

Advice from Our Spiritual Friend

Venerable Geshe Tsulga

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Please generate the proper motivation by thinking, “I must achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. For that reason, I am going to listen to this teaching.”

As Lama Tsong Khapa said, “This perfect human rebirth is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel, has been found just this once, is easily lost and will be extremely difficult to find again.” Therefore, thinking like this, we should abandon all meaningless actions just as we discard the husks of rice, and try and to take the essence of this life both day and night.

The perfect human rebirth

This human life we presently have is not an ordinary human rebirth; it is what’s called a precious, or perfect, human rebirth—one adorned with eighteen particular qualities: the eight freedoms and the ten endowments. It is very difficult to achieve this kind of rebirth because these eighteen qualities are very hard to find. They are hard to find because we have to create the cause for each one individually, and these causes are very difficult to create. Therefore, it is very difficult to achieve the result, the perfect human rebirth.

The perfect human rebirth with its eighteen qualities that we have found just this once is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel. The [mythical] wish-fulfilling jewel is very special because it has the power to grant whatever worldly things we wish for—food, clothing and so forth. Whatever worldly thing we wish for, the wish-fulfilling jewel can bring. However, our perfect human rebirth is even more valuable than the amazing wish-fulfilling jewel. By relying on a wish-fulfilling jewel, we cannot achieve good future rebirths, liberation or enlightenment, but by relying on this perfect human rebirth, by studying and practicing the teachings taught in the profound texts by the great masters, we can achieve the excellent results of better future rebirths, liberation and enlightenment. Therefore, this perfect human rebirth is more valuable than a wish-fulfilling jewel.

Also, this perfect human rebirth is extremely rare; we haven’t had this kind of rebirth very often in the past, and it will be extremely difficult to find again in the future.

We might think that even though this perfect human rebirth is difficult to achieve and we have achieved it now, it’s all right because it might last thousands or millions of years, but it’s not like this. It does not last long; it perishes very quickly. It passes like lightning in the sky. Lightning appears and disappears very quickly; it doesn’t remain long at all. Our perfect human rebirth is just like this. It is very unreliable: today we are human; tomorrow, a corpse. Thus, we have to think about death and impermanence and about practicing Dharma, or virtue, so that we will not fall into the lower realms when we die.

Our having been born human is a result of the virtue that we practiced in previous lives. Because of our previous lives’ practice of Dharma, this time we have received a perfect human rebirth.

Therefore, we have to make sure that we use this perfect human rebirth to bring even more of them in the future, so that we can continue practicing Dharma in the lives to come. If we don't, and instead spend this life creating negative karma, we will definitely be born in the three lower realms, from where it is very difficult to escape. Lower realm lives are millions of years long, and once we have been born there, all we will do is create more and more negative karma and be reborn from one lower realm into another. It is *extremely* difficult to escape from the three lower realms.

Therefore, since we have received a perfect human rebirth, found the Mahayana teachings and met spiritual teachers who can explain them to us, at a time like this, when all these favorable conditions for Dharma practice have come together, it is crucial that we listen to the advice of our gurus and put it into practice every day of our lives.

In order to make whatever practice we do truly Dharma, it has to be grounded in proper refuge in the Triple Gem—Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. On top of that, in order to make the Dharma we practice the cause of enlightenment, it has to be done with bodhicitta. These two—refuge and bodhicitta—are very important.

It is also very important to meditate on renunciation and compassion. Renunciation is based on wanting ourselves to be free from suffering; compassion is based on wanting others to be free from the suffering. These two attitudes are very important as well.

Escaping from suffering

Because of our beginningless ignorance and self-cherishing, we are used to thinking that we're not suffering. From morning to night, we have the idea that we're not suffering, but this is because we fail to analyze whether we're suffering or not. If we check properly, we'll find that we're constantly experiencing many kinds of suffering.

One reason that we think we're not suffering is because we don't know what it is. Therefore, the first thing we have to discover is what suffering actually is. Once we have done so, we will find it easier to have renunciation of our own suffering and compassion for the suffering of others. Of course, we do understand suffering in its gross form, like when someone is lying in the road with a broken leg; we can feel compassion for someone like that. But we don't understand the more subtle forms of suffering and therefore cannot feel compassion for those experiencing them.

So what, in short, is suffering? It is any undesirable thing - great or small - that comes into our life or happens to us. Anything undesirable that we have to experience is suffering. And similarly, when anything undesirable happens to others, they experience suffering.

There are many things we don't desire - getting sick, getting old, dying and so forth. We have no desire to die, but we die anyway—that's suffering. We have no desire to get sick, but we get sick anyway—that's suffering, too. There are also the suffering of separation from loved ones, the suffering of meeting those we don't like; there are many different kinds of suffering.

