FIVE-FOLD MAHAMUDRA

PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE

DEWACHEN
WORLD PEACE SANCTUARY

Introduction

Following the request of Drupön Lama Dorje, this material has been compiled with the purpose of deepening the understanding of the fundamental teachings of the four preliminaries.

Lama Dorje shares the following words on the importance of the preliminaries:

"The preliminaries are very important for us. Many people feel that the preliminaries are inferior or super basic practices, but in reality, the preliminaries are the most important thing.

They're like building the foundation of our house. If we want a house with ten floors—or even more—what do those floors depend on? If we really want a house with several floors, then we need to have the foundation. If the foundation isn't solid, we won't be able to build our house—not even one or two floors. That's why the preliminaries are so important, especially the four thoughts; those are super important for building our Dharma path. It's crucial that we practice them.

If our foundation is strong, then how many floors can you build? Spiritually, how many floors can you construct? Building becomes so much easier because our foundation is already super firm. That's the importance of the four thoughts.

And we're not just practicing Dharma for this life, to have better conditions or to improve saṃsāra. No, we want to become better people internally, and also awaken our potential, freeing ourselves from the suffering of saṃsāra. It's not about brushing saṃsāra aside by covering up the suffering—if we do that, it wouldn't be taking up the Buddha's Dharma.

The Buddha's Dharma is super profound; it's focused on awakening our potential for buddhahood. This is very important because the seed of that potential is already within us, but if we don't practice, we won't awaken it. That's why the preliminaries are super important.

First, we need to remember the preciousness of life, then the law of impermanence, the law of cause and effect, and the defects of saṃsāra—the four foundations. These four are super important. My recommendation is this: reflect on them at every moment. This will establish our practice.

Nowadays, lots of people focus on practices like Dzogchen, Mahāmudrā, tummo—super advanced practices—but they don't know the foundations. So when they face external conditions, their practice can collapse because their foundations aren't well established. That's why all the masters crossed the path starting with the preliminaries.

My advice is that you read this information we're offering you, reflect on it, and practice it—all from your own wisdom.

This is very important."

The existence of this material is the result of the interdependence of multiple causes and conditions. It has been made possible through the collective effort of the Medellín Saṅgha, with the support of Héctor Mauricio Arroyave García, Camilo Arroyave García, Sebastian Franco and Mauricio Quintero, as well as Travis Hamel Olsen and the Dewachen Saṅgha, who have contributed in various aspects of its creation, review, and distribution. Their generosity and dedication reflect the spirit of the Dharma in action, allowing these teachings to be available for the benefit of all.

The texts selected for this compilation have been carefully chosen to provide a clear and accessible guide for study and contemplation.

Turning Confusion into Clarity, by Mingyur Rinpoche, and *Transformation of Suffering*, by Khenchen Könchok Gyaltsen Rinpoche, have been included for their ability to present the Dharma in a clear manner, adapted to the needs of modern practitioners.

The Ornament of Precious Liberation, by Gampopa Sönam Rinchen, and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, by Dza Patrul Rinpoche, present the essential points of practice in a structured and detailed way, making them pillars of the Kagyü and Nyingma traditions.

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1 Turning Confusion into Clarity

By Mingyur Rinpoche

We now begin a more detailed discussion of the four thoughts that turn the mind. These contemplations, which make up the first part of the preliminaries, and which are called the "common" or "outer" preliminaries, start with contemplating our precious human existence.

What makes our birth so precious is our potential for awakening. We are born buddhas, and all dharma practices help us recognize and nurture this truth. Because we do not actually believe in our own capacity for awakening, these teachings work to reverse the tendency to see ourselves as insufficient.

One day when my father was addressing the nuns in his small room at Nagi Gompa, he said, "Every one of you has buddha nature." He was teaching from a raised box, which also served as his bed; this is standard for Tibetans who spend most of their days meditating and teaching. I was about eight and had joined the nuns, who sat on rugs or cushions on the floor. No matter what words he used, my father was always talking about the nature of mind and about how to connect with our own buddha nature, which he also called pure awareness.

I had heard my father say many times that we were all inherently buddha, that everyone was born with buddha nature, and that human birth provided the best opportunity to recognize this. I listened attentively enough, but I always assumed that I was too weak and anxious for this good news to include me. At that time I suffered from extreme shyness and panic attacks. Fierce weather such as snowstorms, thunder, or lightning could cause so much panic that my throat felt like it was closing, my skin would become sweaty, and waves of nausea would make me dizzy. Given these

experiences, I could not imagine that I had the same qualities as all the buddhas.

That morning, however, my father really emphasized that there were no exceptions. "Whether you believe this or not," he said, "there isn't the slightest difference between your true nature and the true nature of all the buddhas." For the first time, I told myself, "This must include me." Just the idea that I was essentially the same as all the buddhas gave me some confidence, and I thought that in the future I might be less weak and fearful.

Around this time my father introduced me to the teachings on precious human existence by asking, "How would it feel to be a dog? Or a cow? Would you have the freedom and time to meditate?" He asked me to consider the different circumstances that must come together for one to connect to dharma. "Each of us has everything that we need to become a buddha," my father would tell me, meaning to recognize the buddha that we already are. "We can see, we can hear, we can taste and touch, we have the capacity for boundless kindness, and we have the fortunate circumstances to be born in a place and time where dharma exists. Everything is here, so we start by recognizing and appreciating all these wonderful circumstances that are part of our life already."

Since I was born into a loving family of dedicated dharma practitioners, this lesson should have been easy. Yet every time I sat down with the intention of appreciating my basic goodness, all I could think about were my panic attacks, my wild mind, and my physical frailty. Feeling like a failure, I asked my father to explain what I was doing wrong.

"It's a good sign to find your negative qualities first," he told me. "Often they are embedded so deeply—like a splinter that disappears under the

skin—that we do not even see them. To separate ourselves from negative qualities, we need to see them first."

To explain how this works, my father used the image of dried cow dung. In India and Nepal, cow dung is commonly used for fuel. Moist dung is made into flat patties and placed onto the walls of mud huts to dry. "If you put cow dung on a mud wall, when it dries it becomes part of the wall," my father explained. "Then when you try to wash away the pieces that stick, what happens? At first the wall appears dirtier than before and smells worse. But if you keep adding water, the dung will eventually separate from the wall, and the wall will become clean.

"When we first start to examine our mind, we might only see things that we do not like about ourselves, and it may feel like our negative qualities are actually increasing. This is quite natural. Eventually we see these negativities as just one small part of who we are. Underneath lies our buddha nature, our pure awareness, and nothing can wash that away, ever. However hidden our buddha nature might be, it's always with us."

Generally we identify so thoroughly with our emotional patterns and habitual thoughts that we come to think of them as "me." Our potential constricts around a limited definition of ourselves. We confine ourselves to fixed thoughts of "This is who I am." We aren't satisfied with our life, yet we suppress our capacity for change. To move beyond these self-imposed limits, we need to let go of our habitual ways of taking our human qualities and circumstances for granted.

Slowly I learned to trust that there was more to me than a bundle of things that I did not like. I began to think that perhaps enlightenment really was possible, even for me. Recognizing this potential—and gaining confidence in our ability to take advantage of it—is the core of the first thought that turns the mind toward liberation.

1.1 The Eight Freedoms and Ten Endowments

The teachings on precious human existence divide into eighteen distinct contemplations: the eight freedoms and the ten endowments—also called the ten riches. Each contemplation offers a distinct approach to shaking us out of our self-imposed habits,,and each provides a fresh examination of qualities that already exist within us.

1.1.1 The Eight Freedoms

The eight freedoms refer to restrictive circumstances that we might have been born into—but thankfully we were born free from these restrictions, free from circumstances and conditions that place dharma wisdom beyond our reach.

The first four contemplations extol the benefits of being born human by considering the eternal suffering of beings in other realms. We might imagine ourselves as a cow, and then realize our good fortune to be born free from those mental and physical circumstances that restrict a cow's life. We might imagine a cow standing in its own excrement, puzzled— or perhaps terrified—by the smells and sounds of a slaughterhouse. These are severe, almost insurmountable, conditions for connecting to buddhahood. We use imagination and meditation to know the qualities of a cow's life in order to experience a heartfelt appreciation for the extraordinary advantages provided by our own human birth.

In working with the eight freedoms, we compare the advantages of being born in the human realm to the disadvantages of being born in the four non-human realms: the hell, hungry ghost, animal, and god realms. Then we imagine four circumstances within the human realm that restrict the potential for awakening, and appreciate that we were born free of these

restrictions: we were not born in a land of religious intolerance; or in a land dominated by ignorant views; or in a land where a buddha did not appear. And we were born free from mental or physical disabilities that might severely restrict our capacity for awakening.

But in order to continue with the eight freedoms, first we need to clarify this concept of realms.

1.1.2 The Six Realms of Samsaric Existence

In Tibetan Buddhism, we map out six realms to investigate the main mental afflictions that bind us to saṃsāra. The six realms of samsaric existence are divided into the three lower and three higher realms. The three lower realms are the hell, hungry ghost, and animal realms. The three higher are the human, demigod, and god realms.

The first three—the hell, hungry ghost, and animal realms—correspond to anger, greed, and ignorance; the order suggests the levels of physical or emotional distress experienced in each. For example, the animal realm embodies the mental state of ignorance. Animals have wonderful qualities, but lack the capacity to reflect on their situation and to find a way out of hope and fear, or find release from living as prey or predator. Although animals have buddha nature just as we do, their circumstances inhibit their ability to recognize it.

Of course we humans have ignorance, too. It's the main obstacle to recognizing our inherent buddha qualities. But unlike animals, we are not defined by delusion and ignorance. For example, parents allow children to eat foods with high sugar contents, even as diabetes reaches epidemic proportions. As humans, we are endowed with the intelligence to make better choices. Even though the habits of desire might keep us eating too much sugar, our capacity to overcome destructive pat terns exists

nonetheless. Another example concerns the environment: in many areas of the world bathing and drinking water is poisoned by chemical and even human waste. There is nothing intelligent about this, yet recognizing positive alternatives exists within our power.

We are not inherently bound to our unhealthy habits with regard to body and mind. We have the potential to wake up to the pure awareness that ignorance obscures. The afflictive states that characterize the realms are called kleshas, or defilements, because they defile our capacity to recognize our original wisdom.

1.1.2.1 The Lower Realms

Most often teachings on the six realms start with the lowest and work up. But of all the nonhuman realms, the animal one is the easiest for us to relate to. Let's start by taking a moment to remember an experience of getting caught in the basic impulses of our animal nature. Are there any recent instances when you craved a particular food, or experienced a primal desire for sex, or felt the fight-or-flight response to a stressful situation? Can you connect with the force of this longing? Animals live their entire lives driven by instinct and self-preservation. Many humans live in a similar state, inhibiting their capacity to know their true selves. The main point of exploring the nonhuman realms is to rejoice that we are not imprisoned by our afflictions, and to make sure that we don't misuse our opportunity for awakening.

The hungry ghost realm is inhabited by emaciated beings with bloated bellies and long skinny necks that can only swallow one drop of water at a time. These creatures, also called pretas, are condemned to be tortured by insatiable hunger and thirst.

What are we really talking about here? Greed. As a state of mind, greed cannot be satisfied, leaving us always grasping and desperate. Human beings know this realm intimately. With the global financial crisis of 2008, we witnessed the effects of minds so driven by greed and so restricted by selfishness that they became incapable of imagining the suffering that would surely result from their actions. When people are preoccupied with how much money they can amass each day by any means possible, including illegal and unethical actions, they are too consumed by the force of their insatiable need to benefit from dharma.

Hungry ghosts remain in this realm forever; some humans spend much of their time in this state. However, no human is destined to remain there. The point is to understand how these mental states create obstacles to liberation—but also to understand that human beings are not imprisoned by them. We move in and out of different afflictive states of samsaric existence, but being born human gives us the key to free ourselves from our self-constructed prisons and to liberate ourselves from saṃsāra altogether.

In the Tibetan map of the mind, hell describes the "lowest" realm, meaning it is the afflictive state with the most intense suffering. Hell beings are tortured by anger and aggression. Consider the term blind rage. Think of the last time you experienced an anger so hot that you became blind to any idea of what caused that feeling or what sane action might alleviate it. To have your mind totally gripped by anger causes a state of blindness to anger's destructive effect on others and on yourself, and to any exits from this affliction.

In addition to the affliction of aggression, hell beings are tortured by their environment, which ranges from extreme heat to unimaginable cold. These conditions make hell beings trapped in their immediate misery. Imagine a moment of excruciating physical pain such as that caused by a

pinched nerve, an infected tooth, or a muscle spasm; or imagine being the victim of torture. Now imagine enduring that agony from your first breath until your last. In these circumstances, the aspiration to recognize your buddha nature cannot come forth.

