Transcript of the teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds, 2014*

Root text: *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* by Shantideva, translated by Toh Sze Gee. Copyright: Toh Sze Gee, 2006; Revised edition, 2014.

Lesson 16 1 April 2014

Chapter Four: Verses 4.12-4.25. Cultivating conscientiousness with regard to the training (cont'd): 1. Being conscientious about abandoning wrongdoing. 2. Being conscientious about cultivating virtue.

Question: When one's bodhicitta degenerates, one can avoid going to the lower realms by purifying one's negativities with the four opponent powers. Why can't such purification also prevent one from being delayed in one's progress on the path?

Answer: Let us say that you walking to a particular destination. When your legs are in good condition, you will reach your destination easily. When you break your legs—of course, your legs can heal and mend—having broken your legs is an impediment or obstacle to reaching your destination. You would have reached your destination more quickly if you did not break your leg.

Khen Rinpoche: You got it? It is clear?

(Student's response inaudible)

Khen Rinpoche: Your question is why one's progress on the path takes longer? That is your question, isn't it? From the example, it can give you an idea why it is so.

It doesn't mean that you cannot fix your legs. You can go to a hospital to fix them so that they become normal again but you would still take a longer time to reach your destination. It is like that. Therefore it is mentioned that it is better not to break your vows from the very beginning. This is the advice. It does not mean that once you purify negative karma you cannot accumulate negative karma. Yes it is possible that you can purify your transgressions but it would mean that the time you reach your destination will be postponed.

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We are now at the chapter on conscientiousness. After taking the bodhisattva vows:

- one has to be conscientious of the bodhicitta that one has already generated
- one has to be conscientious with regard to training in the perfections that one has promised to undertake

With regard to developing conscientiousness of the bodhicitta that one has generated, this section of the text talks about the reasons why it is inappropriate to

give up one's bodhicitta, i.e., there are many disadvantages and faults when one gives up one's bodhicitta. Since this is so, by reflecting and keeping in mind the disadvantages and faults, one strives in applying conscientiousness not to allow one's bodhicitta to degenerate.

We have finished with the section on being conscientious in not letting one's bodhicitta degenerate. Next is the cultivation of conscientiousness with regard to the training.

## **CULTIVATING CONSCIENTIOUSNESS WITH REGARD TO THE TRAINING**

- 1. Being conscientious about abandoning wrongdoing
- 2. Being conscientious about cultivating virtue
- 3. Being conscientious about abandoning afflictions
- 1. Being conscientious about abandoning wrongdoing
  - A. If negativities and downfalls are not abandoned, one must continue [to take rebirth] in the lower realms

Verse 4.12

Therefore just as I have promised

I shall respectfully accomplish it.

If from now on I do not strive

I shall descend from lower to lower states

At the time of taking the bodhisattva vows, one promises to abandon the 18 root downfalls and the 46 faults. Here one should contemplate and think, "I am now going to practise in accordance with the promises I made at the time of taking the bodhisattva vows."

The verse is saying that one should practise respectfully, guarding against committing the downfalls and the faults by remembering the benefits of keeping to the training and the great disadvantages of going against the training. It is said in one sutra<sup>1</sup> that during these degenerate times, the benefit of keeping one precept for one day and night exceeds the merits that one accumulates from making countless offerings of umbrellas, victory banners, light and ornaments of jewels to a hundred billion buddhas for eons equal to the number of sand grains in the River Ganges.

We should read about and understand the benefits we can derive from keeping to the training. We should not engage in the training whilst feeling that they are burdensome obligations. Rather, understanding their benefits, we engage in them happily.

The verse says, "respectfully accomplish" our promise, i.e., to respectfully keep to the training. This means to be able to do them happily and to joyously persevere in the training. The meaning of joyous effort is the mind that is enthusiastic about virtue.

One should reflect on the benefits of keeping the vows and the training that one has

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> King of Concentration Sutra

promised to undertake. When one takes on these vows and commitments but do not put in any effort into keeping them, allowing oneself to be stained by downfalls and faults, the negativities that come from committing these downfalls and faults will cause one to stay in the lower realms for a long time.

