether we are driving or walking. For example, when driving on a highway, we should keep in mind the teaching of impermanence, as at any second, we could be involved in a car accident and no longer be in this world. Similarly, while walking, we might slip and fall into a river, and it could take just a few minutes for the rushing water to sweep us away.

Some young people think, “I won’t die anytime soon because I am still young and have many things yet to accomplish.” However, these are not valid reasons. It is entirely impossible for anyone to be exempt from death simply because of their youth. According to Buddhist logic, this reasoning is a fallacy.

A diligent practitioner always remembers the uncertainty of death’s arrival, often contemplating, “I wonder when I will die.” With this thought in mind, they practice earnestly and do not waste time on trivial conversations and distractions.

In contrast, what people in cities lack the most is awareness of impermanence. They continually procrastinate their Dharma practice, postponing it to next year, the year after, or even until retirement. I once met a man in his 50s who told me that in fifteen years, he would return to Larung Gar to study the Dharma. What a “nice” plan for his future!

The *Dhammapada* covers the story of an old man:

When the Buddha was in Sravasti, a wealthy but stingy old Brahmin in his late 70s lived there. The old man wanted to build an extravagant mansion, so he spent a lot of time supervising the construction and directing the craftsmen. Through his omniscient wisdom, the Buddha knew the old man had only one day to live. However, the old man was unaware of this, so he continued to occupy himself with

meaningless tasks, absorbed in his busyness. Therefore, the Buddha approached the old Brahmin in person.

The Buddha asked the old man, “Are you not too tired? What’s the use of building such a mansion?”

The old Brahmin replied proudly, “In the front of this mansion is the living room, in the back is my bedroom, and on the east and west sides are rooms for my family, children, and servants. There is a veranda where we can cool off in summer, and a solarium where we can stay warm in winter. What a comfortable residence!”

The Buddha said, “Nice, nice! But I have verses for you. Will you pause your work, sit down, and listen to me?”

The old Brahmin replied, “I am too busy to hear your verses. I will talk to you in a few days. If you have anything important to say, just tell me briefly.”

The Buddha said, “Your plans for the future are good, and you may consider yourself a wise man, but what you do not realize is that impermanence comes swiftly, and you will soon leave this world. Yet, you continue to keep yourself busy with meaningless activities. Nothing is more ignorant than this!”

Hearing the Buddha’s words, the old Brahmin Said, “What you have said indeed makes sense, but I am too busy today, so I will talk to you later!”

The old man was very stubborn, and the Buddha could not persuade him to change his mind. Shortly after the Buddha left, the old Brahmin walked beneath a rafter that fell and struck his head, killing him instantly.

Many seniors behave like the old Brahmin, as if they will live for hundreds of years. Each day, they focus solely on making plans for their children and grandchildren, which is rather unwise.

Therefore, each of us should always consider how long we can continue to live. By doing so, we will not cling excessively to fame, wealth, and relationships, even at the cost of our lives.

On one hand, if you practice the concept of impermanence well, you will develop the mental strength to face illness and pain bravely, and you will not be devastated when accidents befall your family and friends. We need to go beyond the superficial and seek the true essence of the Dharma by integrating it into our minds.

Buddhists should not focus solely on external appearances and formali-

ties. Instead, we should delve deeply into the teachings. The Dharma not only encompasses the ultimate truth of everything but also encourages us to put the Buddha's teachings into real practice. Thus, practitioners can cultivate their inner experience to varying degrees while practicing the Dharma. This is what makes Buddhism truly remarkable.

Furthermore, it is precisely because the causes of death are so varied that the time of death remains uncertain. Some pass away in their mother's womb, some at birth, and others just as they learn to crawl. Some leave this world in the prime of life, while others live to old age and die peacefully. It says in *The Collection of Deliberate Sayings*:

Some die in their mother's womb,
Some die at birth,
Some die while learning to crawl,
Some die while learning to run,
Some die old, some die young,
Some young adults die in their prime.

A Chinese proverb states,:

There is no difference between the old and the young on the
path to death.

Death takes everyone, old or young, equally.

A young man thinks, "My hair hasn't turned gray, so how can I die? Absolutely impossible!" He sounds so certain, perhaps because he has attained the level of vidyadhara with power over life. Fantastic!

Some die before they receive timely treatment or help. Some are in an ambulance but die on the way to the hospital. Others, bedridden for years due to lingering illness, waste away to mere skin and bones and pass away with unfulfilled regrets. I have seen many such patients who linger between life and death. Recently, one person called me and said, "Please grant me blessings so I can die sooner. Living like this, I am a burden to others and a pain to myself." However, if his karma had not been exhausted, it was not easy for him to die sooner. Many people die suddenly or by accident, before they can finish their meal, complete their sentence, or accomplish their tasks. Some even take their own lives.

Of course, at the moment of death, ordinary beings inevitably experience the effects of karma, while sublime beings have attained freedom beyond life and death. As I mentioned recently, the lama next door passed into parinirvana while reciting mantras in the vajra posture. Later, many Dharma friends reported that a rainbow appeared in the sky that day. I hesitated to believe it at first, as I typically do not accept others' claims about miraculous signs without question. However, when I later saw the photo, the rainbow was clearly visible, and the date on the photo confirmed its authenticity. So now, I believe that the lama has achieved realization.

There are many such instances in Dudjom Rinpoche's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*. For example, one disciple of Vairotsana placed his shawl and mala on a branch of a cypress tree before ascending directly to the pure realm. The state of realization demonstrated in this case is beyond the imagination and reach of an ordinary person.

In summary, there are countless causes of death in this world. Regardless of what we are doing—whether eating, walking, driving, flying on a plane, or even just sitting at home—death can come suddenly.

Surrounded by so many causes of death, the forces sustaining life are as feeble as a flickering candle flame in the wind. As stated in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*:

Constantly surrounded by causes of death,
We are like lamps in a gust.

*The Stage of Imagination*¹⁵⁷ states:

Life is like a lamp in the wind,
Not knowing when it will be extinguished.

The Buddha employed other similes to convey the uncertainty of death, such as:

Life lasts between one breath and the next.

and

Life is more fragile than a bubble in a stream.

¹⁵⁷ Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā

Given this, we should not occupy ourselves daily with dressing up, making money, and planning for the future.

There is no guarantee that death will not strike unexpectedly at any moment, nor that you will not be reborn as a horned animal tomorrow. You should sincerely accept the uncertainty of the time of death and the circumstances of rebirth. Please contemplate this and earnestly practice it over the long term.

2.1.2.7. Intense Awareness of Impermanence

Meditate single-mindedly on death, reflecting that every action—whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down—could be your last in this life. Speak and contemplate it with utter conviction.

When traveling, consider the possibility of dying away from home without the chance to return.

My practice on this is inadequate. Whenever I leave Larung Gar for elsewhere, I ponder impermanence, feeling I might not return. However, when I walked from my cabin to the Dharma hall a few minutes ago to give teachings, I felt certain that I would return to my cabin after class. Thus, it seems that when I travel far, I contemplate death, whereas when I leave my cabin briefly, I hardly think about it. In fact, wherever we go—whether to the toilet or to fetch water—we should remind ourselves, “I might die there.” We must always maintain a strong awareness of impermanence.

When you set out on a journey or rest on the steps, ask yourself, “Will I die here?” Wherever you are, reflect on whether this might be where you die. At night, before you sleep, consider: “I might die here tonight; it is uncertain whether I will be alive tomorrow.”

Of course, worldly people may find you strange, thinking, “This person is in good health, so it is impossible for him to die while sitting on the stairs; how pessimistic it is that he lives in such fear every day and has no significant goals in life!” However, their perceptions are misguided. What worldly individuals pursue in life is entirely different from what we practitioners strive to attain—renunciation.

Once we develop genuine renunciation through practice, we lose interest in everything except our liberation from samsara. As soon as renunciation arises within a person, they may feel compelled to take ordination and devote themselves

to Dharma practice, and no one can dissuade them from this path. Why does this happen? Because they have understood the truth of everything and no longer wish to wait; they have decided to embark on the path to liberation as monastics.

In contrast, if we have not cultivated genuine renunciation, we will continue to cling to worldly pursuits. Consequently, there is a disconnect between practitioners and worldly individuals. If you have developed a conviction about impermanence, you will undoubtedly become disenchanted with worldly concerns, much like a gallbladder patient who sees greasy food and shows no interest. All you care about is liberation from samsara.

Therefore, we should meditate on death and impermanence constantly and in every circumstance. When we go to bed at night, we should think, “I might die in bed tonight, and tomorrow I may not wake up.”

I often reflect on this, especially at night before I lie down. If my mind is clear and free of discursive thoughts, I frequently contemplate this. In fact, reflecting on impermanence should become a habit. If you think about it every night before going to bed, eventually the awareness of impermanence will arise in you naturally. Please do not behave like an animal that simply collapses on the ground and starts snoring when it is time to sleep, only to wake up in a daze when it is time to get up. If you do so, it indicates that you are not fully immersed in the Buddha’s teachings.

When you rise in the morning, ask yourself whether today might be the day you breathe your last, and consider that there is no certainty you will have the chance to sleep again in the evening.

Meditate solely on death, earnestly and from the depths of your heart.

What I just said may resonate deeply with good practitioners. However, no matter how much more I elaborate on this, it may not impact those who never put the teachings into real practice.

Practice like the Kadampa Geshes of old, who would often contemplate before going to sleep at night: “We do not know if we will need to light a fire tomorrow morning.” Thus, at night, they would typically leave the embers uncovered and would turn their bowls upside down, maintaining a steadfast understanding of death in their hearts at all times. We should follow their example and put this into practice in our own lives.

In the past, Tibetans had no stoves or gas for cooking; they relied on the three-stone fire, arranging three stones to create a stand for a cooking pot. Before

going to bed at night, Tibetans would place several large pieces of yak dung or burning wood in the fire, cover them with ashes, and finally place a large rock on top. In the morning, they would push aside the ashes, find the embers, and easily rekindle the fire.