Please understand that "hell," as well as every other realm, is not a location but a confused projection of the mind. External forces do not account for these mental states. The location of hell does not just confuse Westerners. Tibetans may also mistake these realms for external locations. That's why Saljay Rinpoche used to tell me, "Everything is a manifestation of mind. There's no hell 'out there.'"

Since these realms describe human afflictions, it might be helpful to think about how the mind manifests various realms, rather than thinking that we were born into them. If we mistakenly think we were born into them, then we might consider this a destiny with no exit. But it doesn't work that way. Freedom means not being dominated by anger, greed, ignorance, and other destructive emotions. Humans consumed by hatred live in a realm that we call "hell" because there is no escape, and therefore no access to dharma, no possibility for awakening. Extreme states of mental affliction do not allow us to step back and watch what is happening. When we become identified with our negativity, we fall into the river and get swept away by the current.

These contemplations help develop the confidence that we can learn to step away from compulsion and are no longer tyrannized by the kleshas. We can make choices. Then we can access our original wisdom and nurture awareness. Therefore the suffering that most arouses our compassion is the absence of any opportunity for these beings to recognize their own enlightened qualities.

1.1.2.2 The Upper Realms

The human, the demigod, and god realms comprise the three higher realms of saṃsāra. In the human realm, the main causes of suffering are craving, desire, and attachment. Attachment does not just refer to external phenomena such as houses, food, money, and partners. Our attachment becomes most intense around ideas that we hold about ourselves. We become attached to our ego, to our false sense of a contrived, fabricated persona that we cherish and protect. We put ourselves first and try to satisfy the demands made by our ideas of who we are and what we need.

The good news about the human realm is that it provides just enough suffering to cross over from saṃsāra to nirvāṇa. Not too much and not too little. Suffering so thoroughly oppresses beings in the lower realms that the possibility of liberation cannot arise. Our suffering does not overwhelm our longing for freedom, and our fleeting moments of happiness confirm that suffering is not fixed; suffering too is impermanent and changeable. Suffering and happiness together create the perfect conditions for awakening. Isn't this wonderful?

The realms inhabited by demigods and gods display the afflictions of jealousy and pride. (The demigod and god realms are often presented as two separate realms, but for the preliminaries we classify them as one realm.) The seductions of luxury and leisure overwhelm the aspiration to wake up. Think of all the time, money, and energy some people spend on pleasure and on fulfilling sense desires—the finest food, the perfect couch, the best car, the ultimate hot tub, the ideal island vacation. They wrap their lives in material objects, creating a facade of false security and satisfaction, and all the while they are setting themselves up to be devastated by life's inevitable fluctuations, and they remain unprepared for changing financial or social status, losing loved ones, growing old, failing health, and dying.

Meditators who indulge in this realm may spend more time arranging the beautiful images on their shrines than working with their minds. Or the seduction of comfort may be so strong that they practice while lying down on the couch. You know what the problem with this is? It's harder to practice this way. The mind that indulges its taste for luxury and sense pleasures distances itself from the practice of awareness. Sitting up and putting some backbone into your efforts actually helps the mind to let go of its habitual traps, whether they are sensory indulgences, blind anger, or greed.

God-realm beings tend to use meditation as another way to pursue bliss, or to purposely create delightful experiences like flying to an island resort. Meditation becomes another way of seeking pleasure, rather than a method for clearly seeing the nature of mind and for experiencing things just as they are. Eventually such misguided strategies for happiness return these beings to the lower states of suffering.

My father always emphasized that the human realm offered the best opportunity for awakening. But when I was a child, the god realms still seemed so enticing: luxurious palaces filled with delicious food, fantastic parties, great music. Then my father would explain that the complete satisfaction of the sense desires creates a degree of drunkenness that makes god-realm beings a little stupid. A drowsy kind of complacency guarantees a very long existence here. My father would say, "God-realm beings live without wisdom." And just from his tone, I understood that living without wisdom was the saddest state of all.

1.1.3 Practicing with the Eight Freedoms

Because buddha nature is inherent to every being, no absolute obstacles to liberation exist. But not all beings have the opportunity to awaken in their

present circumstances. Many beings contend with mental, physical, and emotional states that place powerful barricades on the dharma path. Every being encounters difficulties and obstacles. But having been born human means that we have the capacity not to be defined or defeated by them.

When we practice with the eight freedoms, we exchange ourselves with the beings in each of the states that restrict the capacity for liberation. We imagine that we exist as a hell being, a hungry ghost, an animal, or an inhabitant of the god realm. We embody the being; we don't merely observe it from the outside as if watching television.

You don't have to practice the eight freedoms in order. If exchanging yourself with beings in the hell or hungry ghost realms is too depressing or sad, then skip ahead to the animal or god realms, and return to the more difficult ones later. I suggest starting with the easiest, which is probably the animal realm. Pick an animal that you know, like a cow or a dog.

1.2 Guided Cow Meditation

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Rest in open awareness for a minute or two.
- Bring to mind the image of the cow.
- Rest there. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the image of the cow.
- Now become the cow. You have four legs and a long tail. Imagine making the sound a cow makes ("Moooooooo") and imagine that you're munching on grass.
- Now use four aspects to contemplate this cow's life:

Body: What is the body of this cow like? Imagine how it feels to actually be this cow. Inhabit this cow. Be specific.

Life Span: Consider the short life span of cows. Appreciate the length of your life and the opportunities that it provides for waking up!

Circumstance: Where does this cow spend its days and nights? Where does it eat? In a dirty barn or in the hot sun, perhaps covered with dung and flies?

Suffering: How does the cow live and what is it used for? Is it raised for its milk or for its flesh? Maybe it has a ring through its nostrils, or maybe it gets whipped, or maybe it works in hot fields. Maybe it's raised in a factory lot so overcrowded that it cannot move, or maybe it's pumped full of chemicals to make it grow fast and fat for the market. Feel this in your own body as much as possible, using the sensations to support meditative awareness.

- Next, recognize how limited your life would be if you were a cow. You wouldn't have any ability to choose your own path in life, much less uproot the causes of suffering.
- Now, contemplate and appreciate your good fortune to have been born a human, with a reality far different from a cow's. You can move back and forth between being the cow, and appreciation of your good fortune in being human.
- If you get distracted or tired, rest for some moments in open awareness before returning to the cow meditation.
- Try this for five or ten minutes.
- Conclude with resting in open awareness.

1.2.1 Normal and Meditative Awareness

Resting your mind on a cow is different than daydreaming about cows. This is awareness meditation. Usually when we think of something, we do not start with the intention to do so. Thoughts follow one another so quickly that we don't even know what's happening. Moreover, we become identified with our thoughts. We get so absorbed by what we think and feel that we believe that's who we are. Here the intention to cultivate awareness allows us to know that we are thinking while we are thinking. Since we purposely imagine the cow, we cultivate recognizing mental activity in the moment and not losing ourselves in thoughts. With awareness, we know that we are meditating.

Try to get in touch with the difference between normal and meditative awareness. The transformative ingredient is the recognition of awareness as we think about this cow, the fact that we know we are thinking even as we are thinking. We begin by setting the intention to recognize awareness.

When we do analytical meditation like this, it's very helpful to alternate periods of contemplation with periods of resting meditation. When we imagine being a cow, after a while our mind might become bored and restless, and we might think, "Enough of this cow!" If this happens, let go and rest. Drop the visualization, but stay with the awareness. Rest and release a deep exhale: Aaahhh. That's how we rest, how we practice open awareness. No more cow.

Let's say that we are meditating and we become so absorbed in thoughts that we lose track of what's happening. At that moment, we shake ourselves awake. We come back. In that very moment, we experience awareness. This is non-distraction, non-meditation, a sense of not being lost. First we acknowledge, "Oh I am lost." Then we think, "Now I have to meditate." But that comes afterward. In between there's a gap, a moment of

undistracted awareness. We know where we are and what we are doing, but we are not trying to control the mind or do anything special. We are completely at ease with whatever is happening around us. This is resting with non-meditation.

We might want to drop the meditation when we get sick of it or when it becomes stale, but we also might want to drop it when we experience an actual shift in feeling. In this case, for example, it's easy enough to intellectually appreciate the advantages that humans have over cows, but when this shifts from theoretical knowledge to an experiential feeling, then let go of the meditation and just rest in that feeling. Aaahhh. We rest in effortless non-meditation, not worrying about what is happening or not happening, yet not lost either.

If the mind becomes restless again and discursive chatter begins to take over, then return to the cow meditation. This takes a little discipline and effort. If you stray off course and return to the cow meditation twenty times in one minute, no problem. Training the mind not to wander takes practice.

When you emerge from cow meditation, appreciate the differences between the cow's life and your own. Think about those differences. End the session by sitting quietly, just staying with awareness. The entire exercise might take five to ten minutes.

1.2.2 The Four Restrictive Conditions of the Human Realm

After contemplating the four nonhuman realms—the hell, hungry ghost, animal, and god realms—the first thought continues with four human circumstances that restrict the capacity for awakening.

First, we appreciate that we were not born in a "borderland," a term that derives from the time when certain areas that bordered Buddhist countries

were not Buddhist or were hostile to dharma. Today we might consider countries or societies that criticize or condemn religions not their own, or which try to suppress religious institutions that do not support the political regime. Or consider conflicts between Christians in Ireland, or between Buddhists and Tamils in Sri Lanka, or sectarian aggression between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims—and appreciate the freedom that you have to follow a religious path of your choice.

Second, we appreciate that our aspirations have not been restricted by being born in an area dominated by "wrong views." This refers to situations where the prevailing beliefs make it difficult—if not impossible—to benefit from dharma. Mistaken beliefs might include believing that harming others brings virtue, or accepting that profit justifies slavery or slaughter, or denying truths that lie beyond our personal comprehension, such as the inseparability of form and emptiness.

Third, we imagine a realm where a buddha has not even appeared. Those times in human history devoid of a fully awakened teacher are called the dark ages. If we had been born at such times, we would not even hear about dharma, much less have supportive circumstances to realize its value. But this is not the case, so we rejoice in our good fortune!

The fourth and last of the restrictive states refers to being born free of incapacitating physical or mental dysfunctions. Disabilities do not necessarily make dharma practice impossible, but they may make it more difficult. If we are free of these problems, then we should rejoice in the benefits of a sound body and mind rather than taking them for granted. This contemplation provides an occasion to acknowledge the inherent gifts of our human existence and to consider their role in our efforts to wake up—that we can hear the dharma, read the texts, travel to take teachings, or go on pilgrimage to sacred sites.

1.2.3 Daily Practice

Try to imagine each of the eight freedoms as part of a daily practice, just as you did with the cow. At first it may take up to ten minutes for each exercise, but with familiarity, a minute or two for each realm should suffice.

As you move through each situation, inhabit the suffering experienced by different beings. It's quite natural for feelings of compassion to spontaneously emerge, and these exercises might bring tears. You don't have to push compassionate feelings away, but keep the emphasis on staying aware, on knowing what is happening while it is happening.

We exchange ourselves with other beings in order to recognize that we have what it takes to bring an end to suffering. That's our main purpose. In addition, this contemplation offers an important side benefit. The two biggest obstacles to meditation are dullness and agitation, which can be offset by working with living beings. When we try to tame the mind, the mind often responds by becoming either uncommonly dull or fuzzy, or agitated and speedy. With dullness, the mind closes down before we can work with it, and we lose track of our intentions.

This leads to drowsiness and often to falling asleep. With agitation, the mind buzzes around like a drunken bee and cannot settle. Often, trying to bring the awareness to the breath, or to an object such as a flame or a flower, simply doesn't compel the mind enough to offset dullness and agitation. Meditation exercises on living beings, however, particularly when they involve suffering or impermanence, help steady the mind and keep it actively engaged, making the mind less subject to dullness and agitation. Of course, our mind will still wander. That's a very natural function of the mind. Just keep coming back to awareness.

1.2.4 Building a Solid Foundation

Before moving on to the ten endowments, I want to bring your attention to how the practice of precious human existence builds a solid foundation for the entire preliminaries' path.

To begin with, contemplation itself engages us with the recognition of awareness. When we exchange ourselves with beings in other realms, we begin to discover that loving-kindness and compassion are with us all the time. We just need to know how to nurture those inherent qualities. Allowing daydreams and fantasies to rule our life can put us so out of touch with reality that we quickly believe our made-up versions. Generally our thoughts exert tremendous power over us. With these contemplations, we learn to harness the power of imagination in order to dismantle those emotional patterns that keep us spinning in saṃsāra.

We are all pretty attached to our identities, and we can become completely stuck inside the various boxes that we create for our own cherished labels: "I am a man, I am a Tibetan, I am a Buddhist," and so forth. Hundreds of labels like these forge rigid identities. But once we imagine ourselves to be an animal, our solid sense of self may loosen. Our box now includes being a cow. How remarkable!