One may think, "It is all right. Even if I do not strive in keeping my vows and abiding in the training as I had promised to do, because the numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas are so powerful, kind and compassionate, they will definitely stop me from going to the lower realms. They will continue to place me on the path to higher rebirths and enlightenment." If one were to think like that, one must understand that thinking in such a way is a mistake. The answer to that way of thinking comes in verse 4.13.

B. The Buddhas and their children act with equanimity

Verse 4.13
Although countless buddhas have passed by To benefit all sentient beings,
Yet I was not an object of their care
Because of my own misdeeds.

Numberless buddhas including Shakyamuni Buddha worked only for the happiness and welfare of sentient beings. Although numberless buddhas including Shakyamuni Buddha have come to pass, we were not saved by them due to our own misdeeds and negativities. We are like a patient who cannot be saved by even a very good doctor. When the patient does not follow the advice of the doctor, there is nothing the doctor can do. For the same reason, we were not protected or saved by the numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas in the past because of our own misdeeds.

When you have a burnt seed, even if all the cooperative conditions such as water, fertiliser and so forth are present, the seed will not sprout. In order for the seed to sprout, there must be something coming from the side of the seed, i.e., the seed must have the potential to transform into a sprout. But when the seed is burnt, no matter how much fertiliser and water there may be, you are not going to get any sprout. Likewise, all the numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas may possess inconceivable power and compassion but because of the power of our non-virtues, we were not protected and saved by them.

Then you may think, "Even if the buddhas and bodhisattvas do not protect and save me in this life, they will definitely do so in my next life." This is also wrong as shown in Verse 4.14.

Verse 4.14
If I still act like this,
Again and again I will likewise experience
Bad migrations, sickness, bondage,
Mutilation, and laceration.

When one does not put any effort into guarding or keeping the vows as one had promised to do and one is constantly committing downfalls and faults, the negativity

that one accumulates from such actions will throw one not just once but repeatedly into the lower realms for many lifetimes to come.

Even when one is reborn as a human again, because of the negativities accumulated from transgressing the trainings, it is said that one will experience sickness, lack of freedom, bondage and physical harms such as being beaten and so forth.

The point is that it is difficult to be protected by the buddhas and bodhisattvas in future lives when one is not careful in this life and one does not put effort into keeping the vows and the training as one has promised to do.

So it is wrong to think, "It is okay if I don't keep my vows in this life. I will be protected in my future lives." How will you be protected in future lives when you are going to be in the lower realms for many lifetimes to come?

The teachings say that even when you become a human being again as a result of having committed these downfalls and faults, you will have to experience the causally concordant effects such as sickness and so forth. One should be conscientious in keeping one's vows by thinking about these points.

It is possible that there are people who may think, "I didn't do that well this time round. In my next life, when I get a human life of freedoms and endowments again, I will try harder then." Thinking like this is a mistake. Why? The answer is in the next verse.

C. The difficulty of obtaining a human life of leisures and endowments

1. If bodhicitta deteriorates, it becomes difficult to obtain leisures and endowments that possess the four wheels<sup>2</sup>— conditions [that facilitate practice]

Verse 4.15
If the arising of a tathagata,
Faith, the attainment of a human body,
And my being fit to cultivate virtue are rare,

When will they be obtained again?

It is said in the teachings that the coming of the Buddha is as rare as the udumbara flower.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of a Buddha in any particular world system is a very rare

<sup>2</sup> The four wheels referred to here are the four conditions that facilitate practice:

- 1. to be born in a conducive environment with harmonious friends who assist us in the practice of virtue
- 2. to be able to rely on holy beings with specific reference to the fact that we have the opportunity to meet and rely on Mahayana gurus
- 3. as a result of virtuous prayers made in the past, to engage in virtue enthusiastically with one's body, speech and mind
- 4. to have good and favourable conditions for the practice of the Mahayana teachings. This comes about as the result of having accumulated or performed virtue in the past.

These four wheels are the four Mahayana spheres mentioned in the dedication prayer, Verse 117, of the *Guru Puja* (First Basic Program, Module 5, Lesson 20, page7).

<sup>3</sup> The flowers of the udumbara are enclosed within its fruit, as in all figs. Because the flower is hidden inside the fruit, a legend developed to explain the absence (and supposed rarity) of the visual flower. In Buddhist mythology, the flower was said to bloom only once every 3,000 years, and thus came to

phenomenon indeed.