When I was young, Tibetans lived this way, but not anymore. On one hand, it is difficult to make fire with flint, steel, and tinder; on the other hand, the introduction of matches and lighters has made it easier for Tibetans to start a fire. However, in ancient times, every Tibetan household had to cover the embers for the night. Due to their good practice on impermanence, those Kadampa practitioners believed they might die during the night and that the next day there might be no need to light a fire, so they never covered the embers.

These Kadampa practitioners would also turn their bowls upside down. According to Tibetan tradition, turning someone's bowl over symbolizes that the person has died, so a person would never turn their bowl upside down while still alive. If a child does so, their parents will scold them, believing it to be inauspicious. Thus, from a worldly perspective, the behaviors of those Kadampa practitioners might be difficult to understand, but from a practitioner's perspective, they have attained a genuine state of practice.

Although I am not from the Kadampa lineage, I greatly admire their practice. Every time I travel, I think, "Will I die during this trip?" and arrange my affairs accordingly. Once, when I was about to leave Larung Gar, I told a Dharma friend, "Please help me arrange my money if necessary. Let me tell you what is for life release..."

Hearing my words, the Dharma fellow became very frightened, thinking I must know through my clairvoyance that my death was approaching. Therefore, he immediately said, "You will not die! You will not! You'll live long, very long (*the audience laughs*)!"

In fact, everyone should prepare for their death. This is the Kadampa tradition, which has nothing to do with being auspicious or not. However, someone might think, "I am going somewhere to get something done today. If I worry about whether I will die right at the beginning, will it bring me bad fortune?"

Actually, there is nothing to worry about. If you consistently contemplate impermanence and death, you will eventually develop a conviction about impermanence, which will motivate you to practice diligently.

Of course, we should not just pay lip service to this idea. We need to put it into real practice. Some senior practitioners never allow their minds to wander due to their focus on impermanence.

They fill their schedules with Dharma practices, and we should follow their example by practicing impermanence wholeheartedly and diligently. Let's ensure we never slack off or become negligent.



Lesson 38

“However, just to meditate on death will not suffice ... disciples who are perfect vessels, such as the bhiksus Sariputra and Maudgalyayana.” [page 55–57]

Today we’re still discussing “the impermanence of life.” This time, regardless of the practice guidance I am teaching—be it impermanence or another topic—I explain it in greater detail, supported by scriptural evidence and examples. In my opinion, a Dharma teacher should provide thorough explanations of the text during their teachings.

However, some people believe that Buddhist books or teachings should be succinct. Someone once told me, “You would better not translate lengthy works or write long books, as they may discourage readers. You should provide concise teachings; otherwise, listeners may lose interest.”

In my view, the Dharma is as vast and profound as the ocean. What you have received is not even one ten-millionth of a drop in that ocean. Therefore, it may not seem entirely reasonable if you feel the teaching is too lengthy and extensive. If the topic were some worldly matter of little significance, then we should indeed refrain from spending too much time on it. But if it is the Dharma, which offers only benefit and no harm and provides us the path to liberation from samsara, we should dedicate as much time as possible to it.

In fact, relatively speaking, I do not cover too much in my teachings because I consider that people today are often too busy to invest a lot of time and energy in the Dharma. In the past, Master Chengguan (Ching-liang) of Chinese Buddhism

would teach for eight hours a day. Currently, some eminent masters in India and America teach four hours in the morning and four in the afternoon.

Moreover, Khenpo Tarser of Tibetan Buddhism incorporated abundant scriptural evidence and reasoning in his teachings. He could speak nonstop from morning to afternoon without a break for lunch; eventually, many of his disciples could no longer endure it.

I am not teaching in the same manner. On one hand, I do not quote scriptural evidence or use extensive reasoning like those eminent masters. On the other hand, even if I did, there may not be many people willing to listen to lengthy teachings. Nevertheless, I still believe that Dharma teachings should be rich in content, and the duration of a class should not be too short.

Many busy people may not agree with this perspective, but Dharma teachers should not cater to their preferences. If teachers merely conform to their likes and dislikes—following others in their greed when they are greedy or in their anger when they are angry—this is not true “conformity” from a Buddhist perspective. True conformity is to teach in accordance with a recipient’s capacity and level of understanding. As Dharma students, we should strive to study and comprehend the teachings, whether they are extensive or brief.

In the last class, we studied “the uncertainty of the circumstances of death” and part of “intense awareness of impermanence.” However, simply meditating on death will not suffice. We also need to understand what can truly benefit us when death approaches.

The only thing of any use at the moment of death is the Dharma, which not only alleviates the fear and suffering associated with death, but also provides immense significance for entering the path of liberation in many lives yet to come. In the cycles of samsara, the only thing that can accompany us is the Dharma. All other things, including children, wealth, fame, status, and glory, must be left behind when we die. As Shantideva says:

And when the heralds of the Deadly King have gripped me,
What help to me will be my friends and kin?
For them life’s virtue is my one defense,
And this, alas, is what I shrugged away.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

Therefore, while we are still alive, we must practice Dharma and accumulate merit. Otherwise, we will deeply regret it at the moment of death. Sakya Pandita says in the *Treasury of Good Advice*:

Not knowing where to go after death,
At this time, those who have accumulated no virtues are pitiful.

Sometimes I reflect on myself: although I have engaged in some practices, I do not feel as certain about my fate after death as past great masters did about theirs. All of you should also ask yourselves: “Have you practiced diligently in this life?” If you have not, it would be a great pity to leave this world in such a state. In the past, many Mahayana practitioners would practice the Dharma until their last breath. These days, let alone lay practitioners, even some renowned monastics do not spend much time on practice.

So we must always maintain correct understanding and mindfulness, fully recognizing that all mundane affairs of samsara are impermanent and devoid of intrinsic substance. We should continually urge ourselves to practice the Dharma.

Longchenpa says in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*:

You will die before completing all you wish to do in this life;
One thing leads to another, like the waves of the ocean.
Come to thoroughly appreciate that nothing you undertake will
be useful when you die.
From today on, practice to attain enlightenment, which brings
liberation.¹⁵⁹

Not to mention the profound teachings on the Middle Way and Vajrayana, even the concept of impermanence is difficult for many people to accept, let alone put into practice. If a person develops conviction about impermanence, they may feel that worldly life lacks any real meaning and that the only thing of significance is Dharma practice. After studying *The Precious Garland of Mountain Practices* and *Gateway to Training the Mind*, many of you developed strong renunciation and became motivated to attain liberation, thus becoming true practitioners. Otherwise, even if you have received a certificate for taking refuge or bodhicitta vows, if your mind remains unchanged, the certificate carries little weight.

¹⁵⁹ Longchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron (Lama Chökyi Nyima), Padma Publishing, 2006.

In essence, the temporary combination of body and mind is impermanent; therefore, do not cling to this illusory body as the self. In this world, many things that people cling to are, in fact, not worth holding onto. Take, for example, the “I” to which everyone is tightly attached. If we investigate the “I” with the Middle Way reasoning or through the guru’s pith instruction, we will realize that the conjunction of the five aggregates is also governed by the principle of impermanence, so we need not cling to it.

There is a story called “The Traveler and the Ghosts”¹⁶⁰ in the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*:

A man had been given a mission, whereby he was compelled to travel a great distance. He spent the night alone in a vacant dwelling. In the middle of the night, a ghost carried in a man’s corpse and laid it down in front of him. Then another ghost, who had chased along behind angrily castigated the first ghost, yelling, “This corpse is mine! Why did you carry it in here?”

The first ghost said, “It belongs to me! I carried it in here myself!”

The second ghost retorted, “The fact of the matter is, I am the one who carried this corpse in here!” Then each of the ghosts grabbed one hand of the corpse and tried to pull the body away from the other. Then the first ghost said, “There’s a man here. We can ask him to settle this.”

The ghost who had come in later then asked the traveler, “Well, who was it who carried this corpse in here?”

The traveler thought to himself, “Both of these ghosts are very strong. If I report the facts, I am bound to die. If I lie, I am also bound to die. Therefore, since I can’t avoid being killed in either case, what’s the point in lying about it?” And so, he replied, “It was the first ghost who carried in the corpse.”

The second ghost flew into a rage, grabbed one of the man’s hands, tore his limb off, and threw it down on the ground. At this, the first ghost pulled one of the arms from the corpse and attached it to the man as a replacement. They then proceeded in this fashion with both arms, both feet, the head, the two sides, and so forth until the traveler’s entire body had been switched. The two ghosts then proceeded to devour the body that they had gotten from the exchange. When they had finished, they wiped their mouths and departed.

¹⁶⁰ Arya Nagarjuna, *Marvelous Stories from the Perfection of Wisdom*, translated by Bhikshu Dharmamitra, Kalavinka Press, 2009.

At that point, the traveler thought to himself, “With my very own eyes, I saw those two ghosts entirely devour the body born of my mother! This body, which I now have here, is composed entirely of someone else’s flesh! Do I really still have a body now? Or is it the case that I have no body at all? If I hold the view that I do indeed have a body—that body is actually somebody else’s entirely. If I hold that I don’t have one—still, there is a body here right now!” He continued to ponder like this until his mind became so confused and distressed that he became like a man gone mad.

The next morning, he went down the road. When he reached the neighboring country, he saw a Buddha stupa and a group of monks. He could not talk about anything else. He could only keep asking whether his body was existent or nonexistent. The bhikkhus asked him, “Just who are you, anyway?”

The traveler replied, “Well, as for me, I don’t know myself whether I’m a person or a non-person.” He then described in detail the events that had transpired.

The bhikkhus said, “This man has a natural understanding of the nonexistence of a self. He could easily gain deliverance.” And so, they offered an explanation, saying, “From its origin up until the present, your body has always naturally been devoid of a self. It is not something that just happened now. It is merely on account of an aggregation of the four great elements that one conceives of it as ‘my’ body. In this respect, your original body and this one you now have are no different.”

Thus, the bhikkhus precipitated the traveler’s deliverance to the path, whereupon he cut off all afflictions and immediately realized arhatship.

Therefore, by examining our own bodies carefully, we’ll realize they are not different from the corpses in a cemetery. However, due to our defilements since beginningless time, each of us mistakenly regards them as “I.” This ignorance leads to negative actions and causes us great suffering, which is truly not worth it. Thus, through such investigation, we should understand that the five aggregates are not the “I.”