Once we begin to loosen our imprisoning ideas about who we are, we can experiment with new forms, shapes, and identities. If we continue on our dharma path, this newfound flexibility allows us to see more of the awareness, wisdom, and compassion that manifest all the time, in others and ourselves. And if we can become a cow, perhaps we can become a buddha.

The way we use imagination starts simply, but gradually the practices become more complex. We begin by imagining an animal outside ourselves, then we become the animal. Later on, we imagine a buddha outside ourselves, but by the end of the preliminaries we become a buddha. We start

modestly, but once we begin to expand the definitions of who we are and who we can become, anything is possible. Eventually all our rigid notions fall away, and we realize that we don't become buddhas: we already are buddhas.

When we bring imagination into the spiritual journey, it becomes a way to let go of our small-box definitions and magnify the scope of possibilities. Instead of trying to control the mind and force it to stop doing what it does naturally, we use its creative energy. We let all the words, images, and story lines that occupy us serve a constructive purpose.

What allows the mind to change and restructure its content moment after moment? What allows for so much mutability? To answer this question, you might ask yourself whether there is an essential "me" or "self" that defines you. If you think there is, try to find it. Is there some basis for all the ideas that you have about yourself? Or might your sense of identity only exist as a concept? When you let go of all your ideas about the way things are, and even of your beliefs about yourself, what are you left with? What do you see in your direct, naked experience?

One time at Tergar Monastery in Bodh Gaya, India, a student pointed out that the wooden box in front of my chair could be viewed as a table, a casket, a chest, or a throne, depending on context and usage. The point is that imagination gives rise to experience, even though we generally assume that our experiences arise from objective reality independent of how we think about it. The power of imagination can be a fantastic asset on the spiritual path, but it can also be a big headache. So really, we have a choice between using it to benefit ourselves and others, or being tyrannized by it.

This practice raises many interesting questions: What makes it possible to imagine ourselves as other beings? What does our capacity to exchange ourselves with others tell us about ourselves? If the beliefs we have about the

world and ourselves are nothing more than ideas, then who and what are we? These are the very questions that hint at the absolute truth of emptiness, the ultimate reality that allows us to liberate ourselves from fixed and fabricated identities. Many opportunities to discuss this lie ahead, but for now just hold these questions in a creative and playful way.

The ten endowments, or ten riches, describe our inherent opportunities for waking up: to be born human; to be born in a central land; to be born with our senses intact; to be born free from socially fixed situations; to be born with devotion to dharma; to be born where a buddha has appeared; to be born in a world where a buddha has taught the dharma; to be born in a world with the endowment of lineage; to be born in a world with the endowment of saṅgha; to be born in a world with the kindness of teachers.

1.3 The Ten Endowments

The ten endowments, or ten riches, reverse the restrictive states and emphasize human circumstances favorable for liberation.

The first is the fact of human birth—the primary condition for awakening. Even though we may not take advantage of this ability to its fullest, it's still remarkable that we have the potential to explore our own consciousness, to learn how the mind works, to experience our internal buddha directly, and to know our true nature beyond ego, personality, and ideas about selfhood.

The next endowment refers to a "central land," meaning a place where the opportunity to encounter the dharma exists. It also refers to Bodh Gaya, the site of Buddha Śākyamuni's enlightenment located in the center of India. It may also mean the immediate physical environment of our upbringing or school, or whatever circumstances allowed us to connect with dharma. Don't interpret these endowments too literally. The

important point is to acknowledge and appreciate that we were born in a time and place where we have access to dharma.

For the third endowment, we appreciate being born with our senses intact. Fortunately in this age, books in Braille exist for the blind, and sign language exists for the deaf. Impairments that might have made practicing the dharma impossible no longer overwhelm innate potential. But some cases still arise where the senses are too deficient to practice. So we should rejoice in the fact that our eyes allow us to read words of wisdom, our ears can hear the living words of dharma, and so forth.

Next is being born "free from socially fixed situations." This refers to livelihoods that create suffering for oneself and others, and in particular to the days when caste and class determined our place in the world. In many areas of the world today, social systems are not so fixed. Yet the need for employment, the limited availability of work, and the conventional acceptance of destroying the environment for profit, or working in the war industry or meat industry, mean that cultures still sanction livelihoods that contribute to suffering. In contemplating this endowment, we acknowledge our options and appreciate that we can choose a livelihood that does not add more suffering to the world.

Fifth, we consider the good fortune to be born with devotion to dharma. If we do not feel this way, that's OK. We have the potential for devotion to dharma, the potential to have concern for sentient beings, and we recognize the possibility of awakening.

The next five endowments describe those circumstances that make our connection to dharma possible. First, the Buddha appeared in this world. Second, not only did the Buddha appear, but he also taught the dharma. If the Buddha had appeared but not taught, that would not have helped us much. This almost happened: After Buddha Śākyamuni's enlightenment in

Bodh Gaya, his initial response was, "No one will ever believe what just happened to me, what I learned, what I recognized. There is no point in trying to communicate any of this. Nobody will get it." But then—according to legend—Brahmā and Vishnu inter ceded and begged the Buddha to teach.

Third, not only did the Buddha appear and teach, but we are also blessed with the "endowment of lineage." Without lineage, his teachings might have been lost. Many religions in world history have come and gone. Dynasties and royal lineages have disappeared. Yet for two thousand six hundred years, we have had an unbroken lineage that dates back to Śākyamuni Buddha. Appreciate how remarkable this is!

Fourth, we appreciate the "endowment of saṅgha." The Buddha could have appeared and taught, yet his teachings might only exist as cultural artifacts in museums with no living, present link to their origins. The fact that the wisdom of Śākyamuni Buddha continues to be transmitted, taught, practiced, and experienced is a great blessing that should not be taken for granted!

The last endowment that creates favorable circumstances for our connection to dharma is the kindness of the teacher. We appreciate that we were born in a land with kind dharma teachers. In my own case, it is 100 percent clear to me that I could not have found relief from my fears and panic attacks on my own. It was only with the help of my teachers that I was able to watch the display of my neurotic habits without getting swept away by them. The relief that this brought was like living in a world different from the one I had previously inhabited. I could never have done that on my own. The kindness of my teachers became a deeply felt experience, not just an idea about how enlightened people were supposed to act.

1.3.1 The Rarity of Being Born Human

Now that we have cultivated an ardent thankfulness for our human existence, we must take a good look around us and accept that this condition is impermanent and rare, and may not come around again. As Shantideva said:

> So hard to find such ease and wealth
> Whereby to render meaningful this human birth!
> If I now fail to turn it to my profit,
> How could such a chance be mine again?

When my father first explained to me the rare and exceptional nature of human birth, I asked, "If humans are so rare, then why is Kathmandu so crowded that you can barely move through the streets?"

My father answered with a story about a Tibetan merchant who traveled between Tibet and India. In Tibet, he had heard teachings about the preciousness of human existence and how rare it was to be born as a human.

Some time later, the merchant returned to the teacher and asked, "Have you ever been to Kolkata?"

The teacher replied, "No."

"Ah, now I understand why you believe being born human is so rare," the merchant said. "Kolkata is so packed with people that you can hardly walk down the street. The vast, empty landscapes of Tibet, with only a village here and another far beyond the mountains, have convinced you that human birth is something exceptional. But I assure you, it is not."

The teacher then said, "Take a shovel, go into the forest, and dig up a small patch of earth—maybe just a square meter. Stay there long enough to count all the creatures that live in that tiny space."

One anthill might contain more beings than a small city. Most beings live in the ocean; an international study has identified two hundred thousand marine species, and the study is not finished. Tibetans say that if you repeatedly throw a handful of uncooked rice across the room, the chances of one grain sticking to the wall is greater than being born human.

According to Buddhist understanding, being born human results from virtuous actions in our past lives. Take a moment to think about how rare it is in today's world to work for the welfare of others, or to practice patience in the face of aggression, or to give money or food during tough economic times. When compared with all the actions motivated by self-interest and aggression, those that arise from altruism and sacrifice are few and far between. This relates to karma, which is the third thought that turns the mind toward dharma. We will discuss this in detail later. For the moment, just appreciate that you were born in this rare form and that this did not happen by chance. Appreciate that much, and don't worry about anything else.

1.3.2 Support for Our Practice

I have a friend who complained that her area of British Columbia did not support dharma studies. "It's very isolating to practice in the West," she told me. "Our families wish we were studying medicine or some reputable profession. Even if the dharma has inspired us to spend a life helping others, our commitments are not valued. It's not like Tibet, where dharma was treasured."

"Everyone practicing dharma is working through his or her own particular difficulties," I told her. "Otherwise, why practice? And everyone needs encouragement. All the bodhisattvas—those who vow to work for the liberation of all beings—and teachers faced obstacles and discouragement,

and had problems with their families. Think of Śākyamuni Buddha. Think of Naropa. Think of Milarepa. What made these teachers great was not the absence of obstacles, but that they took advantage of those very obstacles to wake up to their own buddhahood. Look at modern masters. Look at Khyentse Rinpoche."

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche [1910-1991] was one of the greatest masters of Tibetan Buddhism in the last century, a true dharma king. From the time he was a small boy, he only wished to study dharma. His parents were devout Buddhists, but his older brother had already been recognized as a tulku, and their parents refused to lose another son to the monasteries. Throughout Khyentse Rinpoche's earliest years, every great lama who met him agreed that he had special qualities, but his parents refused to allow him to ordain.

Then one summer, things changed. His father employed many laborers to help harvest the crops. In order to feed all the workers, enormous vats of soup were set into fire pits. One day when Khyentse Rinpoche was about ten years old, he was outside playing with his brother and he fell into a vat of boiling soup. His body was so badly burned that he could not move from his bed. The family gathered around every day to recite long-life prayers, but he remained close to death for many months.

One day his father said to him, "I will do anything to save your life. Is there anything that you can think of, any ceremonies or prayers, which might make you better?"

Immediately Khyentse Rinpoche told his father, "It might be very helpful if I could wear monk's robes."

Of course his father complied, and once the robes were gently laid over his burns, he recovered very quickly.

Another of the greatest Buddhist masters, Atisha [982.-1054], also had family problems. Like Śākyamuni Buddha, he was born into a royal family; his father wanted him to inherit the throne and tried to lure him away from spiritual pursuits. Naropa had a similar story. All he wanted was to follow a spiritual path, but his parents made him marry—which did not work out too well.

It is natural for us to be inspired by the highest attainments of the great masters. But identifying with their struggles and family problems can inspire us, too. Once we see that they dealt with obstacles and problems just like we do, then we can relate to their discipline, perseverance, dedication—qualities that must be cultivated in order to renounce the world of confusion.

We are not alone with our struggles. The lineage holders and the practices support us. By contemplating our precious human life, we gain confidence that we too can do this. Understanding that we have everything we need for our journey might really inspire us not to waste our inherent treasures. We have planted some very potent seeds, and a little success with our efforts will definitely change our sense of ourselves. We might be able to expand our definitions and explore a wider range of possibilities. We might surprise ourselves by asking our employers for a vacation or a raise, which we had previously thought we did not deserve. Maybe we'll accept an invitation for an activity that used to scare us, such as public speaking, airplane travel, or karaoke singing.

Most importantly, we might come to see that enlightenment isn't just a distant possibility, but our very nature. We can no more be without it than fire can be without heat. But we can only wake up when we realize that enlightenment only happens in the present moment. By contemplating

precious human birth, we recognize that we'll never have a better opportunity than the one we have right now.

2 Transformation of Suffering

By Khenchen Könchok Gyaltsen Rinpoche

This modern age is distinguished by the rapid advancement of technology. Modern science advances so quickly that it almost defies human comprehension. Everyone, regardless of their social status, struggles to keep pace with the development of a vast array of amazing new products. In fact, we are so impressed by technology that we are becoming quite dependent on it. However, it is important to recognize that computers, the Internet, instant communications, and other marvels of technology offer both advantages and disadvantages.

Because of the material progress achieved by many nations, the comfort of daily life is very much improved, with luxurious, even extravagant, living becoming commonplace in many countries. Our world is now so interconnected that no country can remain isolated from its neighbors, and many positive things can be achieved very quickly. If a problem such as famine or fighting arises in one part of the globe, the rest of the world has the ability to observe it and step in to offer necessary help and support. We are increasingly aware of the delicate interdependence of the whole planet and the need, as never before, to act with sensitive responsibility.

While our technological development offers great advances to solve a variety of environmental, social, and health problems, it has not brought the peace and security we hoped it would; mankind still faces infinite difficulties.

Some of the difficulties are a result of our involvement with technology itself, which has made life much busier than before and has brought us even more stress.

It seems we have become enslaved to it, constantly running after the latest, ever-changing technological development which we think will give us an edge or help us to get ahead. Instead of bringing comfort, enjoyment, and more free time, it often results in frustration and disappointment. We have become overly dependent on material things whenever we expect them to make us happy.