In general, for any particular individual to achieve omniscience and full enlightenment, it is said that one needs to accumulate the collections of merit and wisdom over a period of three countless great eons. After achieving enlightenment, the buddhas then turn the wheel of Dharma in order to accomplish the welfare of sentient beings.

Within one great eon, starting from the beginning of the formation of a particular world system until its destruction, there are 80 intermediate eons. During these intermediate eons, most of the time the buddhas do not descend, i.e., there is the eon of darkness. The buddhas will only descend during the eon of abiding and there are only 20 intermediate eons within the eon of abiding.

Furthermore, the buddhas do not descend during the entire 20 intermediate eons of the eon of abiding. They will only descend when the average lifespan of human beings is declining. So among the 20 intermediate eons of the eon of abiding, for half the time, i.e., 10 intermediate eons, the buddhas do not descend.

Now we only have 10 intermediate eons left. Of these remaining 10 intermediate eons, again the buddhas do not descend all the time. They only descend at certain intervals.

When you put all this together, you begin to have some understanding of the rarity of the appearance of a buddha in any world system.

We talked about the human life of freedoms and endowments. There are ten endowments, five pertaining to others and five pertaining to oneself.

When we talk about the five endowments that pertain to others, there are four endowments that are related to the descent of the Buddha, the Buddha having taught the Dharma, the Dharma abiding and so forth.

There are also the five endowments that pertain to oneself, one of which is having faith in Buddhist teachings. It is very rare to have an appreciation of the teachings of the Buddha.

It is very rare to be able to achieve a human life endowed with the eight freedoms and ten endowments. So it is a mistake to think that one will get such an opportunity again in the future, that one will have a human life of freedoms and endowments again.

While we still have the opportunity, we can engage in any virtue we wish and we can do so immediately as we are free of all the obstacles. We have all the necessary conditions so we should start right now.

The teachings are telling us here that while we have all the favourable conditions and are free of all the obstacles, this is the time to work hard. It is incorrect to think, "I will practice later on in life. Now everything is going well. I have good health and I will continue to have good health. I will just do it later in my life." The teaching is telling us that thinking in such a way is also incorrect.

We may also think in this way, "I will practise later on in life. Now everything is going well. I have good health and I will continue to have good health." The teachings are telling us that thinking in such a way is also incorrect.

2. Even though they have been obtained, one should make effort because they quickly perish

Verse 4.16
I am free from sickness like the day,
Fed and free from harm,
But life is momentary and deceptive;

The body is like an object on loan for but a lava<sup>4</sup>

Look at a particular day in your life when things are going well: you have a good life, you are not sick, you have all the conditions, you do not have people harming you and you do not have any obstacles. Although that may be the case for a particular day, it is not certain that the rest of your life will be like that.

Even if you were to assume that the rest of your life will be good, i.e., you will be healthy for the rest of your life and things will always go well for you, even then there will come a time when it will all end. From now till the end of your days, all these favourable conditions are being depleted day by day, moment by moment.

Our body is like an object on loan. This precious human rebirth is obtained just once. Just as a precious object is on loan to you, there will definitely come a time when that precious object will be repossessed by its owner. Likewise, there will come a time when our life will be taken back by the Lord of Death.

Therefore it is incorrect to think, "I will keep to my vows, my training and practice in the future." You have to be conscientious about keeping your promise from the outset.

There are times where one may think that getting a human life of freedoms and endowments is not difficult. It is something that one will get over and over again. With this assumption, one then also assumes that it is therefore all right to practise in the future when one gets such an opportunity again. Of course, this is incorrect.

D. There is no opportunity to practise virtue if one has taken rebirth in the lower realms

1 There is no opportunity to practise virtue if one is reborn in the lower realms

Verse 4.17

With such behaviour of mine

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> A unit of time that lasts 1.6 minutes.

I will not obtain even a human body. If this human form is not attained, There will be solely negativity and no virtue.