Additionally, we should meditate on impermanence in whatever we are doing during our daily lives, whether walking, sitting, resting, or lying down. So how exactly should we practice impermanence in our everyday lives? Here are a few examples:

- 1) Walking

All roads and paths are impermanent, so every action and movement you make should align with the Dharma. As you walk, reflect on the impermanence of the road. From a coarse perspective, the road will eventually be destroyed, perhaps in a disaster; from a more subtle perspective, it is constantly changing in every moment. Similarly, your body is also impermanent, and you may not have the chance to walk the same road again in the future. Therefore, ensure that you act in accordance with the Dharma, and always guide yourself with mindfulness and vigilance.

As it says in the *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*:

If you walk merely gazing at a yoke's-length ahead of you, your mind will remain undisturbed.

Worldly people often feel a sense of impermanence only when they lose a loved one, lamenting that they can no longer see that cherished person. Practitioners should regard any departure as a farewell forever, even if both parties are in good health, thinking, “We may never see each other again in this life, so let’s meet in the Blissful Land!”

Contemplating impermanence at all times is crucial. While worldly people may view this mindset as inauspicious, it is, in fact, essential. It is important for us practitioners to cultivate a deep understanding of impermanence among ourselves as a subtle dependent origination.

2) Places

Wherever you are, all places are impermanent, so contemplate them as pure Buddha-fields. Therefore, no place is worth clinging to. Ultimately, the Saha world, where Buddha Shakyamuni appeared and instructed us living beings, is a pure realm, as Brahma Sikhin told Sariputra in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. We should regard all places as pure Buddha-fields, rather than as messy, filthy, or inferior locations.

Many people who lack good practice may perceive this world as a garbage dump and view other beings as demons and ghosts. Such perceptions can greatly harm their practice.

3) Food and drink

Food, drink, and whatever you enjoy are impermanent, so savor the nourishment of meditative concentration.

When the venerable Milarepa was practicing asceticism through fasting in a

mountain hermitage, many dakinis appeared to offer him food and clothing. They said, “Venerable one, while you are practicing, if you eat a bit of worldly food and wear an item of clothing, and also accept delicious offerings from us dakinis, this will greatly aid your meditation and other virtuous deeds. We will provide food and clothing for you.”

Milarepa replied:

All worldly provisions pale in comparison to a practitioner’s experience and realization. I partake in the ‘food’ of my meditative concentration, so it does not matter whether I have worldly food, drink, or other pleasures.

It would be ideal if we could attain such a state of realization. Even if we do not, we should still consume food free of contamination and guilt and avoid negative actions. I have emphasized that our daily meals must not involve killing. Someone might eat a frog dish in the morning, a snake dish at noon, and a chicken dish at night. Particularly those who live by the sea consume not just one or two living beings, but a significant number at every meal. Such diners are crueler than butchers and more terrible than demons. Therefore, we should strive to adopt a vegetarian diet. Additionally, we should offer to the Three Jewels at each meal or observe the precept of not eating after midday, so we can lead a pure life with a pure mind.

4) Sleep

Sleep is impermanent, so while you are asleep, purify sleep’s delusions into the state of luminosity. It is meaningless to fall asleep in greed and ignorance. Even a dream is a form of delusion. However, if you have attained the states of generation stage and completion stage, you can transform sleep’s delusions into clear light, the state of luminosity. Even if you have not reached these states, you should visualize light rays radiating from the Buddha, shining upon you and your surroundings, and then sleep in that state.

5) Wealth

Wealth, if you have it, is impermanent, so rely on the Seven Treasures of the Noble Ones, including faith, morality, learning, generosity, self-respect, respect for others, and wisdom.

Worldly people place great importance on wealth. Recently, some lay practitioners from Taiwan attended a consecration ceremony at a Tibetan monastery. A Tibetan woman I know was also present. Her entire body was adorned with gold jewelry—gold rings on all ten fingers and several gold necklaces around her neck. The Taiwanese lay practitioners considered her extravagance to be truly wasteful. To be honest, her appearance was rather unappealing and lacked elegance.

An ordinary person may view wealth as a status symbol, thinking that high-end clothing, luxury cars, and expensive houses are signs of success. In contrast, good practitioners with advanced levels of practice regard wealth as no more than dirt and do not take it seriously at all. They value only the Seven Treasures of the Noble Ones.

Of course, it can be quite challenging if a practitioner is a complete maverick and does not conform to worldly norms. Nevertheless, regardless of your situation, make sure to prioritize the Seven Treasures of the Noble Ones.

6) Loved ones

Loved ones, friends, and family are impermanent, so there's little point in spending all day with them. We should avoid crowded places and dwell in solitude to cultivate the spirit of renunciation. In doing so, you will naturally begin to cherish your time.

In fact, it is crucial to value time. If you do not take the time to practice properly, you may not have such an opportunity again. Chan Master Yiyuan of the Ming dynasty said:

To return early to the Western Land,
We must recognize that our impermanent life is measured in
breaths,
So, we must cherish this limited time;
If this life is wasted, it will be difficult for us to attain liberation.

Understanding this will inspire renunciation, as we realize that this human life is so precious that we must make the most of it. Some novice monks or nuns have begun to cultivate renunciation, but this commitment must be sustained continually. Otherwise, such renunciation may simply be an impulse that will not endure.

7) High rank and celebrity

High rank and celebrity are impermanent, so always maintain a lowly position. A true practitioner does not seek fame or status and can always remain humble.

Some people lead exhausting lives, constantly scheming for something insignificant, such as trivial status. How utterly meaningless! Of course, if this status can help them benefit others, it is fine to have it. But if it brings no benefit to others, they should emulate the Kadampa Geshe of the past, who, despite possessing immeasurable inner qualities, remained unknown to others and conducted virtuous deeds simply as ordinary individuals.

8) Speech

Speech and conversation are impermanent, so idle talk is meaningless; urge yourself to recite mantras and prayers.

The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions lists six mistakes¹⁶¹ that a practitioner should avoid, such as trying to please family and friends while neglecting the guru, engaging in idle talk instead of recitation and mantra repetition, and pursuing worldly goals rather than the authentic Dharma.

Some people these days complain they feel exhausted after reciting the Padmasambhava mantra just ten thousand times, saying, “My head is about to burst after one hour of mantra repetition!” Yet, when they engage in conversation,

¹⁶¹ “There are six mistakes that by their nature must be eliminated:

It is a great mistake to look after those close to you, who merely make you happy, and not to honor your guru, who is your source of refuge in this and future lives.

It is a great mistake to spend your time in idle chatter, talking endlessly, rather than in recitation and mantra repetition, which are sources of spiritual attainment.

It is a great mistake to amass material wealth, which is a source of suffering, rather than the seven spiritual riches—faith and the rest.

It is a mistake to strive at distracting and dissipating activities, rather than to cultivate an experience of mind itself, the ultimate way of abiding.

It is a mistake to be arrogant and self-promoting, seeking profit and acclaim, rather than to tame your belief in a self, which is the source of all your flaws.

It is a mistake to meditate in an uninformed and benighted way, following your hunches, rather than to engage in listening to and contemplating spiritual teachings in order to dispel the darkness of your ignorance.

If you eliminate these mistakes, you will come closer to the path to liberation.”

Longchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, translated by Richard Barron (Lama Chökyi Nyima), Padma Publishing, 2006.

especially about others' faults, they feel as though three or four hours pass too quickly, and they are even willing to stay up late to chat longer.

Ordinary people are indeed burdened with afflictions. When performing virtuous deeds, they feel as if they are climbing a challenging mountain. They constantly check the time, hoping it will end sooner. After thirty minutes of prostrations or an hour of mantra repetition, they feel fatigued, but when dealing with worldly trivialities, they are full of energy. It is a complete reversal of priorities. Therefore, we need perseverance and diligence while practicing the Dharma. As for unwholesome deeds, we must strive to refrain from them.

9) Virtuous thoughts

Faith and renunciation are impermanent, so strive diligently to make your commitments unshakable. At times, you may think, "I will not go home anymore! I won't live a worldly life any longer!" However, after a while, this thought may completely fade away. Therefore, to maintain your steadfast renunciation and faith, you must consistently pray to the guru and the Three Jewels and guard your mind with unwavering aspirations and determination.

10) Discursive thoughts

Thoughts and delusions are impermanent, so work on developing a virtuous and noble character.

Many people, especially certain academic scholars, tend to engage in discursive thinking. These "critical thinkers" often identify "problems," believing that this is not right and that is wrong. However, their thoughts are also impermanent.

The key is to cultivate bodhicitta, compassion, and a good nature. Otherwise, no matter how eloquent and creative you are, you may fail to bring benefit to yourself and others.

11) Meditative experiences

In the course of our practice, we sometimes have auspicious dreams at night and direct visions of light or deities during the day. However, these meditative experiences and realizations are impermanent as well, so there is no need to become overly joyful.

Typically, you may not even notice that you have strong afflictions. But once

you develop some meditative experience or attain a realization, you might start proclaiming, “I have attained realization! I have a direct vision of so-and-so!”

In truth, your direct vision is not what matters most. What truly counts is the transformation of your mind. If you consistently practice the common preliminaries, such as meditating on the rarity of human life and the impermanence of life, and eventually cultivate deep conviction, you will be much more adept at applying the higher teachings. Otherwise, your meditative experiences and realizations will be fleeting and unstable.

The Kadampa master Lha Drowai Gonpo (1186–1259) said:

If the conviction in the impermanence of life
Hasn't arisen in your mind,
Even the tantric teachings are not profound to you;
If the thought of death arises in your mind,
Even the prayer on the three refuges is very profound.

Indeed, without a solid foundation, even if you seem to have perceived the bindu (essence-drop) or received the highest tantric teachings such as *Lama Yangtik* (*The Innermost Heart Drop of Guru*), it is akin to building a beautiful house on ice—the meditative experience simply will not endure. If you have not practiced impermanence well, your state will be short-lived and can easily be undermined by delusions. Therefore, a true practitioner must establish a solid foundation, which I have emphasized repeatedly, and I hope you will always keep this in mind.