Although material development and education are necessary to combat poverty and narrow-mindedness, still, this is not the entire solution to the problem of suffering and conflict. How many have thought that if they just reached a certain income level or educational attainment they would find contentment and self-fulfillment? How many have thought that once they achieved a certain level or status, they could make a difference in the world? No matter what high achievements we gain in business or politics or through fame and awards, we continuously strive for more, never content, never seeming to find lasting satisfaction. Material or outer progress will never completely satisfy us without the presence of mental peace.

Many different religions have arisen to address the attainment of inner peace, a universal need that is present in all living beings. When faced with a crisis, it is human nature to use all of the conventional means at one's disposal in order to resolve it. But when none of these work, it is also human nature to turn to spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation to help us face our limitations. At such times, we often learn that happiness and satisfaction do not depend solely upon external conditions, but rather on the degree of love, compassion, and wisdom that we experience.

Each of the world's great religions focuses on developing these qualities, which open our hearts and show us how to live in harmony and friendship. They also understand that appealing to enlightened beings who possess extraordinary wisdom and compassion is a special technique to ease

confusion. With these basic tenets in common, religious traditions have developed in various parts of the world, each with its own unique practices, methods, and belief systems. All of them serve as methods to relieve suffering, pain, and confusion and are worthy of respect.

As in other religions, there are many branches within Buddhism, the main ones being the Southern, Far Eastern, Eastern, and Northern traditions. Even though the fundamental teachings, study, and practice are the same, they each have their own special emphasis with regard to technique and philosophy. This book is concerned with what we now call Tibetan Buddhism.

Actually, it is Indian Buddhism. Buddha himself originally taught the complete teachings, including both sūtra and tantra, more than 2,540 years ago in India. Beginning in the seventh century, these teachings were translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan by great, enlightened scholars who were able to render them completely and accurately. Because Tibet has been relatively isolated throughout the centuries, both the practice and study systems of Buddhism were kept alive in Tibet even when they were lost in India.

Buddha's teachings are entirely concerned with individual human potential integrated with the needs of society. Rather than rejecting material progress, Buddhism counsels moderation, the "middle way." But in order to achieve this harmonious balance, it is essential first to understand our own mind and then to develop it as a positive resource for ourselves and for society. How can this be done? The human mind is mysterious and, lacking color, shape, and form, it is nothing that we can see or grasp. No matter how far technology has advanced or how sophisticated a machine may be, it still cannot show the mind directly. Yet our entire subjective experience, whether happiness or suffering, depends on our state of mind.

Why then do we reflect so little on the mind, the very source of our quality of life? The reason is that the mind is so elusive. It cannot be pinned down easily, for it goes beyond just thinking processes, intellectual ability, perceptions, and personality. As used by Tibetans, "mind" also refers to our innermost essence, the buddha nature, that is hidden within each of us. Through the Tibetan Buddhist system, the entire nature of the mind can be revealed. One can gain a direct perception of the interdependent, relative quality of all phenomena and can comprehend how each sentient being is interconnected with all other beings.

Buddhism is not merely a belief system, or a set of intellectual exercises, or something that applies just to Buddhists. It is a meticulously reasoned analysis of life that places great emphasis on watching the mind, and that takes one right to the core of their being. It was by means of his own rational investigation into the nature of mind that Buddha grasped the causes and conditions of existence and, through that, developed transcendent wisdom and compassion. It was realizing the nature of mind which led him to enlightenment, and that informed everything he taught thereafter. So it is that we must use reason, first to grasp Buddha's teachings, then to follow his detailed instructions that lead to the path of enlightenment, for the nature of mind is universal and this training is applicable to everyone.

Buddha taught that no matter what religion we practice, what language we speak, or what customs we observe, we all want happiness and fear suffering. In this respect, all human beings are the same. But can we gain happiness just by wishing for it? Sometimes we human beings are more helpless than children. From sheer ignorance, we destroy our own peace and happiness as if they were our bitter enemies. We strongly desire to escape suffering, yet we unwittingly pursue it as if it were our best friend.

Buddhist logic would explain this paradox by means of karma, the law of cause and effect. Karma means that everything we do sets up an equivalent result; if we generate negative actions (even out of ignorance), we will inevitably have to face the unpleasant consequences of those actions. If we behave with virtue, we will eventually enjoy the happy results of that behavior, which no one can take away. This law of moral cause and effect is echoed in the American proverb, "What goes around comes around" and in the Christian saying, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." However we state it, this principle offers us a basis for self-reflection, insight, and taking appropriate responsibility for ourselves and our circumstances.

One might argue that karma is not a universal truth, but rather a purely subjective or cultural belief lacking any objective reality. It is true that a universal principle must be grounded in rational appraisal, not accepted in blind faith or rejected because it's unfamiliar. However, whether or not we believe that poison is harmful, it has the power to kill us; whether or not we have faith in medicine, it can heal us. In the same way, the law of karma exists independently of our faith or skepticism.

While most of us are accustomed to viewing our lives from a relatively short-term perspective, karma encourages us to consider the long-term point of view. The desire to make our happiness the main goal in our lives causes us to act out of narrow self-interest. We have the mistaken idea that living primarily for ourselves will bring us the fulfillment we seek. Yet, paradoxically, it is only through concern for others that we achieve lasting peace, not through egoistic self-grasping. To the extent that we work for others, we will come to experience happiness, harmony, and success. Conversely, selfishness will eventually yield only suffering and disappointment. After a lifetime of effort to amass happiness for ourselves,

there will not be even one single day when we could say we were totally free from every kind of suffering.

We may ask ourselves, "Is there any way to escape saṃsāra, this endless cycle of suffering?" The answer is yes. Freeing ourselves from the uncontrolled cycle of birth and death depends on the necessary causes and conditions. One of the conditions for freedom from saṃsāra is "precious human life." From the karmic standpoint, human life is so precious because it offers the potential to achieve immense benefit and to attain enlightenment.

Human life has tremendous possibilities. It provides such wonderful opportunities to learn about all of saṃsāra, not just about our own human realm, but the realms of all beings. With this knowledge comes a gentle confidence and self-esteem which is not born out of arrogance or a deluded mind, but rather out of knowing. Wisdom and compassion, expressed through the power of human intelligence, can resolve any problem regardless of the suffering involved, for we know all phenomena are impermanent. With proper instruction and methods, we can achieve enlightenment. It is just a matter of time.

This is because we are human. No matter how intelligent an animal is, if you tell it, "This is virtue and this is non-virtue" or, "This is saṃsāra, so you have to strive toward enlightenment," or, "Repeat the mantra Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ," that animal will have no idea what you mean. On the other hand, a human being has the opportunity to understand the cause of suffering, how to encounter it, how to face it, and finally how to escape it forever. This is why a human life is called precious.

Unfortunately, not all human beings have this opportunity. According to the Buddhist view, there are three basic types of human beings: first, the human being who is born wealthy, and lives and dies in secure enjoyment.

Second is the human being who is born poor and lives and dies in hardship. If neither of these has any interest in Dharma or enlightenment, they are just ordinary human beings. Though they may be intelligent and talented, as long as they lack the opportunity or interest to practice Dharma, they are not considered to have precious human life. The third type of person, however, has a sense of renunciation of saṃsāra and devotion to Dharma, and thus can achieve enlightenment. Whether rich or poor, talented or not, this type is called a precious human being.

2.1 Eight Freedoms

The opportunity to practice arises when one is born into circumstances where, first, one has the time for practice, and secondly, one is free from the eight unfavorable conditions that would prevent practice. These unfavorable conditions occur if one is born: 1) in the hell realm where beings suffer constant torment from heat and cold; 2) in the hungry ghost realm where they suffer from hunger and thirst; 3) in the animal realm, suffering from stupidity and lack of freedom; 4) in the long-life gods' realm, suffering from a false sense of security and a lack of any motivation to practice.

If one is born 5) in a barbarian land where one sacrifices animals, there is no chance to hear Dharma teachings; 6) in a eon of darkness, when no Buddha has appeared to teach; or 7) without senses or faculties of the mind, such that one cannot perceive the teachings; 8) with wrong view or deep delusion, such that one rejects teachings on karma, cause and effect, virtue and non-virtue.

Given any of these conditions, one lacks the freedom and opportunity to study and practice.

At the time of Buddha, there was a monk called Lekpe Karma who stayed with the Buddha for many years and became expert in the teachings. Lekpe Karma had a human life, but since he always persisted in wrong view, when he died he was reborn as a hungry ghost. There the chance to practice and realize the perfect Dharma was lost to him.

2.2 Ten Endowments

The opportunity to practice can arise only in the presence of the ten endowments: those within oneself and those coming from others. Outlined by Nāgārjuna, the five endowments related to oneself are as follows:

1. If one is to study and practice Dharma teachings in a complete way, one has to be born as a human being. Those born in the god realm, so full of enjoyment, don't have the "vessel" to accept the teachings. Animals, no matter how beautiful or valuable, cannot practice Dharma.

2. One must be born in a "central place." This refers primarily to Bodhgayā, India, where Buddha attained enlightenment. It can also refer to any place where Dharma is flourishing, particularly where monks and nuns are studying the complete teachings. Everyone interested in Dharma must try to make the place where they are into a central location.

3. One must have all one's faculties; otherwise, one won't get to see the precious images of meditation practices or hear Dharma teachings or express one's feelings directly. To attain enlightenment is not easy; therefore, one needs all of one's faculties intact to receive the complete teachings.

4. One must shun the five heinous crimes. If one is born into a non-virtuous life and is involved in activities that contradict and are far from Dharma, or engages in any of the five heinous crimes, then there is no way to attain Buddhahood within one lifetime, even for one who practices the Dharma.

5. One must have confidence. If one takes refuge in powerful local deities or nāgas, then one cannot be freed from saṃsāra. Without proper confidence in the Three Jewels, one has no basis for study and practice. That is why confidence in the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the saṅgha—is so vital for one's progress.

These are the five endowments related to others:

6. Buddha has appeared. If the Buddha had not come, we would not even know enough to speak his name. This is indeed a fortunate eon with a very special endowment, since, in some eons, many Buddhas appear, but in others no one even knows their names, much less the concept of enlightenment.

At the beginning of this planet, floating in the ocean were a thousand lotuses, a sign that in this eon a thousand Buddhas would appear. This eon is therefore called an eon of light—the light of the Dharma teachings. All these buddhas will attain enlightenment in Bodhgayā and turn the wheel of Dharma. After this eon ends, for 60 eons there will be no buddhas. These are known as the eons of darkness or the unfortunate eons. We are so lucky that Buddha appeared in our eon.

7. Then, after Buddha appeared, he taught. These teachings are the representation of Buddha's enlightenment in Bodhgayā, when he said, "I found profound peace, free from elaboration. I found clear light. Even if I teach, it will be difficult for others to understand, so I will remain in the forest in silence." But after several weeks, Brahmā, Indra, and many others requested that he turn the wheel of Dharma. Finally, Buddha accepted and then came to Deer Park in Sārnāth, where he first taught the Four Noble Truths. Then there followed the second and third turning of the wheel, as well as all the Vajrayāna teachings.

8. Now that Buddha has appeared and taught, the teachings continue to flourish. If Dharma were not alive, if what Buddha taught were to disappear or the next teaching had not yet come, then this eon would be no different from an eon of darkness. But Dharma is alive. We have all the teachings, so we have the opportunity to study and practice. Even though we live in a degenerate time, the teaching has not yet dissolved. If we do not study the teachings, however, they will not help us no matter how long they survive. For example, even though the sun rises, we cannot see it if we are blind. As long as we are disinterested, the fact that Dharma is alive does not help us.

9. So followers must enter the pure path of Dharma. Even though Dharma is flourishing, if we only use Dharma for our own benefit, to remove the obstacles of this life, then we have not entered upon the pure path. True Dharma practice means working to free all of saṃsāra entirely, with not one sentient being left behind.

10. The last endowment is gaining support from the kindness of others, including the spiritual master. Even if one enters the pure path, if one lacks a teacher, one won't enhance one's experience. Buddha gave so many teachings, as vast as the ocean; even if we could repeat all of them, we could not practice without a special system. We depend on an authentic spiritual master so that the original purpose of Dharma is not lost. We use all our vows—Prātimokṣa vows, bodhisattva vows, Vajrayāna vows—to purify all the obscurations of the mind and enhance all the inner realizations so that we can benefit all sentient beings.

If even one of these eighteen qualities is missing, we lose our opportunity to practice the Dharma. No matter how great a scholar one may be, if we do not understand the impermanence of this life and the interdependence of all phenomena, we have no hope of escaping saṃsāra. All the instructions

we need come from the spiritual master. These practices depend on the kindness of the spiritual master and other supporters.

Many things can interfere with a successful practice: if we are too attached to relatives and friends; if we hate our enemies; if we are overpowered by afflictive emotions; if we are influenced by talented but insincere teachers; or if we are overpowered by laziness, we have no chance to realize the teachings. If we have heavy negative karma and dense obscurations, we have to suffer the consequences and shouldn't blame the Dharma.