We must remember the context of our discussion here. The context is that of someone who has generated bodhicitta, adopted bodhicitta through a ritual and having taken the bodhisattva vows, i.e., an oath to practise the perfections. When this person does not strive to keep to the oath that was taken but instead carelessly keeps on accumulating non-virtue and committing downfalls and faults, what will happen to such a person? As said in verse 4.17, such a person will not even obtain a human rebirth. As such, only the lower realms are open to this person.

Of course once you find yourself in the lower realms, you will not have any opportunity to engage in anything that is beneficial or virtuous.

The teachings are telling you that when you seriously look at your own actions and behaviour, you understand that it will be difficult for you to obtain such an opportunity again in the future. Even just obtaining a human rebirth will be difficult. Of course you will end up in the lower realms.

When you end up in the lower realms and you think about that, it is crystal clear that there will be no opportunity for engaging in virtue. Instead you will be only engaging in non-virtue all the time. When non-virtue is continually being accumulated, then getting out of the lower realms and getting another human rebirth will be extremely difficult.

While you may not be able to directly perceive the hell realms and the preta realms, you can observe the life of animals. There are many kinds of animals that live by killing others. They cannot survive without killing others. There are many kinds of animal that have to live like that.

Imagine you are born as an animal. Put yourself in their situation. Think about it. Your entire life is spent continually killing just to survive. It is then very clear that you will be constantly accumulating non-virtue. When that is the case, how is it possible for one to obtain a good rebirth thereafter?

2. If one does not make the effort when one has obtained a higher rebirth, once one is in the lower realms, one will be ignorant with regard to what is to be abandoned and what is to be cultivated

Verse 4.18

If, even when I have the good fortune of virtuous conduct,

I do not create virtue.

Then what shall I do when all confused

By the suffering of the unfortunate rebirths?

When you do not employ your body, speech and mind in virtue while you have this human life of eight freedoms and ten endowments, once you are in the lower realms you would not be able to even distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. You would not be able to distinguish what you need to abandon and what you need

to cultivate.

When you do not employ your body, speech and mind in even the smallest of virtues while you have all the opportunities to do so, then when you end up in the lower realms such as the hell realms, you will be completely overwhelmed by suffering. You will be completely confused as to what to abandon and what to cultivate. By thinking about this, you apply conscientiousness in keeping to your training and to engage in virtue.

3. It is extremely difficult to be liberated from the lower realms [once one has taken rebirth there]

Verse 4.19

If I do not create virtues But readily amass negativities, Then for hundreds of millions of eons I shall not even hear the term "good migration."

Here the verse is saying that while you have the opportunity and you do not cultivate even a small virtue but only accumulate negativities, then you will be reborn in the lower realms and will have to stay there for a very long time. The verse says, "hundreds of millions of eons." Once you are in the lower realms, it is very difficult to get out. You can forget about getting a good rebirth as even hearing the words, "good migration," will be extremely difficult.

E. The reason why it is difficult to obtain the leisures and endowments

Verse 4.20

For this very reason, the Bhagavan said That just as in the case of a turtle inserting its neck Into a yoke adrift upon the vast ocean, It is very hard to attain the human state.

In the sutras, the Buddha taught the difficulty of obtaining a human life of freedoms and endowments through an analogy. Imagine that there is a very vast ocean. There is a golden yoke floating on the surface of the ocean. It is constantly moving about. At the bottom of the ocean, there is a blind turtle. This blind turtle will only surface once in every one hundred years. The chances of that blind turtle surfacing and poking its neck right into the hole of that golden yoke will be very small. Likewise, the chances of getting a human life of freedoms and endowments are extremely difficult.

In short, this section talks about how you have to be conscientious about abandoning negativities and non-virtue. When you are not conscientious in abandoning non-virtue, i.e., you keep on accumulating non-virtue and being stained by the downfalls and faults, the result of all those negativities karma will be rebirth in the lower realms. You will have to stay in the lower realms for a very long time. It is also very difficult to get out of the lower realms once you are there. Keeping these points in mind, you apply conscientiousness in keeping to the vows and the training as you had promised to do.

This is similar to what you can find in the lam-rim literature.

In short, when we have the opportunity and the ability to employ ourselves in virtue, we should start right away. It will be a mistake to postpone one's practice to the future.