It is not that I am withholding the tantric teachings from you or unwilling to share them. In fact, from a pedagogical perspective, teaching tantras is not difficult. For example, it may take me a week or a month to explain the practical guide to *Lama Yangtik*. I should be able to teach you tantric texts; however, if you have not completed ngöndro, you cannot attain the corresponding state, and even if you do, that state will not endure.

Therefore, you must first practice ngöndro thoroughly before proceeding to the practice of higher teachings. Only in this way can you succeed in your practice. Otherwise, given the unique differences in each person's channels, energies, and essences, some of you may temporarily experience certain meditative states in the early stages of your practice, but these experiences still belong to the path stages and can easily fade away. In any case, you need not cling to them.

What you must pursue are the meditative experiences of the fruit stages. That is, you reach the point where everything dissolves in the nature of reality—the fourth vision¹⁶² of Dzogchen.

At that time, you have already transcended birth and death, fully mastering both. With the ability to freely control the process of dying, you attain the indestructible realm of deathlessness. Like an eagle soaring in the sky, there is no fear when death arrives. From then on, there is no need for further practice.

In fact, the Chan school offers similar guidance. Recently, I listened to some audio teachings from Chan Master Laiguo, who repeatedly emphasized that reciting mantras and prayers alone cannot completely uproot samsara. According to him, to go beyond life and death, one must recognize the nature of mind through meditating on “Who is reciting the name of the Buddha?”¹⁶³

What Master Laiguo said is essentially the same as what Patrul Rinpoche expressed in this text. When we reach the point where everything dissolves into the nature of reality, we recognize the nature of mind, and we will seize the citadel of immortality, just as Milarepa, Longchenpa, and other great accomplished masters did. Consequently, we will no longer fear death, and we can even enter the Buddhafield without abandoning the physical body.

Of course, ordinary people do fear death. Aryadeva states in the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*:

When there is no end at all
To this ocean of suffering,
Why are you childish people
Not afraid of drowning in it?¹⁶⁴

As Milarepa Sang:

At first, fearing death, I fled to the mountains.
Again and again, I meditated on the uncertainty of death.
Having realized the indestructible ground of deathlessness,

¹⁶² Tib. མཐོན་ཐོན་ལོ་ལོ་ལོ་, chözé lodé

¹⁶³ This refers to the Chan practice of Hua Tou, a skillful method for breaking through the constraints of mental habits into the mind of enlightenment.

¹⁶⁴ Aryadeva and Gyel-tsap, Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* with commentary, translated by Ruth Sonam with additional commentary by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

I am now free from the fear of death.

Milarepa had committed many wrongdoings, and he worried that he would die before purifying his negative karma, which would lead him to fall into a lower realm. Therefore, he went to a solitary place, followed the pith instructions received from Marpa, and repeatedly meditated on “the impermanence of life.” In the end, Milarepa attained the citadel of immortality and transcended all fear of dying.

This is also true for many Dharma practitioners. When reflecting on their past wrongdoings, they often feel anxious about what will happen after death, prompting them to enter Buddhism and practice with single-minded dedication. At a certain point, even if they have not attained the same realization as the eminent masters of the past, they at least recognize that had they not studied the Dharma, they would not have ceased their wrongdoing. Now, they refrain from committing severe wrongdoings and devote themselves to the Dharma for the rest of their lives, adopting a simple and pure lifestyle. As a result, they can face death with greater confidence and no longer fear it as they once did.

It is commendable that many lay practitioners have completely transformed their lives and lifestyles through studying the Dharma. Regardless of how worldly people perceive you, as a practitioner, you should consider making some changes. Many Dharma students at Larung Gar express that they carry heavy karmic debts that hinder their practice. However, compared to the past, even if you are not practicing well, at least you are no longer engaging in severe wrongdoings, which is worth acknowledging.

Otherwise, if you have not abandoned your previous lifestyle, you may be inching closer to the hell realm with each passing moment. Some people used to eat seafood daily; they even consumed fish alive, with their teeth stained with blood. Yet, they did not perceive their actions as terrible or cruel. Now, through learning the teachings of compassion in the Dharma, many have come to acknowledge their past wrongdoings, which is a significant step forward.

A few days ago, someone handed me a letter saying, “After studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, I feel enormous gratitude toward you.” He expressed his thanks multiple times, filling a large piece of paper. In truth, you do not need to thank me. However, you should indeed be grateful for Mahayana teachings, such as *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, because they have transformed our lives in ways that cannot be measured by wealth or status.

Through our practice of impermanence, we should strive to attain the citadel of immortality, as Milarepa did. This is also the practice that the Buddha engaged in during his causal stage.

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* States:

In the past, when the Buddha was a Brahmin, he was engaging in bodhicitta activities on a snowy mountain. At that time, neither the Buddha nor the Dharma existed. To test the Brahmin's determination, Indra transformed into a horrific rakshasa, a demonic being, and approached him, reciting a half-stanza:

Impermanent, alas, are conditioned things!
Their very nature is to arise and vanish.

Upon hearing this, the Brahmin felt that this half-stanza pointed to the right path for buddhas of the past, present, and future, so he pleaded with the rakshasa to reveal the second half. The rakshasa refused unless the Brahmin offered his blood and flesh. The Brahmin gladly agreed, and the rakshasa continued:

Having arisen, they then cease.
Their subsiding is blissful!

The Brahmin was overjoyed and wrote this stanza on rocks and trees, hoping it would be noticed by others. [This stanza encompasses the essence of all phenomena. Some Dharma practitioners often put no-talk posters on the pillars of the Dharma hall. You need not do this. If you truly wish to post something on the pillars, you may display this stanza instead.]

Then, to fulfill his promise to the rakshasa, the Brahmin climbed a tall tree and jumped off. At that moment, melodious music filled the sky, and Indra returned to his original form and caught the Brahmin. Indra then repented, prostrated before the Brahmin, praised him, and returned to the celestial realm.

This story is also recounted in *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni* and other Jataka¹⁶⁵ tales. As you can see, the principle of impermanence is the true gateway to liberation, making it essential to seek out this teaching.

Regarding the practice of impermanence, the peerless Dagpo Rinpoche said:

¹⁶⁵ Jataka (Skt. Jātaka; Tib. རྟེན་རྟེན་, kyérab, Wyl. skyes rabs) — accounts of the Buddha's former lives, comprising one of the twelve branches of the excellent teaching. (Source: Rigpawiki.org)

At first, you should be driven by a fear of birth and death, fleeing without hesitation, like a stag escaping from a trap. In the middle, you should have no regrets even if you die, like a farmer who has tirelessly cultivated his fields. In the end, you should feel relieved and at ease, like a person who has just accomplished a great task.

During the practice of impermanence, at first, we should be like a stag escaping from a hunter's trap, without looking back. When a person begins to understand impermanence, they may immediately forgo everything and insist on becoming a monk to devote themselves to the Dharma. Once they have made up their mind, nobody can dissuade them. Whatever happens—whether their mother faints or their father is furious—cannot change their resolve. This is beneficial because, without such renunciation, there is no way for them to disentangle themselves from worldly trivialities.

In the middle, we should practice diligently, like a farmer carefully tending to his fields, until we gain the confidence that we will not experience a bad rebirth after death. This way, we will have no regrets even if we die.

In the end, having completed all our practices, we feel relieved and happy. The great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche states in his *A Yogi's Song of Happiness*:

In life, I am joyful because I serve the teachings and beings.
In death, I shall be joyful too, as I shall surely go to a pure land.
So whatever karmic experiences arise, whether positive or
negative,
I have let go of mental agitation based on hopes and fears!¹⁶⁶

While in exile around the region of Gyalmo Tsawarong, Vairotsana composed *The Song of Content and Happiness*, which reflected similar themes.

Happiness is defined very differently between a worldly person and a practitioner. I read a book titled *I Am a Happy Person*, which presents many examples of worldly happiness that lack true meaning. These forms of happiness are neither the happiness derived from Dharma practice nor the great bliss beyond life and death.

The Peerless Dagpo Rinpoche Also Says:

¹⁶⁶ Translated by Adam Pearcey, 2018.

At first, you should recognize that there is no time to waste, like someone dangerously wounded by an arrow. In the middle, you should meditate on death with single-minded focus, like a mother whose only child has died. In the end, you should realize that there is nothing left to do, like a shepherd whose flocks have been driven off by his enemies.

In the course of practicing impermanence, we should initially be like someone dangerously wounded by an arrow, setting aside all other matters, no matter how important they may seem, and focusing solely on emergency medical treatment. Similarly, when we first develop the view of impermanence, we care about nothing but practicing the Dharma, and nothing can deter us from our practice.

In the middle we should meditate on death without thinking of anything else, like a mother whose only child has died, so that all she thinks about day and night is her child and nothing else.

In the end, you attain the ultimate fruition that is beyond any fabrication and effort. At this stage, all phenomena are clearly and thoroughly understood, yet they cannot be expressed in words. You are like a shepherd whose flocks have been driven off by his enemies—dumbfounded and unsure of what to do. Of course, this state is not the sadness that a shepherd might feel after losing his flocks. Here, the focus is primarily on the indescribable nature of this state, which is unaffected by any effort.

The peerless Dagpo Rinpoche suggests that one should meditate single-mindedly on death and impermanence until one reaches that stage. Puchungwa Gyeltsen said:

If one does not meditate on death in the morning,
Then one spends the day in vain;
If one does not meditate on death in the evening,
Then one spends the night in vain.

Another great practitioner said:

If the thought of impermanence does not arise in the morning,
Then at noon, the desire for this life will surface;
If the thought of impermanence does not arise in the afternoon,

Then at night, the desire for this life will take over your mind.

During the evening assembly in temples of Chinese Buddhism, the sangha chants a verse that says:

This day is already done.
Our lives are that much shorter.
We are like fish in a shrinking pond.
What joy is there in this?

Therefore, we should always urge ourselves to meditate on death and impermanence, supported by scriptural evidence and Buddhist stories. By doing so, over time, it becomes easier for us to attain conviction about impermanence.

The Buddha said:

By meditating on impermanence persistently, one makes offerings to all the buddhas;
By meditating on impermanence persistently, one receives comfort from the buddhas;
By meditating on impermanence persistently, one receives prophecies from the buddhas;
By meditating on impermanence persistently, one receives blessings from the buddhas.
Among all footprints, the elephant's is the greatest.
Among all practices in the Buddha's teachings, meditation on impermanence is unparalleled.