Some people are interested in Dharma but, due to a lack of time in the middle of a busy life, they get little experience in Dharma practice. Some study and practice well, but their minds are focused on this life as they seek respect, status, and fame. In this case, they are overpowered by the eight worldly concerns and are not really practicing to attain enlightenment. Others are interested in Dharma, but when it comes to their personalities, they cannot change and are reborn in the lower realms.

Some fail to develop devotion to the Dharma and their master, and this blocks the door to liberation. Some study and practice very high tantra, yet they ignore the foundation practices; they don't care about karma, and so they are reborn in the lower realms. Some study the precious Dharma just to become a teacher, not to be free from saṃsāra. But because of their attachment to arrogance, they don't renew their samayas and so miss any realization. They miss the beacon of liberation. So we need to watch our personality and motivation. Watch what harms and what enhances our meditation practice. We have all the qualities of a precious human life—we should rejoice!

Many causes and conditions are necessary for Dharma practice. Just as to make a cup of tea, we need a pot, water, fire, and tea itself. With all of these

elements, we can fix tea; without any one of them, we will have no tea to drink. Likewise, one who possesses the ten endowments and is free from the eight unfavorable conditions is considered to have precious human life and the opportunity for enlightenment in this lifetime. If any one of these is missing, there is no hope to successfully practice the precious Dharma and progress on the path. So we shouldn't think the spiritual path is easy and that we will always have access to it; rather, we should take it seriously and gather together all the elements necessary to make progress.

Because precious human life is dependent upon all these conditions, it is very difficult to attain. To illustrate, Buddha used this example. Suppose this whole universe were an ocean. On the surface of the ocean is a yoke floating with the currents, never staying in one place. There is also a turtle deep in the ocean that lacks eyes to see the yoke, just as the yoke lacks consciousness to sense the turtle. The turtle surfaces and then sinks once every hundred years. Not easy for the turtle, which lives for a thousand years, to put his head through the yoke! To be born in a precious human body is even more difficult.

Another way to understand is to contemplate this story: One day Buddha scraped up some dust with his thumbnail and asked Ānanda, "Where is there more dust, on my nail or on this earth?" And Ānanda said, "O Lord, of course there is no comparing the dust on your nail with the dust on the earth." Buddha said, "Likewise, the sentient beings in the three lower realms are like the dust on this earth, while the number of human beings is like the dust on my nail."

Among human beings, how many are interested in Dharma study and practice? Very few. And how many really have time to practice? Very, very few. We can see this with our own eyes.

This human life is not achieved by some coincidence or synchronicity but rather is the result of many virtuous deeds and accumulations gathered over many lifetimes. But it's not enough just having a human life, because sometimes human beings make much greater negative karma than some animals do. A human can destroy the whole earth, but an animal could not do that. This is why Milarepa said to the hunter, "To achieve a precious human body is difficult, but to be a man like you is not so rare."

We have a choice in this life. If we use it in the best way, we can reach enlightenment in one lifetime. If we use it in the worst way, we can go to the hell realms. So contemplate this and use it as a special method to realize the precious Dharma in your heart and bring peace and happiness to all sentient beings. This we have to do as soon as possible, for which one of us can guarantee that we will see the sun come up tomorrow? If we wait too long, we'll experience regret but it will be too late. If we have freedom and endowments and waste our chances, there's nothing worse. Once we're born an animal, it's so difficult to regain a human life.

Gampopa said, "Just contemplate how difficult it is to achieve a human life. Yet once we have it, it is very easily lost. Every moment, meditate on this and practice Dharma."

Think! Is this a dream or is it real? Think: "This time I must make an effort to practice this precious Dharma, whatever it may cost. And if there's something missing, I will correct my faults and try to enter the path of Dharma. If I miss this chance, when can I get another one?"

3 Ornament of Precious Liberation

By Gampopa Sönam Rinchen

Given that all sentient beings have buddha nature, can the five types of nonhuman beings —hell beings, hungry spirits, and so forth— achieve buddhahood? They cannot. The excellent type of existence that provides a working basis for achieving buddhahood is known as a precious human existence, meaning someone who materially has freedoms combined with assets and who mentally has the three kinds of faith. The synopsis of the explanation of this is the following:

> The very best basis is summed up in five points: freedoms, assets, conviction, aspiration, and clarity. Two of these are material and three are mental.

They are freedoms inasmuch as the person is free from eight unfavorable conditions. According to [Prajñākaramati's Commentary on the Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life, in his summary of what is found in the] Attention to Mindfulness Sūtra:

> The eight unfavorable states are to be
> a hell dweller, a hungry spirit, an animal,
> a barbarian, a long-living god,
> someone with fixed aberrant views, one born in a time without
> a Buddha,
> or a person with severe difficulty in understanding.

Why are these states deemed unfavorable for the attainment of enlightenment? Hell is unsuitable because the very character of its experience is constant suffering. The hungry spirit state is unsuitable because of its mental anguish. The animal state is unsuitable because of its generalized benightedness. These three states are also devoid of a sense of dignity or regard for others. Such beings do not really have any possibility of practicing Dharma because the above conditions render their general way of existing inappropriate for it.

The "long-living" gods are those without cognition. Because their stream of consciousness, along with its related mental activities, is in a state of suspension, they do not have the possibility of practicing Dharma: their mind is incapable of applying itself to it. Apart from these particular gods, all desire-realm gods live long compared to humans, and so could also be included in this category.

In fact, all the gods are in an unfavorable condition due to their attachment to the well-being of their situation. This makes them unsuited because they are unable to strive for virtue. In this respect, the relatively limited degree of manifest suffering present in human life is a [helpful] quality, inasmuch as it fosters rejection of saṃsāra, quells pride, gives rise to compassion for other beings, and makes us shun unwholesome action and appreciate virtue. This is also mentioned in Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life:

> There are further virtues to suffering:
> world-weariness helps dispel arrogance,
> compassion will well up for those in saṃsāra,
> and one will shun nonvirtue and delight in virtue.

The above explains why those four [nonhuman] sorts of existence simply do not have the freedom to work toward enlightenment. But neither do some forms of human existence: barbarians, because of the improbability of their interacting with spiritual teachers; those with fixed aberrant views, because of the difficulty they have in understanding virtue to be the cause of rebirth into better states and of liberation; those born in a world without a Buddha, because of the absence of teachings on what is and what is not to be done; and those with severe impediments, because these make them unable to understand the Dharma teachings explaining which things are worthwhile and which things are harmful.

The "very best freedom" is to be free from the above eight.

There are ten assets: five are personal and five are other-related. The five personal assets are described as:

> To be human, born in a central land, with complete faculties, free from having committed the worst of actions, and having appropriate trust.

(1) "To be human" means to have been born the same as other humans, with male or female organs. (2) To have been born in a "central land" means birth in a place with accessible holy beings. (3) To have "complete faculties" means that you have the intellectual faculties needed for the actual practice of virtue, suffering from neither a severe learning difficulty nor a severe communication impediment. (4) "Free from having committed the worst of actions" means you have not committed the actions of immediate consequence in this life. (5) "Appropriate trust" means confidence in all those wholesome things that truly merit trust — the noble teachings declared by the Buddha as a way of taming the mind.

The five other-related assets are: (6) a Buddha has manifested in the world, (7) the noble Dharma has been taught, (8) the teachings of noble Dharma are still extant, (9) there are those who follow them, and (10) loving kindness can be developed due to others.

Someone possessing these ten personal and situational factors is called "a person with the very best assets." Where these two — the freedoms and the assets — are complete, that is the precious human existence. Why is it called "precious"? It is so termed because, being rarely encountered and exceedingly beneficial and useful, its qualities are comparable to those of a wish-fulfilling gem.

It is rarely encountered. It says in the Bodhisattva Collection:

> It is difficult to be born human,
> and then difficult to stay alive.
> The noble Dharma is a rare thing to obtain,
> and it is also rare for a buddha to manifest.

Furthermore, it says in the White Lotus of Great Compassion Sūtra:

> It is not easy to come by a human existence. A person possessing the finest freedoms is also rarely encountered, and it is difficult, too, to find a world in which a Buddha has appeared. Further, it is not at all easy to aspire to what is virtuous, nor is it easy to find most perfect aspiration.

It also says in the Marvelous Array Sūtra:

> It is rare to encounter that which is free from the eight unfavorable circumstances. It is rare, too, to be born human. It is also rare to obtain the very best form of freedom, in its plenitude. It is rare, too, for a Buddha to manifest. It is also rare not to have deficient faculties. It is rare, too, to be able to study the Buddhadharma. It is also rare to be in the company of holy beings. It is rare, too, to find truly qualified spiritual teachers. It is also rare to be able to practice properly that which has been taught so purely. It is rare, too, to maintain a truly right livelihood, and rare, in the human world, to earnestly do what is in accord with Dharma.

Furthermore, it says in Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life:

> These freedoms and assets are exceedingly rare.

What could exemplify this rarity, for whom is it so rare, and just why it is such a rare thing? Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life gives an analogy:

> On account of it being like that,
> the Buddha has said that to be human is as rare
> as a turtle putting its neck through the hole
> of a wooden yoke floating on a turbulent ocean.

Where does this quotation come from? In the most excellent scripture it says, among other things:

> Were this vast land to be transformed into water, and were someone to set afloat a single one-holed wooden yoke to be driven in the four directions by the winds, a poor-sighted turtle might take thousands of years [to surface and put its head through it].

For those born in the lower states of existence, this [precious human existence] is very hard to obtain. The rarity is due to causality, since the principal cause for obtaining an existence with freedoms and assets is a prior accumulation of merit in the continuum of lives. Once born into the lower realms, a being constantly does nothing but wrong and does not know how to develop virtue. For this reason the only ones born in the three lower realms who can attain a human existence are those who have built up relatively little evil, or those who have created karma that will have to be experienced but in some later life.

It is exceedingly beneficial and useful. It says in Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life:

> Concerning the attainment of making an able human life meaningful...

The "able human life" renders the Sanskrit term puruṣa, a word [for a human life] connoting power or ability. A human existence endowed with the freedoms and assets is this "able human life," because it has the strength or ability to attain higher rebirth and ultimate good.

Further, since there are three levels of this ability, there will be three corresponding categories of powerful human potential. Thus it says in Lamp for the Path to Awakening:

One should know there to be three types
of human ability: lesser, middling, and best.

Those with the lesser type of powerful human potential have the ability to achieve human or divine rebirth by avoiding descent into the lower states. Thus it says:

A person described as someone with lesser ability
is one who, through whatever means,
strives for personal welfare and aspires
merely to worldly well-being.

Those with the middling human ability are able to attain a state of peace and well-being by liberating themselves from saṃsāra:

Someone who turns away from worldly happiness,
turns away from unwholesome action,
and strives for personal peace alone
is referred to as the "middling" type.

Those with the highest human ability are capable of attaining buddhahood for the benefit of sentient beings:

Those who, having understood their own suffering,
aspire to totally eradicate
the entire suffering in every being
are most excellent individuals.

Master Candragomin has also commented on the great benefit and use of a precious human existence, saying:

> There are those who would reach the end of the ocean of
> rebirth
> and, further, plant the virtuous seed of supreme
> enlightenment.
> Their qualities far exceeding those of a wish-fulfilling gem,
> how could such people engage in fruitless tasks?
> The Sugata's path, found by a human
> with such great strength of mind,
> cannot be attained by gods, nāgas, demigods, garuḍas,
> knowledge holders, kiṃnaras, and uragas.

This human existence endowed with freedom and assets gives the ability to relinquish nonvirtue, cross saṃsāra's ocean, tread the path of enlightenment, and attain perfect buddhahood. Therefore such an existence is far superior to those of gods, nāgas, and the like. It is something even better than a most precious wish-fulfilling gem. Because this human existence endowed with freedoms and assets is hard to obtain and of such great benefit, it is called "most precious."

Although it is so hard to obtain and of such tremendous benefit, it is very easily destroyed. This is because there is nothing that can perpetuate the life force, there are many causes of death, and the flow of moments never ceases. Thus it says in Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life:

> It is not right to contentedly think,

"At least I won't die today."
It is without doubt that at one time or another
I will be annihilated.

Thus, through its rarity, fragility, and real purpose, this physical existence should be considered a boat for doing whatever is needed to find a haven from the ocean of saṃsāra. Thus it says:

Making use of this vessel of able human life,
get free from the mighty river of suffering.
Since such a craft will be hard to come across in the future,
don't fall into confusion: there is no time for sleep!

Considering this existence as a steed to be ridden, do whatever must be done to get free from the hazardous path of saṃsāra and suffering. Thus it says:

Having mounted the steed of a pure human existence,
gallop away from the hazardous paths of saṃsāra's suffering.

Considering this physical existence as a servant, make it do wholesome tasks. Thus it says:

This human existence should
be employed in service [of others].