These verses from *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* are very powerful. You can reflect on these verses especially at times when you feel that it is difficult to keep your vows and keep to the training. By reading and contemplating these verses, you should be able to generate the willingness and joy to keep to your practice.

If you love and cherish yourself, you have to keep to the training and keep to your practice. If you do not love yourself, then that is a completely different matter.

When we talk about loving ourselves, we are not just talking about loving ourselves for just one lifetime. We are talking about real long-term happiness. Knowing how to think correctly and with a long-term view, you will come to regard your practice and engaging in virtue as an ornament to be valued and enjoyed, not a burden.

There are vows and commitments of daily recitations to be observed and so forth. When you do not know how to think, sometimes you may find it difficult to keep these up. When you do not know how to think, you may find them burdensome. It is at these times that you really must know how to think by reflecting on the points mentioned here. Much of this boils down to having the faith of conviction in karma, which is so important.

Being conscientious about cultivating virtue

- A. As negativities accumulated in the past are limitless, it would be reasonable to make effort in abandoning them
- B. The reasons the karma [that leads one to take rebirth in] the lower realms is not exhausted by merely experiencing suffering in the lower realms one time
- C. The reasons it would be reasonable to make effort in the antidotes to negativity
- A. As negativities accumulated in the past are limitless, it would be reasonable to make effort in abandoning them

Verse 4.21

If even by the negativity committed for an instant

One will abide in Relentless Torment for eons,

Then because of the negativities I have accumulated in beginningless cyclic existence,

What need to mention my not going to a good migration?

The teachings say that when one has to be reborn in the hell realms from being angry at a bodhisattva even for just one moment, then it goes without saying that one will be reborn in the lower realms for a very long time due to the immeasurable amount of non-virtue that one has accumulated since one's beginningless lifetimes.

We have accumulated an immeasurable amount of non-virtue since our beginningless lifetimes. When this is not purified, we will be thrown into the lower realms. Therefore we have to work really hard in confessing and purifying all the negativities that we have accumulated since our beginningless lifetimes.

B. The reasons the karma [that leads one to take rebirth in] the lower realms is not exhausted by merely experiencing suffering in the lower realms one time

Verse 4.22
Through experiencing merely that
I shall not be liberated,
Because while experiencing that in such a way
Other negativities will be strongly produced.

The teachings state that between virtue and non-virtue:

- The heavier of the two will ripen first.
- When both are of equal strength, the one that one is more familiar with will ripen first.
- When one is equally familiar with both virtue and non-virtue, the one that was created earlier will ripen first.

When we think about this, for us, our non-virtue is much more powerful than our virtue and we are also more familiar with non-virtue. When that ripens, we would have to experience problems and suffering. For that reason, we have to confess and purify them.

There may be people who think, "It is not really necessary to purify the negativities because once they ripen, you would have finished experiencing them. That would be it."

Others may think, "Once the negative karma or non-virtue ripens, one goes to the lower realms. All the suffering that one will experience there will exhaust all the negativities that one has accumulated. When those negativities are exhausted, then one will be liberated from the lower realms and one will get a good rebirth."

Of course this is another incorrect position. The answer to that is in Verse 4.22.

Verse 4.22
Through experiencing merely that
I shall not be liberated,
Because while experiencing that in such a way
Other negativities will be strongly produced.

Even when one finishes experiencing the fruitional effect of being reborn in the lower realms as a result of the non-virtue accumulated in the past, one will not be liberated from the lower realms. Why is this so? Because when one is in the lower realms, one is always accumulating non-virtue. There is always anger. There is always ill-will. One continuously engages in non-virtue such as killing and so forth. So it is wrong to think that one will be liberated from the lower realms once one has finished experiencing the fruitional effect of non-virtue. While one is experiencing the fruitional effect of being in the lower realms, one is continuously accumulating non-virtue. This prevents one from being liberated from the lower realms.

Based on a rebirth in the lower realms, one's ability to engage in virtue is very weak. In that state of existence, one is continuously accumulating non-virtue. Therefore the

commentary says that we should strive now to stop creating the causes for the lower realms. We have to strive to purify all the negativities that we have already accumulated in the past. When we do not strive in virtue after having obtained a good rebirth, we will be deceiving and cheating ourselves.