It also says in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*:

Just as among the footprints of all living beings,
There is nothing that surpasses the footprint of an elephant,
So too is the concept of impermanence paramount among all concepts.¹⁶⁷

Why are the elephant's footprints the best of all? Some masters explain that

¹⁶⁷ Blum, Mark L., trans. The Nirvana Sutra (Mahāparinirvāṇa-Sūtra), Vol. 1. BDK English Tripiṭaka Series. Moraga, CA: BDK America, 2015.

the elephant's footprint is round and majestic, while other animals have incomplete footprints. Other masters suggest that the elephant can avoid dangerous trails and only walk safe paths, so if we follow the elephant's footprints, we can steer clear of dangers and arrive safe and sound. Similarly, of all the meditations, the practice of impermanence is the most supreme.

Some people have too many discursive thoughts; they think about this and that, here and there. Their minds can hardly remain calm and focused, which truly distresses them. In fact, if you enjoy thinking, you'd better contemplate impermanence: "The mountains are impermanent, the rivers are impermanent, I am impermanent, and you are impermanent... In the end, I will die, and so will you." There is no instruction more supreme than this one.

The great Pure Land Master Yinguang had a statue of Buddha Amitabha on his shrine table, and on the wall behind the statue was a piece of paper with a large Chinese character for "death." When we reflect on our mortality, what else is worth clinging to, and what can we bring with us at the moment of death? Thus, many eminent masters place great importance on the practice of impermanence, which is why their practice has been so effective and powerful.

As stated in the *Vinaya*:

To contemplate the impermanence of all compounded phenomena for even a single moment is greater than giving food and offerings to a hundred of my disciples who are perfect vessels, such as the bhikkhus Sariputra and Maudgalyayana.

Of all the disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana were like precious vases, possessing pure precepts, excellent practice, unobstructed clairvoyance, and profound wisdom. The merit accumulated from making offerings to one hundred such great disciples is surely immense. Giving food and offerings to one hundred ordinary bhikkhus alone already accumulates significant merit, not to mention making offerings to a great bhikkhu like Sariputra. However, the merit is even greater if you contemplate impermanence, even for just an instant.

It is quite easy to reflect on impermanence briefly. I encourage you to practice this often, as it is not only foundational but also accumulates great merit. Even if you have many discursive thoughts, it should not be difficult to think about impermanence for just a moment. You may simply consider, "Everything is impermanent; there is no one in this world who will not die. I do not know when I will die."

You can contemplate this through analysis or meditate on it according to pith instructions. As long as you persist in practicing impermanence every day, you will perfect your practice.

In the past, many eminent masters would perform a session of meditation on impermanence before proceeding to the main practice, just as we practice guru yoga before the main practice of each session. In fact, these pith instructions are very profound, so ensure you pay sufficient attention to them.

I am very happy this year due to the positive changes among some Han Chinese Dharma students. In the past, they were not even aware of the most basic principles of Buddhism and had no understanding of which teachings were advanced and which were foundational. Now, many of them may have benefited from the teachings given this time.

Of course, all I can do is provide you with teachings and instructions. Whether you practice or not is entirely up to you. I cannot grab each of you and force you to engage in the practice.

The Buddha also says:

I have shown you the methods
That lead to liberation.
But You Should Know
That liberation depends upon yourself.

Those wise individuals understand that this teaching is precious and hard to attain. Doctrines in Buddhism differ from other worldly truths, beliefs, and knowledge in that both educated and uneducated individuals can embrace the Dharma. Take *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* for example: faithful readers with a bachelor's or doctoral degree will find the content unassailable, while illiterate listeners will also acknowledge the principle of impermanence. Therefore, I hope each of you will benefit from this study.

In particular, you must frequently meditate on impermanence.

During the Song dynasty, there was a learned man named Wu Xinsou who was a devout Buddhist. Although he held a high position in the imperial court, he was keenly aware of the principle of impermanence, so he never pursued glory or wealth.

Wu meditated on impermanence day and night. He had a coffin made for himself, and at night he would sleep in it. His servant was instructed to knock on the coffin every day at dawn and chant: “Wu Xinsou, go back now! There is no peace in the Three Worlds, so do not linger. There is the lotus womb in the Pure Land, so go back now!” Hearing this, Wu would immediately rise and begin his recitations. One day, while reciting the name of Buddha Amitabha, his family heard music from the sky. Wu told everyone, “The golden lotus dais has arrived. It’s time for me to go!” Then, he passed away peacefully.

Having a coffin at home may be considered inauspicious by worldly people, but for a practitioner, it is an extraordinary way to practice impermanence.

Once, Venerable Potowa gave a piece of Tibetan woolen fabric called a *pulu* to Geshe Ben Kungyal, saying the geshe’s provisions were too shabby and that the pulu could be used to wrap his corpse. If this were said to a worldly person, they would be furious because they prefer to hear blessing words such as, “May you live a long life,” or “May you have health and longevity.” If someone presents a worldly person with a gift and says, “This gift is for wrapping your corpse,” the person would undoubtedly kick the gift-giver out of their house.

We practitioners, however, should follow the Kadampa’s pith instruction to practice impermanence. If we can do so, then regardless of whether we can verbally express the principle of impermanence, we will not fear suffering such as birth, old age, sickness, and death, as worldly people typically do.



Lesson 39

“A lay disciple asked Geshe Potowa ... That we may truly understand impermanence.” [page 57-59]

In the course of our practice, meditating on impermanence is crucial. Without practicing impermanence, no matter how vast or profound the teachings you engage with, they may not have a meaningful impact on your journey. These insights are not mere words from a select few; they reflect the personal experiences of many eminent masters, past and present.

Thus, I emphasize the importance of engaging in the ngöndro practice. Without these preliminary practices, even if you access the guru’s highest tantric teachings, they may not resonate with your mind. It is essential to lay a solid foundation before constructing a building; our practice is no different. Without a strong foundation, even if meditative experiences or signs of realization arise in you, they are unlikely to endure.

In our brief lives, if we wish to achieve success in our practice, we must first identify the most critical point of focus. This is akin to a butcher locating an animal’s vital point during slaughter. A practitioner must rely on a qualified and experienced teacher and heed their guidance. Why is this important? Because a true teacher is deeply compassionate toward their disciples, much like a mother caring for her child. The teacher is willing to impart the most meaningful teachings for the benefit of their students, both temporarily and ultimately.

So, what constitutes the most meaningful instruction? The key point is that a practitioner should not adopt a top-down approach, starting with the highest teachings and then moving downward. Instead, they should take a bottom-up

approach, beginning with the fundamentals and progressing step by step. Establishing a solid foundation for practice is of utmost importance.

Of all the fundamentals, the practice of impermanence is particularly important. Without it, no Dharma practice can be successful. The *Keyūra Sutra* states:

A person who does not think of impermanence
Will desire the glories of the Three Worlds;
Like a falling leaf in the wind,
He wanders through samsara's realms.

If we do not practice impermanence well, we'll inevitably cling to fame and wealth in the Three Worlds. What will happen then? Just as falling leaves blown by the wind have nowhere to settle, we will drift in the currents of karma and be reborn endlessly in the six realms of samsara, experiencing all kinds of suffering.

However, many worldly people do not realize that their bodies, possessions, status, and wealth are like bubbles that lack any true meaning. They blindly pursue these things, spending time indulging in food, drink, and other pleasures, believing they are living a happy life. In reality, if they truly understood the nature of samsara and the principle of impermanence, they would certainly not waste their time. Shantideva also says:

Today, at least, I shall not die,
So rash to lull myself with words like these!
My dissolution and my hour of death
Will come to me, of this there is no doubt.¹⁶⁸

If we think, "I will not die today," we may live carelessly and choose not to dedicate ourselves to practice; this is unreasonable.

Due to my limited state of realization, I may not convey the most profound essence of the principle of impermanence. However, as long as you repeatedly read the vajra words of the past eminent masters and contemplate them thoroughly, you will undoubtedly reap the benefits in the end.

Conversely, if you have never practiced impermanence, you are merely a

¹⁶⁸ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

practitioner in name, not in essence. So, are you a genuine practitioner or a superficial one? Reflect on this carefully.

Let's continue with the root text:

A lay disciple asked Geshe Potowa: "If one wishes to focus on a single Dharma practice, which practice is the most important?"

Many people advocate for specializing in a single Dharma practice. So, what is the best practice to choose? Some may suggest reciting the name of Buddha Amitabha, while others may recommend engaging in Chan practice to recognize the nature of the mind, practicing the Great Perfection, or studying Buddhist logic, among other options. Many suggestions are available, and different practitioners may prefer different instructions and practices. But what is Geshe Potowa's answer?

The Geshe replied:

If you want to focus on a single Dharma practice, meditating on impermanence is the most important. By contemplating death and impermanence, it initially serves as the cause for entering the Dharma; in the middle, it becomes the condition for diligently practicing virtuous deeds; in the end, it helps in realizing the sameness of all phenomena.

1) By contemplating death and impermanence, it initially serves as the cause for entering the Dharma:

The reason many people hesitate to study and practice the Dharma is that they have not fully grasped the concept of impermanence. They often believe there is plenty of time to waste, resulting in a lack of urgency. However, once they truly understand the principle of impermanence, they will feel that time is limited and will immediately commit themselves to practicing the Dharma.

There is a story in *The White Lotus: The Great Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni*:

During the causal stage of Buddha Shakyamuni, he was once reborn as a Brahmin, who was later given a name that literally means "birth in a cattle pen." This Brahmin was exceptionally intelligent and capable, leading several kings to rely on him for both significant and minor matters. Eventually, he grew disenchanted with worldly life and decided to get ordained. He informed a few kings, "I am going

to take ordination and start practicing the Dharma. Do you have any plans for the future?” The kings responded, “If you can wait seven years until our sons grow up and we pass the thrones to them, then we will all follow you and get ordained too.”

The Brahmin replied, “Seven years is too long! Greed can easily arise, and indulgence can quickly intoxicate the mind, but our lifespan is uncertain. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether I will be able to get ordained seven years from now, so I must take my ordination now.”