The more we think about suffering, the stronger will be our wish to be free from it. That's why we have to meditate on suffering—in order to generate the strong wish to free ourselves from it. Once we have generated this wish, we will begin to seek out the methods of freeing ourselves from it.

What is suffering? How does it arise? Is there any way that it can be ended? These are the kinds of question practitioners ask themselves and investigate when meditating upon suffering.

However, what is the root of suffering? Where does suffering really come from? Suffering is rooted in ignorance, or the three poisonous delusions—attachment, anger and ignorance. The main sufferings that we sentient beings experience - the suffering of cyclic existence and especially the suffering of the three lower realms - are caused by the delusions, and these various sufferings have their own individual causes. The suffering of the lower realms comes mainly from the ten non-virtuous actions, and the suffering of cyclic existence from the three poisonous delusions.

Then, if we study and check further, we will find that there is a way to eliminate these causes of suffering. The Buddha explained that the main practice for purifying the causes of the suffering of the lower realms -the ten non-virtuous actions—is that of the four opponent powers conjoined with the seven-limb offering. Most of you have been receiving teachings for a long time, so you already know what the four opponent powers, the seven-limb practice and so forth are. But simply knowing what these are is not enough. You have to put what you know, what you have studied, into practice. Having met many teachers and received lots of teachings means nothing if you don't put the instructions that you have heard into practice. There's no use in simply being able to reel off large numbers of teachers and teachings you have encountered.

The Buddha also taught how to eliminate the causes of the suffering of cyclic existence - the three poisonous delusions - by practicing the three higher trainings in morality, concentration and wisdom. Of these three, the one that actually destroys the three poisonous delusions is wisdom, and of the many kinds of wisdom, the ones we mean here are the wisdom realizing selflessness and the wisdom realizing emptiness.

However, whether we are trying to free ourselves from merely the suffering of the three lower realms or that of cyclic existence in its entirety, we have to practice morality. It is on the basis of the higher training in morality that we engage in the other two higher trainings in concentration and wisdom. Training in morality underlies all other forms of practice - it is like the foundation upon which we build a house.

Therefore, even if we have received and understood many teachings from many lamas, if we don't put them into practice and just say, "I am too busy now; I'll practice tomorrow," all we are doing is depriving ourselves of the opportunity to benefit from the teachings we have heard. In order to counteract the lazy, procrastinating thought of "I'll practice later," we have to think about death and impermanence—how death is certain, how the time of death is uncertain, and how nothing other than Dharma can help us at the time of death. If we think about these points, we will not be able to kick back and relax; we will automatically practice Dharma.

What to study

In order to practice Dharma, we have to understand *how* to practice, and in order to know how to practice, we have to study. Moreover, when we study- whether it is a text that we ourselves are reading or one taught by a lama- we have to make sure that it is an authentic text written by a properly experienced lama. Furthermore, we have to ensure that the origin of that text can be traced all the way back to the Buddha, just as a river can be traced all the way back to its pure source in the snow mountains.

Some Dharma books have been written by practitioners who have thought, “I think it’s like this; I think it’s like that,” and cannot be traced all the way back to the Buddha. You cannot rely upon or trust those kinds of book. However, of texts that *are* totally authentic, trustworthy and reliable and can be traced all the way back to the Buddha, there are none better than Shantideva’s *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*. This text has been studied and practiced by all the great masters, and wherever the Mahayana teachings have flourished, there are none who do not praise it.

As proof that this text can be traced all the way back to the Buddha, in the second part of the first verse, Shantideva says, “Here I shall explain how to engage in the vows of the Buddha’s sons, the meaning of which I have condensed in accordance with the scriptures.” The last five words show that this text has been written according to the teachings of the Buddha.

Over the past few weeks, I have taught the first two chapters of the *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*. The first chapter explains the benefits of bodhicitta and the second tells us how to create the merit we need to generate bodhicitta and the practices we can do to remove obstacles to this. So, this is the chapter on the confession of negativity.

The third chapter, “Full Acceptance of the Awakening Mind,” is about rejoicing, but since I’m leaving for India tomorrow, there’s no point in starting now, because we won’t be able to finish it before I go. It will be better to start from the beginning of the third chapter when I return.

However, as I said earlier, if you don’t practice what I teach, then no matter how much I explain, it will not be of much use, and your coming here to listen will be about as beneficial as going to a movie. On the other hand, even if I explain very little, if you put what I teach into practice, your coming here will have been highly meaningful, very worthwhile.

Why do we come to the Center?