- C. The reasons why it would be reasonable to make effort in applying the antidotes to negativity
  - 1. One deceives oneself if one does not make effort in virtue once one has obtained leisures and endowments
  - 2. One will experience suffering in this life
  - 3. One will be tormented with the suffering of the lower realms in the future
  - 4. The reasons why it would be reasonable to abandon negativities and make effort in virtue
  - 1. One deceives oneself if one does not make effort in virtue once one has obtained leisures and endowments

Verse 4.23

If, having found such leisure,

I do not familiarize with virtue,

There can be no deception other than this;

There can be no confusion other than this.

This verse can be particularly effective when we can commit it to memory and use it to constantly remind ourselves of the point it is making.

We have obtained a human life of freedoms and endowments where we have all the conditions to practise. We have met with the teachings of the Buddha. We have met with the virtuous friend. From our side, if we do practise, the best thing that can happen is for us to achieve omniscience, full enlightenment. But even if that does not happen, we can do something to move closer to it by generating bodhicitta. At the very least, we should not die with any regrets and in order to be able to do this, we have to familiarise ourselves with virtue.

The teachings are telling us that, at the very least, we should die without any regrets so that at the time of death, we are satisfied by thinking, "Due to the fact that I have done a fair bit of practice in this life, I don't have regrets and I can go." This is the minimum.

After having found this human life of freedoms and endowments where we have all the opportunities to practise—we have met the teachings, we understand the teachings—but we do not practise, when we die, we will die with regrets. Despite having met and knowing the teachings, because of not practising the teachings and instead spending our whole lives letting ourselves be controlled by our three mental poisons—ignorance, anger and attachment—and living a life filled with the eight worldly dharmas, then at the time of death, we will die with great regrets. When this happens, then there is no greater deception than this. We would have cheated and deceived ourselves in the greatest way.

This is about saying to oneself, "I should practise pure Dharma." When you are not

conscientious in practising virtue, you will experience suffering in this life.

2. One will experience suffering in this life

Verse 4.24
If, having understood this,
Out of confusion I am indolent afterwards,
When it is time to die
Tremendous grief will rear its head.

Despite having obtained such favourable conditions we still spend our lives indulging in the objects of desire, the teachings tell us that at the time of death, we will experience great regret because we will think, "I didn't do it. I didn't practise." We will experience great regret and great regret will result in great mental suffering.

Are we not in such a situation? Despite having all the conditions for practice and knowing that we can do it and know how to do it, we always have our long list of reasons why we cannot do it, using these reasons to postpone our practice. "Not now." Aren't all of us like that?

When you do your daily commitments and think, "What is the point of doing this? What is the benefit?" immediately there is already a reason not to do it. Immediately there is a reason to stop engaging in virtue. Rather than coming out with reasons to do something beneficial, you will always find reasons not to do it, thinking, "What is the point of doing these prayers?"

Even when you may want to do it but sometimes you think, "This is not the time" or "I don't have the time." Again there is another reason not to do it.

When it comes to educating ourselves in the teachings of the Buddha, some people think, "It is too late in my life. Now I am old, I do not have the ability." Once again, immediately, that becomes another reason not to engage in virtue.

Basically there are these different lists of reasons we come up with and use to stop ourselves from practising Dharma, thus cutting the Dharma away from our lives. Actually we know what we have to cultivate and what we have to abandon. We know what we need to practise, what we need to stop doing and we know that we can do it now. But we do not do it. Instead we come up with these long list of reasons to stop ourselves from doing so.

The teachings are saying that when we live and finish our lives like that, then at the time of death, we will definitely feel very regretful. This will result in great misery and suffering. It is quite evident that this will happen. It is similar to when we fall sick. Then we remember those times when we were well, "At that time I didn't do it. So wasted." We feel regret.

We should apply ourselves to be conscientious in cultivating virtue by thinking about these points for when we are not conscientious in cultivating virtue, we will suffer when we are in the lower realms.

3. One will be tormented with the suffering of the lower realms in the future

Verse 4.25
If my body burns for a long time
In the fires of hell which are difficult to bear,
Inevitably my mind will be tormented
By the blazing fires of unbearable remorse.

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Patricia Lee & Julia Koh; edited by Cecilia Tsong.