The three types of faith: In order to act in such a way, faith is needed. It is said that without faith, noble qualities will not develop in a person. Thus the Ten Dharmas Sūtra says:

> The noble qualities will not arise in someone without faith,
> just as a green shoot will not emerge from a scorched seed.

The Flower Ornament Sūtra also says:

> Those of worldly disposition with little faith
> will be unable to know the buddhas' enlightenment.

Therefore, you should cultivate faith. As the Buddha teaches in the Vast Manifestation Sūtra:

> Ānanda, cultivate faith; this is what the Tathāgata asks of you.

What exactly does faith mean? When analyzed, it has three aspects: faith as conviction, faith as aspiration, and faith as clear joy.

Faith as conviction arises from contemplating actions and their consequences, the truth of suffering, and the truth of suffering's origin. Conviction means being convinced that the consequence of virtuous action is to experience well-being in the desire realm, the consequence of nonvirtuous action is to experience misery in the desire realm, and the consequence of unwavering karma is to experience well-being in the form and formless realms. It means being convinced that through the power of karma and afflictions, explained as the truth of all origination, you will obtain the five contaminated aggregates, explained as the truth of suffering.

Faith as aspiration is to consider highest enlightenment as something very special indeed and to ardently study how it can be attained.

Faith as clear joy is something stable that emerges with respect to its object, the Three Jewels — being a joyful clear mind that has devotion and respect for the most precious Buddha as teacher of the path, for the most precious Dharma as that which is the path itself, and for the most precious Saṅgha as the companions who practice the path. Thus it says in the Treasury of Higher Knowledge:

> What is faith? It is confidence in karma and its results, the [four] truths, and the most precious ones. It is aspiration and it is lucidity of mind.

Further, it says in the Precious Garland:

> Whoever, despite temptation, anger, fear, or confusion,
> never strays from Dharma
> is said to possess faith.
> Such a person is a wonderful vessel for the highest good.

"Not to stray from Dharma despite temptation" means not to abandon Dharma out of craving. You would not renounce it despite temptations of food, wealth, consorts, kingdoms, or any enticement intended to persuade you to give up the Dharma.

"Not to stray from Dharma despite aggression" means not to abandon Dharma out of hostility. For example, you would not relinquish a Dharma way of life for the sake of [fighting] someone who had not only harmed you greatly in the past but is also harming you greatly in the present.

"Not to stray from Dharma despite fear" means not to abandon Dharma out of fear. For instance, even faced with the threat that, were you not to abandon Dharma, three hundred fierce warriors would cut five ounces of flesh from your body every day, you would still not relinquish it.

"Not to stray from Dharma despite confusion" means not to abandon Dharma out of ignorance. For instance, even though people might argue convincingly that cause and effect, the Three Jewels, and so forth are false, and thereby throw your Dharma into question, still you would not relinquish it.

Someone who can maintain conviction when faced with these four types of situations is a person with faith. Such faith makes one ideally suited to achieving liberation. Such faith will create countless benefits, including giving rise to the mentality of the best of beings, eliminating the unfavorable, sharpening and brightening the faculties, ensuring the nondegradation of moral discipline, removing afflictions, taking one beyond domains of experience marred by evil, enabling one to encounter the way of liberation, gathering a vast store of virtue, making one see many buddhas, and causing the buddhas' blessing to be received.

As it says in the Jewel Lamp Dhāraṇī Sūtra:

> The mental attitude of a great being induces
> faith in peerless enlightenment —
> faith in the enlightened beings and their teachings
> and trust in the activity of the bodhisattvas.

This and more is said. Further, it is taught that all the buddhas, the blessed ones, will appear before a person of faith. The Bodhisattva Collection says:

> Thus the buddhas, the blessed ones, having recognized them as being worthy vessels of the Buddhadharma, will appear before them and will most properly teach them the way of the bodhisattva.

Thus a "most precious human existence," having two sets of qualities (the freedoms and assets) as well as three mental qualities (the aspects of faith), is the proper basis for achieving peerless enlightenment.

This concludes the second chapter, concerning the basis, of this Ornament of Precious Liberation, a Wish-Fulfilling Gem of Sublime Dharma.

4 The Words of My Perfect Teacher

By Dza Patrul Rinpoche

The main subject of the chapter is explained in four sections: reflecting on the nature of freedom, reflecting on the particular advantages related to Dharma, reflecting on images that show how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages, and reflecting on numerical comparisons.

4.1 Reflecting on the Nature of Freedom

In general, here, "freedom" means to have the opportunity to practice Dharma and not to be born in one of the eight states without that opportunity. "Lack of freedom" refers to those eight states where there is no such opportunity:

> Being born in the hells, in the hungry ghost realm,
> As an animal, a long-lived god, a barbarian,
> Having wrong views, being born when there is no Buddha
> Or being born deaf and mute, these are the eight states without freedom.

Beings reborn in hell have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they are constantly tormented by intense heat or cold.

The hungry ghosts have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because of the suffering they experience from hunger and thirst.

Animals have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they undergo slavery and suffer from the attacks of other animals.

The long-lived gods have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they spend their time in a state of mental blankness.

Those born in border countries have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because the doctrine of the Buddha is unknown in such places.

Those born as tīrthikas or with similar wrong views have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because their minds are so influenced by those mistaken beliefs.

Those born during a dark eon have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because they never even hear of the Three Jewels and cannot distinguish good from bad.

Those born mute or mentally deficient have no opportunity to practice the Dharma because their faculties are incomplete.

The inhabitants of the three lower realms suffer constantly from heat, cold, hunger, thirst, and other torments as a result of their past negative actions; they have no opportunity to practice the Dharma.

"Barbarians" means those who live in the thirty-two border countries, such as Lo Khaṭha, and all those who consider harming others an act of faith or whose savage beliefs see taking life as good. These people inhabiting the outlying territories have human form, but their minds lack the right orientation and they cannot attune themselves to the Dharma. Inheriting from their forefathers such pernicious customs as marriage to their mothers, they live in a way that is the very opposite of Dharma practice. Everything they do is evil, and it is in techniques of such harmful activities as killing insects and hunting wild beasts that they truly excel. Many of them fall into lower realms as soon as they die. For such people, there is no opportunity to practice the Dharma.

The long-lived gods are those gods who are absorbed in a state of mental blankness. Beings are born in this realm as a result of believing that

liberation is a state in which all mental activities, good or bad, are absent, and of meditating upon that state. They remain in such states of concentration for great eon on end. But once the effect of the past actions that produced that condition has exhausted itself, they are reborn in the lower realms because of their wrong views. They, too, lack any opportunity to practice the Dharma.

The term "wrong views" includes, in general, eternalist and nihilist beliefs, which are views contrary to, and outside, the teaching of the Buddha. Such views spoil our minds and prevent us from aspiring to the authentic Dharma, to the extent that we no longer have the opportunity to practice it. Here in Tibet, because the second Buddha, Padmasambhava of Oḍḍiyāna, entrusted the protection of the land to the twelve Tenma, the tīrthikas themselves have not really been able to penetrate. However, anyone whose understanding is like that of the tīrthikas, and contrary to that of the authentic Dharma and authentic masters, will thereby be deprived of the opportunity to practice according to those true teachings.

The monk Sunakṣatra spent twenty-five years as Lord Buddha's attendant, and yet, because he did not have the slightest faith and held only wrong views, ended up being reborn as a hungry ghost in a flower-garden.

Birth in a dark eon means to be reborn in a period during which there is no Buddha. In a universe where no Buddha has appeared, no one has ever even heard of the Three Jewels. As there is no Dharma, there is no opportunity to practice it.

The mind of a person born deaf and mute cannot function properly, and the process of listening to the teachings, expounding them, reflecting on them, and putting them into practice is impeded. The description "deaf mute" usually refers to a speech dysfunction. It becomes a condition without the opportunity for Dharma when the usual human ability to use

and understand language is absent. This category therefore also includes those whose mental disability makes them unable to comprehend the teachings and thus deprives them of the opportunity to practice them.

4.2 Reflecting on the Particular Advantages Related to Dharma

Under this heading are included five individual advantages and five circumstantial advantages.

4.2.1 The Five Individual Advantages

Nāgārjuna lists them as follows:

> Born a human, in a central place, with all one's faculties,
> Without a conflicting lifestyle and with faith in the Dharma.

Without a human life, it would not be possible even to encounter the Dharma. So this human body is the advantage of support.

Had you been born in a remote place where Dharma was unheard of, you would never have come across it. But the region you were born in is central as far as Dharma is concerned, and so you have the advantage of place.

Not to have all your sense faculties intact would be a hindrance to the practice of Dharma. If you are free of such disabilities, you have the advantage of possessing the sense faculties.

If you had a conflicting lifestyle, you would always be immersed in negative actions and at variance with the Dharma. Since you now have the wish to do positive actions, this is the advantage of intention.

If you had no faith in the Buddha's teachings, you would not feel any inclination for the Dharma. Having the ability to turn your mind to the Dharma, as you are doing now, constitutes the advantage of faith.

Because these five advantages need to be complete with regard to one's own make-up, they are called the five individual advantages.

To practice the real, authentic Dharma, it is absolutely necessary to be a human being. Now, suppose that you did not have the support of a human form, but had the highest form of life in the three lower realms, that of an animal—even the most beautiful and highly prized animal known to man. If someone said to you, "Say Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ once, and you will become a Buddha," you would be quite incapable of understanding his words or grasping their meaning, nor would you be able to utter a word. In fact, even if you were dying of cold, you would be unable to think of anything to do but lie in a heap—whereas a man, no matter how weak, would know how to shelter in a cave or under a tree, and would gather wood and make a fire to warm his face and hands. If animals are incapable of even such simple things, how could they ever conceive of practicing Dharma?

Gods and other beings of the kind, however superior their physical form, do not meet the requirements laid down for taking the prātimokṣa vows, and therefore cannot assimilate the Dharma in its totality.

As to what is meant by a "central region," one should distinguish between a geographically central region and a place that is central in terms of the Dharma. Geographically speaking, the central region is generally said to be the Vajrāsana at Bodh Gayā in India, at the center of Jambudvīpa, the Southern Continent. The thousand Buddhas of the Good Eon all attain enlightenment there. Even in the universal destruction at the end of the eon, the four elements cannot harm it, and it remains there as if suspended

in space. At its center grows the Tree of Enlightenment. This place, with all the towns of India around it, is therefore considered the central region in terms of geography. In Dharma terms, a central place is wherever the Dharma—the teaching of Lord Buddha—exists. All other regions are said to be peripheral.

In the distant past, from the time Lord Buddha came into this world and as long as his doctrine still existed in India, that land was central in terms of both geography and Dharma. However, now that it has fallen into the hands of the tīrthikas and the doctrine of the Conqueror has disappeared in that region, as far as Dharma is concerned even Bodh Gayā is a peripheral place.

In the days of the Buddha, Tibet, the Land of Snows, was called "the border country of Tibet," because it was a sparsely populated land to which the doctrine had not yet spread. Later, the population increased little by little, and there reigned several kings who were emanations of the Buddhas. The Dharma first appeared in Tibet during the reign of Lha-Thothori Nyentsen, when the Sūtra of a Hundred Invocations and Prostrations, a tsa-tsa mould, and other objects fell onto the palace roof.

Five generations later, in accordance with prophecies that he would understand the meaning of the sūtra, there appeared the Dharma King Songtsen Gampo, an emanation of the Sublime Compassionate One. During Songtsen Gampo's reign, the translator Thonmi Sambhota was sent to India to study its languages and scripts. On his return, he introduced an alphabet to Tibet for the first time. He translated into Tibetan twenty-one sūtras and tantras of Avalokiteśvara, The Powerful Secret, and various other texts. The king himself displayed multiple forms, and along with his minister Gartongtsen, he used miraculous means to defend the country. He took as his queens two princesses, one Chinese and one from Nepal, who

brought with them numerous representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, including the statues called the Jowo Mikyö Dorje and the Jowo Śākyamuni, the actual representatives of the Buddha. The king built the series of temples known as the Thadul and Yangdul, of which the principal one was the Rasa Trulnang. In this way, he established Buddhism in Tibet.

His fifth successor, King Trisong Detsen, invited one hundred and eight paṇḍitas to Tibet, including Padmasambhava, the Preceptor of Oḍḍiyāna, the greatest of the mantra-holders, unequaled throughout the three worlds. To uphold representations of the Buddhas' form, Trisong Detsen had temples built, including "unchanging, spontaneously arisen" Samye. To uphold the Buddha's speech, the authentic Dharma, one hundred and eight translators, including the great Vairocanā, learned the art of translation and translated all the main sūtras, tantras, and śāstras then current in the noble land of India. The "Seven Men for Testing" and others were ordained as monks, forming the Saṅgha, to uphold the Buddha's mind.

From that time onwards up to the present day, the teachings of the Buddha have shone like the sun in Tibet and, despite ups and downs, the doctrine of the Conqueror has never been lost in either of its aspects, transmission or realization. Thus Tibet, as far as the Dharma is concerned, is a central country.