When the Brahmin rejected their proposal, the kings attempted to negotiate, shortening the time to six years, then five years, four years... down to seven months, seven days, and so on, but the Brahmin still refused. Ultimately, all the kings decided to follow the Brahmin and get ordained that very day.

[Some people here wanted to get ordained right after arriving at Larung Gar, but I insisted they undergo a four-month probationary period. However, after today’s Dharma class, will they use impermanence as an excuse to challenge my decision? What should I say in response? I will need to think it over.]

Therefore, once you decide to engage in positive practice, it is best not to procrastinate; otherwise, obstacles may arise. Very often, some Dharma students tell me, “I will first go back to sort things out, make some money, and arrange my work. I will return in two years to get ordained.”

However, once they leave Larung Gar, their renunciation gradually fades. People around them dissuade them from studying the Dharma and pursuing ordination, and they begin to conform to these influences. Eventually, their determination regarding the Dharma diminishes. Therefore, when it comes to negative actions, we should try to postpone them as long as possible; whereas, when it comes to positive actions, we should take action as soon as possible.

2) In the middle, it becomes the condition for diligently practicing virtuous deeds:

If your meditation on impermanence and death is effective, then when you want to engage in a practice—be it compassion, bodhicitta, taking refuge, or Chan meditation—you will spring into action without delay. Some individuals have embraced the practice of impermanence well, dedicating time each year for retreat practice. Meanwhile, they consistently maintain a full schedule for their daily practice and rarely squander time.

In fact, whether a person can practice effectively depends on whether the understanding of impermanence has arisen in their mind. If it has, they will undoubtedly rise early in the morning to practice, will not fall asleep too early at night, and will practice diligently in between.

3) In the end, it helps in realizing the sameness of all phenomena:

At first, the practice of impermanence makes you take up the Dharma, and as you progress, it inspires you to practice diligently, making it easier in the end to realize the true nature of reality. Eminent masters of the past did not attain enlightenment without reason; their realization depended on specific causes and conditions, as well as diligence.

Geshe Potowa Continued:

At first, meditation on impermanence serves as the cause for severing ties to this life; in the middle, it becomes the condition for renouncing attachment to samsara; and in the end, it aids in entering the sacred path of nirvana.

1) At first, meditation on impermanence serves as the cause for severing ties to this life:

If we do not practice impermanence, we will not be able to set aside, even for just a few days, our attachment to family, friends, status, wealth, and fame. We will continue to view these aspects of life as very important.

2) In the middle, it becomes the condition for renouncing attachment to samsara:

Once we develop a deep sense of impermanence, we will no longer pursue pleasures in samsara, nor will we desire rebirth in the celestial realm. All we seek is liberation.

3) In the end, it aids in entering the sacred path of nirvana:

With the practice of impermanence, there is no barrier to entering the path of nirvana. This is because we recognize that everything is impermanent, and impermanence leads to suffering. The only way to eradicate suffering is to attain ultimate nirvana by following the path to enlightenment. Therefore, you will strive for nirvana. It is stated in the *Madhyama Agama*:

Thus, one should not cling to all things in this world; instead,
one should cultivate aversion to them and pursue renunciation
and liberation.

Because past eminent masters and some present senior practitioners have developed a conviction in impermanence, they feel that life is short. Therefore, to accumulate as much merit as possible, they rise very early each day, dedicate themselves to their practice throughout their lives, and never waste time.

Many Dharma practitioners present at this teaching are thriving in their practice, unlike those who are idle. Their diligence is attributed not only to the virtuous habits cultivated in previous lives but also particularly to their focus on impermanence in this life.

If you have practiced impermanence well, you will not squander time carelessly; you will complete your tasks as planned and avoid procrastinating on your practice. In contrast, if you have never meditated on impermanence and death, you may simply drift through life and commit many wrongdoings.

Recently, some older individuals lamented, “I started studying the Dharma too late! Now I cannot remember anything! If only I had embraced the Dharma in my youth!”

Indeed, their sentiments are understandable. We should encourage young people to study the Dharma. If they can engage with the Dharma earlier and understand the truth of samsara, they will undoubtedly practice earnestly. Then, when they grow old, they will feel assured about their liberation. Otherwise, if a person only begins to encounter the Dharma when half their life has passed, they are bound to regret the countless negative actions they have committed. As is said in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

O protectors! I, so little heeding,
Hardly guessed at horror such as this—
And all for this brief, transient existence,
I have done so many evil things.¹⁶⁹

Recently, I checked the profiles of lay Dharma students and noticed that seventy to eighty percent of them are seniors, including middle-aged and older

¹⁶⁹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2011.

individuals, with very few young adults. Young people are often preoccupied with careers, family, fame, and relationships, believing these worldly pursuits are of utmost importance. They are unaware of the true purpose of life. It is only when they study the Dharma or become ordained that they realize their past pursuits were ultimately meaningless, akin to someone awakening from a deluded dream. Therefore, it is essential to identify the right goals in life. In the process of studying the Dharma, we must effectively practice impermanence.

Geshe Potowa continued:

At first, meditation on impermanence serves as the cause for cultivating faith; in the middle, it becomes the condition for diligence in your practice; in the end, it fosters the emergence of wisdom.

1) At first, meditation on impermanence serves as the cause for cultivating faith:

Through the practice of impermanence, you realize that everything lacks true meaning, and the only support and refuge at the moment of death come from the guru and the Three Jewels, allowing you to cultivate genuine faith.

2) In the middle, it becomes the condition for diligence in your practice:
In order to obtain liberation, you diligently practice the Dharma.

3) In the end, it fosters the emergence of wisdom:

Through your diligent practice, the wisdom of no-self will arise in your mindstream, or you will come to recognize the nature of mind as described in Chan Buddhism.

Geshe Potowa also said:

At first, meditation on impermanence, until you are fully convinced, serves as the cause for seeking the Dharma; in the middle, it becomes the condition for practicing the Dharma; in the end, it helps in attaining the ultimate goal.

1) At first, meditation on impermanence, until you are fully convinced, serves as the cause for seeking the Dharma:

If you have developed conviction about impermanence, you will not cling to worldly trivialities anymore. You will forgo everything, move to a solitary place, follow a qualified teacher, and pursue the Dharma seriously.

2) In the middle, it becomes the condition for practicing the Dharma:

You will continue to practice the Dharma diligently.

3) In the end, it helps in attaining the ultimate goal:

Therefore, you will definitely attain enlightenment in the end.

Some lay practitioners only study the Dharma superficially: they register for the Dharma class and acquire the textbooks but do not truly engage in the studies. Others study diligently: at first, they have strong motivation; in the middle, they carefully follow each instruction in their practice; and at the end, although they may not have attained enlightenment, they certainly develop a deeper understanding of the Dharma. Previously, they knew little about impermanence, and now they fully grasp that everything is constantly changing and lacks inherent existence. Understanding this is a realization in itself.

Some people believe that attaining realization means one must have transcended the worldly state and entered a sublime state. However, this is unrealistic for ordinary people. In fact, as long as you have understood the principle of impermanence and the qualities of the Three Jewels, this understanding is a realization in itself, even if it is a small one.

Geshe Potowa also said:

At first, meditation on impermanence, until you are fully convinced, makes you practice with armor-like diligence; in the middle, it becomes the condition for practicing with diligence in action; in the end, it helps you practice with unwavering diligence.

1) At first, meditation on impermanence, until you are fully convinced, makes you practice with armor-like diligence:

Once you are convinced that everything is impermanent, you will don the armor of diligence and commit to practicing well from that point forward, just like a warrior who puts on metal armor before entering battle.

2) In the middle, it becomes the condition for practicing with diligence in action:

You will then apply the teachings in real life and will not merely pay lip service.

3) In the end, it helps you practice with unwavering diligence:

Such diligence will not wane, so you will not be like those who begin their practice when they feel good but abandon it when they are unhappy. You will not let your moods or busy schedules disrupt your practice.

Thus, these three types of diligence are cultivated through the practice of impermanence.

To sum up, Geshe Potowa briefly explained the importance of meditation on impermanence. When we develop a conviction about impermanence, many states of practice will arise naturally within us.

And Padampa Sangye says:

At first, to be fully convinced of impermanence serves as the cause for entering the Dharma; in the middle, it acts as a whip to spur diligence, and in the end, it leads you to the luminous Dharmakaya.

1) At first, to be fully convinced of impermanence serves as the cause for entering the Dharma:

If you are initially convinced of impermanence, you will embrace the Dharma.

Many sangha members often say, “The reason I chose to get ordained at Larung Gar was due to an experience of impermanence...” At first, someone might find it intriguing to discuss impermanence, but as they reflect on it more deeply, they come to recognize the truth that everything is indeed impermanent. This realization fosters a sense of urgency, leading them to understand that they should no longer squander their lives. To pursue the path to liberation, through various extraordinary causes and conditions, they arrived at Larung Gar and began a long-term study and practice of the Dharma. Some have remained at Larung Gar for over ten years.

Many sangha members at Larung Gar also decided to take ordination after grasping the truth of impermanence. Therefore, a deep conviction in impermanence serves as the cause for many to embrace the Dharma.

2) In the middle, it acts as a whip to spur diligence:

When a person lacks conviction about impermanence, they will spend their days idling. In contrast, when they have embraced the concept of impermanence, they will practice diligently at all times and will not relax, as if someone is urging them to move forward.

3) In the end, it leads you to the luminous Dharmakaya:

Once upon a time, there was a king whose favorite concubine could only live for seven days. The king had no choice but to bring her to a female arhat. The arhat had the concubine ordained and instructed her to meditate on impermanence. Seven days later, the concubine died and was reborn in the celestial realm as a result of the blessings from her practice of impermanence. Later, as a celestial being, she approached Buddha Shakyamuni for teachings and eventually attained the fruition of stream entry—the first stage of awakening to Arhathood.

Thus, as long as you listen to and reflect on the teaching of impermanence, you can uproot the causes of samsara and attain true liberation.

Unless you feel this unaltered conviction in the principle of impermanence, any teachings you believe you have received and practiced will only make you increasingly impervious to the Dharma.