The main reason for your coming here to listen to teachings and practice Dharma is to be free from suffering. You’re don’t come here to get rich; you can see that no matter how many times you’ve been here, it hasn’t made you rich. You’re not here to get famous, either; it’s actually extremely difficult to become famous. No, your main goal for coming here is to find freedom from suffering. Therefore, you should make sure that you get what you came for, and do whatever practices it takes for you to accomplish your aim.

If someone asks you, “Why do you come to the Center?” your answer will be, “To practice Dharma and listen to teachings.” Then the next question will be, “Why do you practice Dharma and listen to teachings Dharma?” and you will reply, “Because I want to be free from suffering.”

Thus, the reason you listen to teachings is to free yourself from suffering. That is why you come to the Center. Now, this text that we have been studying, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, explains exactly how you can free yourself from suffering. Therefore, if you put the teachings it contains into practice, you will fulfill your purpose in coming to the Center.

Although it is important to receive teachings from a lama, you should not be content with just listening. You should also make an effort to read books and analyze, or contemplate on, the meaning of what you have read. Then, you should put the teachings you have studied into practice by meditating on them. Go into your practice room, close the door and give your practice your full attention. If you are doing prostrations, do prostrations; if you are making offerings, make offerings; if you are practicing purification, practice purification.

Offering

I would like to re-emphasize something that I have told you before and you already know, which is that the offerings we arrange on the altar- the flowers, water and so forth- are not the actual offering; they are simply the offering substances. They are not the offering itself. The actual offering comes when you arrange the offering substances on the altar, make prostrations and then sit on your cushion, recite the offering verses and think according to the meaning of the verse. That is when the *real* practice of offering begins.

Offering, or *puja*, in Sanskrit, means “to please,”- to please the object of offering, whoever it is: guru, deity, Buddha and so forth. If your offering pleases the object to whom it is made, then *that* is the actual offering. If you offer papaya to your guru and it pleases him, then *that* is offering. The papaya itself is just the offering substance. When you offer the substance to your lama and it pleases him, when he is made happy by that, then that is the offering. When you do the practice of offering by reciting the verses found in the *Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga*, the *King of Prayers* and so forth, offer flowers, music and the rest, and then imagine that your offering pleases the object of offering—your guru, the deity or whoever else it may be—*that* becomes the actual offering.

If you are practicing the *Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga*, then after making the offering and imagining that your guru accepts it with delight, which is the actual offering, go ahead and confess all your negativities by saying “I have all these negativities to confess” and reciting the confession verse, which goes:

Non-virtue committed with body, speech and mind,
Which I have heaped up since beginningless time,
Especially that which has contradicted three vows,
Each I confess from my heart with strong regret.

While reciting this verse, imagine all your negativities being purified as I have explained.

When practicing purification, you can use any of the various antidotes- for example, prostrating to the Thirty-five Buddhas while reciting their names; reciting the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra; or reciting the *Heart Sutra* while contemplating the meaning of emptiness explained in it- as the opponent power of remedy.

If you are meditating on the seven limbs, the main practices are prostration, offering, confession and rejoicing, and it is important that you do these four very carefully. If you practice exactly as your lama has taught, you will free yourself from suffering. If you do not, you will not free yourself from suffering.

Thus, when he said, “I have shown you the path to liberation; whether or not you achieve it depends on you,” the Buddha placed the responsibility for our own welfare squarely upon our own shoulders. Thus, liberation depends on our practicing what we have been taught. If we practice what our guru has advised, we will free ourselves from suffering; if we don’t, we will not. The Buddha pointed right at us and said, “It all depends on you.”

In short, then, we should devote our perfect human rebirth to developing renunciation, compassion, loving-kindness, bodhicitta and wisdom, and abandon all thoughts of wanting better and more. Be content with less and eliminate desire.

The kindness of the Center

One last thing is that my being able to teach Buddhadharma and your being able to come and receive it is all due to the kindness of the Center. But do not think that this Center, which provides the facilities for listening to, studying and practicing Dharma, is temporary; something that is here when you want it and the rest of the time can just be rolled up and put away like a thangka. This Center is going to be here for a long time to come, to serve not only the present generation but many future generations as well.

In order for this to happen and for the Center to improve, to be of more help to others, to bring more benefit to others, it needs support, financial and otherwise; many different kinds of support. Therefore, I request all of you to think of the different ways in which you can sustain the Center. I have been here for almost ten years, and during this time there have been many directors and many translators, and as a result of all this change, from the beginning of this year we have found ourselves in our own house, our own solid center. Please do what you can to help Kurukulla Center develop.

Venerable Geshe Tsulga gave this teaching at Kurukulla Center on Sunday, October 26, 10:00 a.m., the day before he departed for India for two months. Translated by Thubten Damchoe. Edited by Nicholas Ribush.