A person lacking any of the five sense faculties does not meet the requirements laid down for taking the monastic vows. Moreover, someone who does not have the good fortune to be able to see representations of the Conqueror to inspire his devotion, or to read and hear the precious and excellent teachings as the material for study and reflection, will not be fully capable of receiving the Dharma.

"Conflicting lifestyle" refers, strictly speaking, to the lifestyles of people born in communities of hunters, prostitutes, and so forth, who are involved in these negative activities from their earliest youth. But in fact, it also includes anyone whose every thought, word, and deed is contrary to the Dharma—for even those not born into such lifestyles can easily slip into them later in life. It is therefore essential to avoid doing anything which conflicts with the authentic Dharma.

If your faith is not in the Buddha's teachings but in powerful gods, nāgas, and so forth, or in other doctrines such as those of the tīrthikas, then, no matter how much faith you might place in them, none of them can protect you from the sufferings of saṃsāra or from rebirth in lower realms. But if you have acquired a properly reasoned faith in the Conqueror's doctrine, which unites transmission and realization, you are without doubt a fit vessel for the true Dharma. And that is the greatest of the five individual advantages.

4.2.2 The Five Circumstantial Advantages

A Buddha has appeared and has preached the Dharma
His teachings still exist and can be followed
There are those who are kind-hearted toward others

Those not born in a bright eon, one in which a Buddha has appeared, have never even heard of the Dharma. But we are now in a eon in which a Buddha has come, and so we possess the advantage of the presence of the particular teacher.

Although a Buddha has come, if he had not taught, no one would benefit. But since the Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma according to three levels, we have the advantage of the teaching of the Dharma.

Although he has taught, had his doctrine died out it would no longer be there to help us. But the period during which the doctrine will remain extant has not yet ended, so we have the advantage of the time.

Although the teachings still exist, unless we follow them they can be of no benefit to us. But since we have taken up the Dharma, we possess the advantage of our own good fortune.

Although we have taken up the Dharma, without the favorable circumstance of being accepted by a spiritual friend, we would never come to know what the Dharma is really about. But since a spiritual friend has accepted us, we possess the advantage of his extraordinary compassion.

Because these five factors need to be complete with regard to circumstances other than one's own, they are called the five circumstantial advantages.

The time it takes for the universe to form, to stay in existence, to be destroyed, and to remain in a state of emptiness is called an eon. A eon in which a perfect Buddha appears in the world is called a "bright eon," while one in which a Buddha does not appear is called a "dark eon."

Long ago, during the great Eon of Manifest Joy, thirty-three thousand Buddhas appeared. A hundred dark eons followed. Then, during the Perfect Eon, eight hundred million Buddhas appeared, again followed by a hundred eons without Dharma. Then eight hundred and forty million Buddhas appeared during the Excellent Eon, after which there were five hundred dark eons. During the Eon Delightful to See, eight hundred million Buddhas appeared, and then there were seven hundred eons of darkness.

Sixty thousand Buddhas appeared during the Joyous Eon. Then came our own eon, the Good Eon.

Before our eon arose, this cosmos of a billion universes was an immense ocean on whose surface appeared a thousand thousand-petaled lotuses. The gods of the Brahmā-world, wondering how this could be, through clairvoyance understood it to signify that during this eon one thousand Buddhas would appear. "This will be a good eon," they said, and "Good" became its name.

From the time when beings' lifespan was eighty thousand years and the Buddha Destroyer-of-Saṃsāra appeared, and up to the time when beings will live incalculably long and the Buddha Infinite-Aspiration will come, one thousand Buddhas will have taken their place in this world on the Vajrāsana at the center of the Continent of Jambudvīpa. Each one of them will have attained perfect Buddhahood there and turned the Wheel of Dharma. Therefore, our present eon is a bright eon.

It will be followed by sixty peripheral, bad eons, and after that, in the Eon of Vast Numbers, ten thousand Buddhas will appear. Then another ten thousand bad eons will ensue. In this alternation of bright and dark eons, should we happen to be born during a dark eon, we would never even hear that there was such a thing as the Three Jewels.

Moreover, as the Great One of Oḍḍiyāna points out, the Secret Mantra Vajrayāna in particular is taught only rarely:

> Long ago, during the very first eon, the Eon of the Complete Array, the teachings of the Secret Mantrayāna were promulgated by the Buddha known as Once-Come-King and achieved great renown. The teachings we have now, those of the present Buddha Śākyamuni, also include the Secret Mantrayāna. In ten million eons' time, during the

> Eon of the Array of Flowers, the Buddha Mañjuśrī will come, as I have come now, to reveal the Secret Mantra teachings on a vast scale. This is so because beings in these three eons are suitable recipients for the Secret Mantras, and the reason why the Mantrayāna teachings do not appear at other times is because the beings of those times are not capable of making use of them.

In this Good Eon, at the present time when the span of human life is a hundred years, the perfect Buddha Śākyamuni has come to the world, and so it is a bright eon.

Suppose that a Buddha had come, but was still in meditation and had not yet taught the Dharma. As long as the light of his Dharma had not appeared, his having come would make no difference to us. It would be just as if he had never come at all. On attaining total and perfect Buddhahood upon the Vajrāsana, our Teacher 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.

Accordingly, for seven weeks he did not teach, until Brahmā and Indra begged him to turn the Wheel of the Dharma.

Furthermore, if those who hold the authentic teaching do not explain it, it is difficult for the Dharma to be of any real benefit to beings. An example is the great Smṛtijñāna of India, who came to Tibet because his mother had been reborn there in one of the ephemeral hells. His interpreter died on the journey, and Smṛtijñāna, who was wandering around the province of Kham

unable to speak a word of the language, became a shepherd and died there without having been of very much benefit to anyone. When Jowo Atiśa later arrived in Tibet and learned what had happened, he cried out: "How sad! Tibetans, your merit is weak! Nowhere in India, East or West, was there a paṇḍita better than Smṛtijñāna," and, placing his hands together, he wept.

For us, the Buddha Śākyamuni has turned the Wheel of the Dharma on three levels and, manifesting an inconceivable number of forms according to the needs and capacities of those to be helped, leads disciples through the nine vehicles of his teaching to maturity and liberation.

Even during an eon in which a Buddha has appeared and given teachings, once the time for those teachings to endure has come to an end and the authentic Dharma he has taught disappears, it is exactly the same as in a dark eon. The period between the disappearance of one Buddha's teachings and the next Buddha's teachings being given is described as "devoid of Dharma." In fortunate places where beings have adequate merit, pratyekabuddhas appear, but the doctrine is not taught or practiced.

These days we still have the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Their degree of survival follows a tenfold sequence. First, there are three periods, each consisting of five hundred parts. During this time, there appears the "teaching of the heart of Samantabhadra," which is the fruit. Then come three periods of five hundred parts for accomplishment. These are followed by three periods of five hundred parts for transmission. Finally, one period of five hundred parts arises when only the symbols are retained. Altogether, this makes ten periods, each of five hundred parts. At present, we have reached the seventh or eighth period. We live in an age of increase in the five degenerations—those of lifespan, beliefs, emotions, time, and beings. Nonetheless, the doctrine of transmission and realization does still exist. As

it has not died out, we still possess the advantage of having the Dharma in its entirety.

That the Doctrine is still present, however, is irrelevant unless you make use of it—just as the rising sun, although it lights up the whole world, does not make the slightest difference to a blind man. And, just as the waters of a great lake cannot quench the thirst of a traveler arriving at its shore unless he actually drinks from them, the Dharma of transmission and realization cannot infiltrate your mind by itself.

To enter the Dharma just to protect yourself from sickness and negative influences in this life, or because you fear the sufferings of the three lower realms in future lives, is called "Dharma as protection against fears," and is not the right way to set out on the path.

To enter the Dharma merely to have food, clothing, and so on in this life, or to obtain the pleasant reward of a divine or human rebirth in the next, is called "Dharma as quest for excellence."

To enter the Dharma understanding that the whole of saṃsāra has no meaning, striving to find a way to be free from it, is called "taking up the teaching by arriving at the starting point of the path."

Even if you start practicing the Dharma, unless you have been accepted by a spiritual friend, it will be of no use. The Condensed Transcendent Wisdom says:

> The Buddha and the teachings depend upon the spiritual friend.
> Thus said the Conqueror, supreme embodiment of all good qualities.

The Buddha's teaching is immense, its transmissions are numerous, and it covers an inexhaustible range of topics. Without relying on the pith instructions of a teacher, we would never know how to condense the essential points of all those teachings and put them into practice.

Once, when Jowo Atiśa was in Tibet, Khu, Ngok, and Drom asked him: "For someone to achieve liberation and complete omniscience, which is more important—the canonical scriptures and their commentaries, or the oral instructions of the teacher?"

"The teacher's instructions," Atiśa replied.

"Why?"

"Because when it comes to doing the practice—even if you can explain the whole Tripiṭaka from memory and are very skilled in metaphysics—without the teacher's practical guidance, you and the Dharma will part company."

"So," they continued, "is the main point of the teacher's instructions to keep the three vows and to strive to do good with body, speech, and mind?"

"That is not the slightest bit of use," Atiśa replied.

"How can that be?" they exclaimed.

"You may be able to keep the three vows perfectly, but unless you are determined to free yourself from the three worlds of saṃsāra, it just creates further causes of saṃsāra. You may be able to strive day and night to do good with body, speech, and mind, but unless you know how to dedicate the merit to perfect enlightenment, two or three wrong thoughts are enough to destroy it entirely. You may be teachers and meditators, full of piety and learning, but unless your minds are turned away from the eight ordinary concerns, whatever you do will only be for this present life, and you will not encounter the path that helps for future lives."

This illustrates how important it is to be taken under the care of a teacher, a spiritual friend.

Checking your own life and circumstances for each of the eight freedoms and ten advantages, if you find that all these favorable conditions are present, you have what is known as "human life endowed with the eighteen freedoms and advantages." However, the Omniscient Dharma King Longchenpa, in his Wish-granting Treasury, specifies sixteen additional conditions which preclude any opportunity to practice the Dharma—eight intrusive circumstances and eight incompatible propensities—under whose sway it is important not to fail. In his words:

> 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 saṃsāra, 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.

4.2.3 The Eight Intrusive Circumstances that Leave No Freedom to Practice the Dharma

People in whom the five poisons—that is, negative emotions such as hatred for enemies, infatuation with friends and relatives, and so forth—are extremely strong, may wish from time to time that they could practice some kind of true Dharma. But the five poisons are too strong, dominating their minds most of the time and preventing them from ever accomplishing the Dharma properly.

Very stupid beings, lacking even the slightest glimmer of intelligence, might enter the Dharma but, being unable to understand a single word of the teaching or its meaning, they will never be able to study it or reflect and meditate upon it.

Once people have been taken as disciples by a false spiritual friend who teaches the view and action in a perverted manner, their minds will be led onto wrong paths and will not be in accord with the true Dharma.

People who want to learn the Dharma but are too lazy, without even a trace of diligence, will never accomplish it because they are so ensnared in their own indolence and procrastination.

Some people's obscurations and negative actions are such that, in spite of the effort they put into the Dharma, they fail to develop any of the right qualities in their minds. Their backlog of bad actions has overwhelmed them, and they will lose confidence in the teachings without perceiving that it is all due to their own past actions.

Those who are in servitude to someone else, and have lost their autonomy, may want to take up Dharma; but the person who dominates them does not allow them to practice.

Some people take up Dharma out of fear for this present life—that they might lack food or clothing, or experience other afflictions. But since they

have no deep conviction in the Dharma, they give themselves up to their old habits and get involved in things that are not Dharma.

Others are impostors who, through a pretense of Dharma, try to win possessions, services, and prestige. In front of others, they assume the guise of practitioners, but in their minds, they are only interested in this life, so they are far removed from the path of liberation.

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

4.2.4 The Eight Incompatible Propensities that Leave No Freedom to Practice the Dharma

People who are tightly bound to their worldly commitments, wealth, pleasures, children, relatives, and so forth, are so preoccupied with the strenuous efforts entailed by these things that they have no time to practice the Dharma.

Some people lack any scrap of humanity, and their nature is so depraved that they are unable to improve their behavior. Even a genuine spiritual teacher would find it very difficult to set them on the noble path. As the sublime beings of the past said, "The abilities of a disciple can be shaped, but not his basic character."

A person who feels not the slightest consternation either on hearing of lower rebirths and the ills of saṃsāra, or in the face of this present life's sufferings, has no determination whatsoever to liberate himself from saṃsāra, and therefore no reason to engage in Dharma practice.

To have no faith at all, either in the true Dharma or in the teacher, shuts off any access to the teachings and bars entry to the path of liberation.

People who take pleasure in harmful or negative actions, and who fail to control their thoughts, words, and deeds, are devoid of any noble qualities and have turned away from the Dharma.