What does “unaltered conviction” mean?

When a teacher explains the principle of impermanence, you find it to be undeniably true. After class, when you observe the external environment and sentient beings, you recognize their impermanence. This understanding of impermanence emerges from the deliberate effort of contemplation and meditation.

“Unaltered conviction” is a further step up. At all times, you naturally perceive that everything—status, wealth, and others’ opinions of you—is impermanent and lacks inherent meaning, allowing you to refrain from clinging to anything in this illusory world. Dzogchen adepts abide in a state where their awareness is free from any fixed reference point, awe-struck, unimpeded, vivid, and dreamlike. This is similar to how you feel when unaltered conviction in the principle of impermanence arises within you. Some individuals become deeply attached to worldly pursuits. When they cannot attain their longed-for status or relationships, they experience so much pain that they would rather die. Why does this happen? It is because they have never meditated on impermanence. Here is a pertinent story:

Once, there was a king who shared a deep romantic bond with his consort. Over the years, the couple remained in love and could not bear to part from each other. One day, the king whimsically decided to test how much his consort loved him. He instructed a servant to tell her that he had been eaten by a tiger while he hid in the imperial garden to observe her reaction. Upon hearing the news, the consort was so devastated that she fell to the ground and died.

The king was filled with remorse. He carried his consort's corpse to a cemetery and stayed by her side all day long, wailing while affectionately calling her name.

Eventually, the corpse decayed and became a skeleton, which then weathered away, yet the king never left. Thus, he spent twelve years (some say eight) in the cemetery.

Later, a master sought to guide and liberate him, so he brought a crock to the cemetery. As the master approached the king, he intentionally let the crock fall to the ground, shattering it into pieces. The master pretended to be heartbroken, crying loudly while calling out the name he had given to the crock.

Seeing this, the king could no longer bear it. He paused, missing his consort and calling her name, and said to the master, "How foolish you are! Is it worth feeling so sad over a broken crock? Will it never break? Can't you just find another crock to replace it?"

The master replied, "You are more foolish than I! My crock was broken, but at least I still have its pieces. You cannot even find a single particle of your consort now, yet you remain here in great pain!"

The king was like one awakened from a dream. He immediately realized that everything is impermanent and developed faith in the master, asking him to take him as a disciple. Later, under the master's guidance, the king fully recognized the nature of the mind and became a great Mahasiddha.

Therefore, when you see someone who has gone through a divorce or breakup, you should also take a crock and smash it in front of them, pretending to cry out loud. This is a pith instruction. Perhaps it will work! (*The audience laughs.*)

However, some individuals have specific dispositions. Even if we explain the principle of impermanence well to such a person, they will still feel pain. In this case, we cannot be of much help.

Nevertheless, reflecting on impermanence is a profoundly impactful practice.

Without this foundational practice, your other practices may only skim the surface and may not be effective. Only when you have developed a conviction about impermanence will it be easy for you to engage in any Dharma practice.

Padma Sangye also said:

I never see a single Tibetan practitioner reflecting on death; nor have I found anyone who has remained in this world forever! Monastics accumulate wealth—are they planning to offer it to the Lord of Death? They hoard rare and precious treasures—do they secretly hope to bribe the minions of Yama? Ha-ha! Observing these Tibetan practitioners makes me laugh!

Padma Sangye spoke critically of Tibetans. According to historical accounts, the Tibetan population was about ten million at that time, and among that many people, Padma Sangye claimed there was not a single Tibetan who practiced impermanence well. However, later, when he met Jetsun Milarepa, he remarked, “You are the only one who has attained the state beyond pursuit, effort, and activities among all the Tibetan practitioners.” This suggests that Padma Sangye may not have met Milarepa when he made his comments about Tibetan practitioners.

Padma Sangye traveled to Tibet five times. At that time, Buddhism was relatively prosperous, and many Kadampa and Nyingma practitioners were retreating in hermitages. In my view, Tibetans of that era were much better than today’s counterparts. Padma Sangye may have been addressing most practitioners, chastising them for not practicing impermanence well and for rarely meditating on death.

Padma Sangye held a low opinion of Tibetans, and I sometimes have similar thoughts about Han Chinese practitioners. For example, some practitioners who specialize in reciting the name of Buddha Amitabha seem obsessed with fame and superficial goals, rarely considering the attainment of liberation from samsara. Essentially, they may regard the Land of Great Bliss merely as a heaven, pursuing nothing but a comfortable worldly life. Some practitioners who focus on meditation do not aspire to attain enlightenment for the sake of liberating all sentient beings; instead, they meditate simply because it relaxes them and dispels their discursive thoughts. Both monastics and lay practitioners today sometimes behave in ways that are not in accordance with the Dharma. I often have this impression but am reluctant to point fingers at any individual.

Padma Sangye also said:

The most learned are often filled with arrogance,
 The best meditators hoard wealth,
 The solitary hermits remain distracted,
 The renunciates of home and country feel no shame.
 Those individuals are merely practitioners in appearance!
 They take pleasure in creating negative karma.
 They can witness others dying but fail to recognize their own
 impending demise.
 All these faults stem solely from a lack of contemplation on
 impermanence.

Some practitioners are very learned, but they are also very proud. Some regard themselves as good renunciates, great Mahasiddhas, or high lamas, yet they accumulate wealth more zealously than ordinary people. Some enter solitary retreats but become preoccupied with trivialities, such as gathering people for insignificant activities or listening to worldly radio broadcasts every day. Some renunciates have left their hometowns, and since no one knows them anymore, they act recklessly without a sense of shame.

These individuals are immune to the Dharma, making them merely practitioners in name. They are drawn to wrongdoing. Although they often witness others dying, they have never considered that they too may die soon. All these mistakes stem from their lack of understanding of impermanence.

Therefore, whether one is a monastic or a lay practitioner, if one has not practiced impermanence well, one cannot become a true practitioner. However, if one has practiced impermanence effectively, one can succeed in all aspects of Dharma practice.

Particularly, great compassion also arises through contemplating impermanence. If you understand what is said in the *Introduction to the Middle Way*, that sentient beings are like the moon's reflection in moving water,¹⁷⁰ and they

¹⁷⁰ "Beings are like the moon in rippling water,
 Fitful, fleeting, empty in their nature.
 Bodhisattvas see them thus and yearn to set them free.
 Their wisdom is beneath compassion's power."

Chandrakirti, *Introduction to the Middle Way*, with commentary by Jamgon Mipham, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2012, verse 4.

are constantly changing without being apart from the nature of suffering, great compassion will arise naturally.

Aryadeva Also Said:

The impermanent is definitely harmed.

What is harmed is not pleasurable.

Therefore, all that is impermanent

Is said to be suffering.¹⁷¹

Anything that is impermanent carries the nature of suffering, albeit with fleeting moments of happiness. Someone may have a good job and a loving family, feeling like the happiest person in the world. However, suffering is always intertwined with happiness; today's laughter may turn into tomorrow's sorrow. So, what is the point of clinging to these impermanent things? They hold no true significance.

Even if you are not a Buddhist, contemplating impermanence can help you discover a meaningful purpose in life. Sogyal Rinpoche shared a story in his *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*:

I remember a middle-aged American woman who came to see Dudjom Rinpoche in New York in 1976. She had no particular interest in Buddhism, but had heard there was a great master in town. She was extremely sick, and in her desperation she was willing to try anything, even to see a Tibetan master! At that time I was his translator.

She came into the room and sat in front of Dudjom Rinpoche. She was so moved by her own condition and his presence that she broke down into tears. She blurted out, "My doctor has given me only a few months to live. Can you help me? I'm dying."

To her surprise, in a gentle yet compassionate way, Dudjom Rinpoche began to chuckle. Then he said quietly, "You see, we are all dying. It is only a matter of time. Some of us just die sooner than others." With these few words, he helped her to see the universality of death and that her impending death was not unique. This eased her anxiety. Then he talked about dying, and the acceptance of death. And

¹⁷¹ Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, with commentary by Gyel-tsap, translated by Ruth Sonam with additional commentary by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

he spoke about the hope there is in death. At the end he gave her a healing practice, which she followed enthusiastically.

Not only did she come to accept death; but by following the practice with complete dedication, she was healed. I have heard of many other cases of people who were diagnosed as terminally ill and given only a few months to live. When they went into solitude, followed a spiritual practice, and truly faced themselves and the fact of death, they were healed. What is this telling us? That when we accept death, transform our attitude toward life, and discover the fundamental connection between life and death, a dramatic possibility for healing can occur.¹⁷²

Meditation on impermanence is the prerequisite for opening the door to all spiritual practice. This practice is essential for both worldly individuals and spiritual practitioners. Of course, such practice must not remain superficial; one must apply the relevant teachings in real practice.

A lay practitioner once asked Geshe Potowa for guidance on how to dispel adverse circumstances, Geshe Potowa responded with the following words:

You should frequently contemplate the certainty of death and impermanence. If a firm conviction that death is inevitable arises in your mind, then neither purifying wrongdoings nor practicing virtuous deeds will be difficult.

After that, if you continuously cultivate and generate genuine compassion in your mindstream, benefiting sentient beings will also not be difficult. Then, meditate for a long time on emptiness, the nature of all phenomena. Once you fully understand emptiness, dispelling delusion will no longer pose a challenge.

Geshe Potowa's words are very important. Please memorize them! In the past, when I taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, I would ask Dharma students to memorize this instruction, as well as the one below from Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu.

What Geshe Potowa meant is that our practice should follow three sequential steps:

First, meditate on death and impermanence repeatedly until you develop a sincere conviction about the principle of impermanence. Once you do, it will no

¹⁷² Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, edited by Patrick Gaffney and Andrew Harvey, HarperOne, page 30.

longer be difficult to put aside wrongdoings and engage in virtuous actions. Why do many people struggle to meditate for just one hundred days or to recite one million repetitions of a mantra, or find it even harder to complete ngöndro? It is because they have not practiced impermanence effectively. If they had, they would find no difficulty in undertaking positive practices and abandoning negative ones.

Second, based on the practice of impermanence, if you frequently visualize and contemplate how all beings are trapped in samsara, authentic compassion will arise within you, making it easier to act for the benefit of others.