Some people are no more interested in spiritual values and Dharma than a dog in eating grass. Since they feel no enthusiasm for the Dharma, its qualities will never develop in their minds.

Anyone who, having entered the Basic Vehicle, breaks his vows and commitment to bodhicitta, has nowhere else to go but the lower realms. He will not escape from states where there is no opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Anyone who, having entered the Secret Mantra Vehicle, breaks his samaya commitments to his teacher and spiritual brothers and sisters, will bring about his own ruin and theirs, destroying any prospect of accomplishments.

These are eight propensities that lead one away from the Dharma and snuff out the lamp of liberation.

Before these sixteen factors that leave no opportunity for the practice have been carefully ruled out, people in these decadent times may look as if they have all the freedoms and advantages and are true practitioners of the Dharma. However, the chieftain upon his throne and the lama beneath his parasol, the hermit in his mountain solitude, the man who has renounced the affairs of state, and anyone who might have a high opinion of his own worth—each may think he is practicing Dharma, but as long as he is under the sway of these additional limiting conditions, he is not on the true path.

So, before blindly assuming the forms of Dharma, check your own state carefully first to see whether or not you have all thirty-four aspects of the freedoms and advantages. If you do have them all, rejoice and reflect deeply on them over and over again. Remind yourself how, now that you have

finally gained these freedoms and advantages that are so difficult to find, you are not going to squander them; whatever happens, you are going to practice the true Dharma. Should you find, however, that some aspects are missing, try to acquire them by whatever means may be possible.

At all times, you should take pains to examine carefully whether or not you have all elements of the freedoms and advantages. If you fail to check, and any one of those elements should be lacking, you will be missing the chance to practice the Dharma truly. After all, even the execution of a single minor everyday task requires many mutually dependent materials and conditions to be brought together. Is it any wonder that the realization of our ultimate goal—the Dharma—is impossible without the conjunction of many interconnected factors?

Imagine a traveler who wants to brew himself some tea. The making of tea involves many different elements—the pot, the water, the wood, the fire, and so on. Of these, just to light the fire alone is impossible without a flint, steel, some tinder, the traveler's hands, and so forth. If just one thing is missing, the tinder for instance, then the fact that the traveler has everything else he needs is of no use whatsoever. He simply does not have what it takes to make tea. In the same way, if even one element of the freedoms and advantages is missing, there is no chance at all of practicing the true Dharma.

If you check your own mind carefully, you will see that even the basic eight freedoms and ten advantages are very difficult to attain, and that to have all ten advantages is even rarer than to have all eight freedoms.

Someone born as a human, with all his faculties intact and in a central region, but who becomes involved in a lifestyle conflicting with the Dharma and who has no faith in the Conqueror's teaching, only has three of the advantages. Were he to obtain either of the two others, he would still only

have four. Now, to have a lifestyle which does not conflict at all with the Dharma is extremely hard. If any of a person's thoughts, words, and deeds are negative and his motives are for this life, then in fact, even if he has the reputation of a good and learned man, his lifestyle is in conflict with the Dharma.

The same applies to the five circumstantial advantages. If a Buddha has come, has taught the Dharma, and the teachings still exist, yet a person has not entered the Dharma, that person has only three of those advantages. Here again, "entering the Dharma" does not simply mean asking for some teaching and being given it. The starting point of the path of liberation is the conviction that the whole of saṃsāra 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 unshakable 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.

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.

4.3 Reflecting on images that show how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages

The Buddha said that it is more difficult for a being to obtain human birth than it would be for a turtle coming up from the depths of the ocean to put its head by chance through the opening of a wooden yoke tossed around by huge waves on the surface.

Imagine the whole cosmos of a billion universes as a vast ocean. Floating upon it is a yoke, a piece of wood with a hole in it that can be fixed around the horns of draft oxen. This yoke, tossed hither and thither by the waves, sometimes eastward, sometimes westward, never stays in the same place even for an instant. Deep down in the depths of the ocean lives a blind turtle who rises up to the surface only once every hundred years. That the yoke and the turtle might meet is extremely unlikely. The yoke itself is inanimate; the turtle is not intentionally seeking it out. The turtle, being blind, has no eyes with which to spot the yoke. If the yoke were to stay in one place, there might be a chance of their meeting; but it is continually on the move. If the turtle were to spend its entire time swimming around the surface, it might, perhaps, cross paths with the yoke; but it surfaces only once every hundred years. The chances of the yoke and the turtle coming together are therefore extremely small.

Nevertheless, by sheer chance, the turtle might still just slip its neck into the yoke. But it is even more difficult than that, the sūtras say, to obtain a human existence with the freedoms and advantages.

Nāgārjuna expresses this in his Advice to King Surabhibhadra:

> It is highly unlikely that a turtle might, by chance, arise
> through a yoke tossed about on a mighty sea;
> And yet, compared to animal birth, there is far less chance than
> even that
> Of obtaining a human life. Accordingly, O Lord of Men,
> Practice the authentic Dharma to make your fortune fruitful.

And Śāntideva says:

The Buddha declared that like a turtle that perchance can place
Its head within a yoke adrift upon a shoreless sea,
This human birth is difficult to find.

The difficulty of obtaining human birth is also compared to that of getting dried peas thrown at a smooth wall to stick to it, or to that of balancing a pile of peas on the tip of an upright needle—which is hard enough with even one single pea! It is important to know these comparisons, which are from the Nirvāṇa Sūtra, and similar ones in other texts.

4.4 Reflecting on Numerical Comparisons

When you consider the relative numbers of different kinds of beings, you can appreciate that to be born a human is hardly possible at all. By way of illustration, it is said that if the inhabitants of the hells were as numerous as stars in the night sky, the hungry ghosts would be no more numerous than the stars visible in the daytime; that if there were as many hungry ghosts as stars at night, there would only be as many animals as stars in the daytime; and that if there were as many animals as stars at night, there would only be as many gods and humans as stars in the daytime.

It is also said that there are as many beings in hell as specks of dust in the whole world, as many hungry ghosts as particles of sand in the Gaṅgā, as many animals as grains in a beer-barrel, and as many asuras as snowflakes in a blizzard—but that gods and humans are as few as the particles of dust on a fingernail.

To take form as any being of the higher realms is already rare enough, but rarer still is a human life complete with all the freedoms and advantages. We can see for ourselves at any time how few human beings there are compared to animals. Think how many bugs live in a clod of earth in

summertime, or ants in a single anthill—there are hardly that many humans in the whole world. But even within mankind, we can see that, compared to all those people born in outlying regions where the teachings have never appeared, those born in places where the Dharma has spread are exceedingly rare. And even among these, there are only a very few who have all the freedoms and advantages.

With all these perspectives in mind, you should be filled with joy that you really have all the freedoms and advantages complete.

A human life can be called a "precious human life" only when it is complete with all aspects of the freedoms and advantages, and from then onwards it truly becomes precious. But as long as any of those aspects are incomplete, then, however extensive your knowledge, learning, and talent in ordinary things may be, you do not have a precious human life. You have what is called an ordinary human life, merely human life, hapless human life, meaningless human life, or human life returning empty-handed. It is like failing to use a wish-fulfilling gem despite holding it in your hands, or returning empty-handed from a land full of precious gold.

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

To win a whole kingdom
Is nothing compared to meeting a perfect teacher.
Look how those with no devotion
Treat the teacher as their equal!

To be given command of a province
Is nothing compared to receiving the Bodhisattva vows.
Look how those with no compassion
Hurl their vows away!

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!

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!

These freedoms and advantages do not come by chance or coincidence. They are the result of an accumulation of merit and wisdom built up over many eons. The great scholar Trakpa Gyaltsen says:

This free and favored human existence
Is not the result of your resourcefulness.
It comes from the merit you have accumulated.

To have obtained human life only to be wholly involved in evil activities without the least notion of Dharma is to be lower than the lower realms. As Jetsün 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.

Nothing has as much power to drag you down to the lower realms as human life. What you do with it, right now, is up to you alone:

Used well, this body is our raft to freedom.
Used badly, this body anchors us to saṃsāra.
This body does the bidding of both good and evil.

It is through the power of all the merit you have accumulated in the past that you have now obtained this human life complete with its eighteen freedoms and advantages. To neglect the one essential thing—the supreme Dharma—and instead just spend your life acquiring food and clothes and indulging the eight ordinary concerns would be a useless waste of those freedoms and advantages. How ineffectual to wait until death is upon you and then beat your breast with remorse! For you will have made the wrong choice, as it says in the Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life:

Thus, having found the freedoms of a human life,
If I now fail to train myself in virtue,
What greater folly could there ever be?
How more could I betray myself?

This present life, therefore, is the turning-point at which you can choose between lasting good or lasting evil. If you do not make use of it right now

to seize the citadel of the absolute nature within this lifetime, in lives to come it will be very hard to obtain such freedom again. Once you take birth in any of the forms of life in the lower realms, no idea of Dharma will ever occur to you. Too bewildered to know what to do or what not to do, you will fall endlessly further and further to ever lower realms. So, telling yourself that now is the time to make an effort, meditate over and over again, applying the three supreme methods: start with the thought of bodhicitta, do the practice itself without any conceptualization, and dedicate the merit at the end.

As a measure of how much this practice has truly convinced us, we should be like Geshe Chenngawa, who spent all his time practicing and never even slept. Geshe Tönpa said to him: "You'd better rest, my son. You'll make yourself ill."

"Yes, I should rest," Chenngawa replied. "But when I think how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages that we have, I have no time to rest." He recited nine hundred million mantras of Mi-yo-wa and did without sleep for the whole of his life. We should meditate until exactly that sort of conviction arises in our own minds.

Although I have won these freedoms, I am poor in Dharma,
which is their essence.
Although I have entered the Dharma, I waste time doing other
things.
Bless me and foolish beings like me
That we may attain the very essence of the freedoms and
advantages.

5 Glossary

Avalokiteśvara: An important bodhisattva in the Tibetan tradition, revered as the embodiment of boundless love and compassion.

Bodhisattva: A being who seeks enlightenment not only for themselves but for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Bodhicitta: The compassionate wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Brahmā: A prominent deity from Hindu cosmology adopted into Buddhist narratives, often depicted as a creator figure and protector of the Dharma.

Chenrezig: The Tibetan name for Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

Gaṅgā: The Ganges River, considered sacred in Hinduism and also significant in Buddhism.

Dharma: The teachings of the Buddha, the path to enlightenment, or the ultimate reality.

Garuḍas: Mythical creatures, half-human and half-eagle, appearing in Hindu and Buddhist mythologies.

Kiṃnara: Celestial beings known for their music and dance, often depicted as half-human and half-bird.

Mañjuśrī: A significant bodhisattva in the Tibetan tradition, associated with wisdom and symbolizing profound understanding and insight of the nature of things.

Mantrayāna: Another name for Vajrayāna, the path of the secret mantra in Buddhism.

Nāgas: Serpentine beings or dragons in Hindu and Buddhist mythologies, often linked to water.

Nirvāṇa: The state of liberation from suffering and the cycle of uncontrolled rebirth.

Oḍḍiyāna: Believed to correspond to parts of present-day northwestern Pakistan or eastern Afghanistan, it holds importance in Buddhism as a sacred center for the development and spread of tantric practices.

Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ: A six-syllable mantra associated with Avalokiteśvara, invoking compassion and wisdom.

Omniscient Dharma King Longchenpa: A 14th-century Tibetan scholar and master of the Nyingma school, renowned for his writings on Dzogchen.

Padmasambhava: The master who introduced Vajrayāna Buddhism to Tibet, also known as Guru Rinpoche.

Prātimokṣa: The code of monastic discipline in Buddhism, regulating the lives of monks and nuns.

Saṅgha: The community of monks, nuns, and lay practitioners in Buddhism.

Secret Mantra: Another name for Vajrayāna, emphasizing esoteric practices and rituals.

Sublime Compassionate One: A title for Avalokiteśvara.

Sugata: An epithet of the Buddha meaning "well-gone," referring to his attainment of enlightenment.

Sūtra: A discourse or scripture attributed to the Buddha, part of the canonical texts.

Tathāgata: A title of the Buddha meaning "the one who has thus come" or "thus gone," referring to his realization of ultimate truth.

Tīrthikas: Non-Buddhist religious practitioners or philosophers in ancient India.

Tripiṭaka: The "three baskets" of Buddhist scriptures, including the Vinaya, Sūtras, and Abhidharma.

Uragas: Serpentine beings or dragons similar to Nāgas, often associated with the underworld.

Vajrāsana: The "diamond seat," the spot under the Bodhi tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment.

Vajrayāna: The "diamond vehicle," a branch of Buddhism incorporating tantric and esoteric practices to hasten the path to enlightenment.

Vishnu: A major deity from Hindu cosmology, occasionally referenced in Buddhist narratives as a protector or figure of cosmic order, symbolizing preservation and benevolence.