Some teachers are so profoundly compassionate that nothing can deter them from acting for the benefit of beings, not even poor health or a bad mood. Driven by compassion, they dedicate their lives to Dharma activities that benefit all beings. Like a mother who fully devotes herself to her children, the teacher tirelessly works for the benefit of others. In contrast, those who lack compassion will begin to negotiate when asked to help, saying, “Oh! How much will you pay me? I won’t do it if I’m underpaid.”

Third, based on the practice of compassion, if you consistently meditate on the nature of reality, realizing that everything is empty and devoid of self, you will find it easy to dispel your delusions and grasping and attain the supreme state of primordial purity as described in the tantras.

Therefore, the instruction that Geshe Potowa gave us was to meditate on impermanence, compassion, and emptiness consecutively. Make sure to follow this sequential order. Otherwise, if you first receive empowerment and practice emptiness, then move to meditation on compassion, and finally to impermanence, you will completely disrupt the order. Therefore, please pay attention to this: You must begin with the practice of impermanence.

Once we have such conviction about impermanence, we will inevitably let go of all attachment to the worldly affairs of this life, just as a person suffering from nausea has no desire for greasy food.

Thus, we can entirely relinquish attachments to wealth, fame, and other worldly desires in this life. Patrul Rinpoche’s root lama, Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu, often said:

No matter how noble, powerful, wealthy, or beautiful someone may be, I do not feel envy. Instead, I focus on the life stories of great masters and accomplished individuals from the past. This is

due to a subtle realization of impermanence that has arisen in my mindstream. Aside from the teaching on impermanence, I have no other instruction more profound to share with you.

These instructions from the eminent masters are particularly valuable, so be sure to memorize them and strive to evaluate yourself accordingly. For example, consider: “Am I the type of person who feels envious when I see others with beautiful houses, luxury cars, or promotions? Do I have a strong desire to attain these things myself?” If you have cultivated certain beliefs about impermanence, you will undoubtedly become indifferent to fame and wealth and will hardly cling to anything.

How can you tell if you have conviction in impermanence?

You should be like Geshe Kharak Gomchung, who went to meditate in the mountain solitudes of Jomo Kharak in the province of Tsang. Geshe noticed a thorn bush at the entrance of his cave that frequently snagged on his clothes.

At first, he considered cutting it down, but then he reconsidered, “Alas, I may die in this cave—I do not even know if I will ever have the chance to leave again. It is better to prioritize my Dharma practice.”

Later, when he stepped out of the cave, he reflected again: “I do not know if I will ever return to this cave.”

Thus, he never removed the thorn bush.

He practiced in the cave for many years until he became an accomplished master. When he left, the bush remained uncut.

On the surface, this is quite an ordinary story, but it conveys a very profound pith instruction. Some Dharma practitioners are not like Geshe Kharak Gomchung. They reside in a solitary valley yet insist on building a magnificent house. I saw a few such houses today.

Here is another practitioner who has excelled in the practice of impermanence:

Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa would always spend the time of the constellation *Ṛṣi*, in autumn, at a particular hot spring. The sides of the pool had no steps, making it very difficult for him to enter the water. His disciples offered to carve some steps, but he replied: “Who knows if I will even have the chance to bathe here next year? What’s the point of all this trouble?” He frequently spoke of impermanence like that.

Many practitioners constantly procrastinate regarding their practice, yet spring into action immediately for worldly trivialities. Eminent masters of the past did precisely the opposite: under all circumstances, they prioritized their practice and set aside everything else. Otherwise, as the proverb says:

Tomorrow comes, and again comes tomorrow,
 Tomorrows are like rivers that endlessly flow.
 If all my tasks are put off until tomorrow,
 My time wasted to no purpose will brew woe.

If we continue to postpone our practice—the recitation we should complete today is deferred until tomorrow, but tomorrow is fully scheduled, so we must delay it further to the day after tomorrow—if we persist in this manner, we will ultimately fail to succeed in any practice.

Therefore, we must cherish the present moment, as the renowned Chinese poet Tao Yuanming said:

The splendid year never comes again,
 And the morning of a day will not return.
 Work hard whenever you can,
 Because time waits for no man.

We should make every effort to align our minds with the principle of impermanence before and during meditation. Many people ask me, “How many days should I meditate on impermanence?” The answer is clearly stated in the text: Until you have developed sincere conviction about impermanence, you must continue practicing it for as long as necessary, whether that be one hundred days, two hundred days, three years, or five years. Ultimately, you will come to fully understand that everything lacks substantial meaning, and that practicing Dharma is the only truly meaningful pursuit!

We should meditate on impermanence with the three supreme methods. Begin by generating bodhicitta, and as the main practice, make every effort to train our minds until the unaltered view of impermanence really permeates our every thought. Finally, conclude our practice with dedication and aspiration. It is essential to follow in the footsteps of noble predecessors, and with utmost effort and diligence, continue our practice. Here is the summary verse:

Although impermanence surrounds me, I still cling to permanence.

Although I have reached old age, I still think of myself as young.

Bless me and all misguided beings like me,

That the realization of impermanence may arise in our minds.

Patrul Rinpoche said with humility: Impermanence unfolds right before me—all things, including my own body and lifespan, are profound teachers illustrating impermanence—yet I still believe everything will endure. I am already an old man, yet I continue to act as if I am young. I pray to the buddhas and bodhisattvas to bless me and misguided beings like myself so that we may truly develop conviction in impermanence.

Once that conviction arises within you, any Dharma practice will become effortless. At that point, you will not require the guru's close supervision or the oversight of a monastery to monitor you constantly. You will engage in practice proactively.

Even if the guru forbids you from practicing, you will implore his permission, saying, "I must practice right now; otherwise, it will be too late! Life is too short, and impermanence can arrive at any moment, so will you allow me to practice for one hour a day?" Therefore, a genuine practitioner places great importance on the practice of impermanence.

Homage to the great Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche:

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

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

Jigme Phuntsok, at your feet I pray!

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

Homage to the omniscient Longchenpa:

*At the neck of the treasury Gangri Thökar,¹⁷³
Is the blissful grove of perfect virtues.
Omniscient Longchen Rabjam,
The secret yogin with the essence of the twofold goal,
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!*

May the supreme blessings of the guru's body, speech, and mind completely permeate the minds of all our disciples, so that we can carry forward the vast Dharma activities of spreading the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings.

May each and every being generate the conviction in impermanence!

May each and every being generate the conviction in impermanence!

May each and every being generate the conviction in impermanence!

[This concludes *The Impermanence of Life*]

¹⁷³ Gangri Thökar, literally "The White Skull Snow Mountain", is a famous peak in Central Tibet, approximately 25 km S-SW of Lhasa. It was here, in the hermitage of Orgyen Dzong, that Longchenpa taught and composed many of his most important writings.

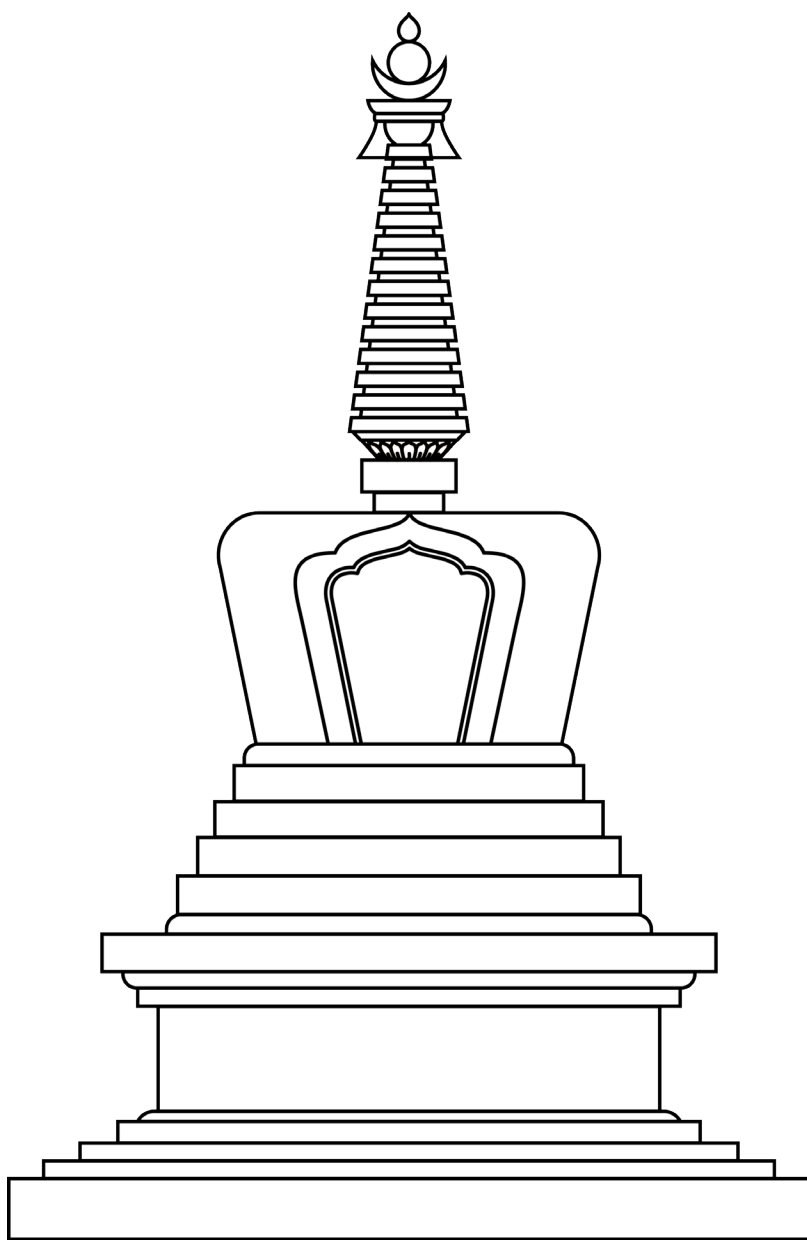


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KHENPO SODARGYE was born in 1962 into a nomadic family in a small valley of the Tibetan region of Kham. He was ordained in 1985 and went on to become a lineage holder of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition, as well as a preeminent practitioner 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.

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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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