

**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 1**16 February 2016**

Cultivating joyous effort. The four powers. The laziness of procrastination and its antidote, the meditation on death and impermanence. Going to the lower realms. Practising the Dharma. “Why must I study so much?” Disadvantages of not remembering death & impermanence.

CULTIVATING JOYOUS EFFORT

In Gyaltsab Je’s commentary on *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, in the summary at the end of Chapter Seven, he said, “Sincerely achieving the aspiration for liberation depends on the practice of joyous perseverance to complete what one initially started and is engaged in. Hence one should generate joyous perseverance that is complete with the four powers.”

This verse is addressing those of us who are seeking the happiness of liberation and omniscience. Starting the process of doing so and then achieving our goal depends on our joyous effort or joyous perseverance. In order to develop such joyous effort, we must cultivate the four powers.

As a Buddhist, it is extremely important that we reflect on the workings of karma and its effects. It is important that we understand that non-virtue is an object to be abandoned and that virtue is to be cultivated.

*The four powers***1. The power of aspiration**

Of the four powers, the first one—the power of aspiration—is essentially developing the conviction in karma and its effects. Through understanding that non-virtue is to be abandoned and that virtue is to be cultivated, one develops the heartfelt yearning that wants to abandon non-virtue and actualise virtue.

On the basis of generating this power of aspiration, then one engages in the actual practice.

2. The power of steadfastness

After one starts to practise, one has to ensure that the practice is brought to its full culmination. One needs to complete the practice as the practice cannot be done part-time, i.e., one does the practice sometimes and other times, one doesn’t do it at all. There must be stability in one’s practice. That is the second power, the power of steadfastness.

3. The power of joy

The power of joy is not being satisfied or satiated by the practice of virtue. One is

completely immersed in one's practice. The example given in the teachings is that of a child at play. When children play, they are completely immersed in their play, enjoying it thoroughly. When they are playing, they do so happily. Even when their parents tell them to stop, they will continue playing. Likewise, the power of joy refers to this insatiability with regard to the practice of virtue.

4. *The power of relinquishment*

Due to joyously persevering in virtue, it is possible that at times one will be physically and/or mentally exhausted. If one is tired because of having joyously persevered in the practice of virtue, then it is necessary to rest with the idea of resuming one's practice when one has rested.

The last verse of Chapter Seven of the root text says:

Verse 76

Just as the wind blowing back and forth
Controls a piece of cotton,
So shall I be mastered by enthusiasm,
And in this way I will accomplish all.

The definition of joyous effort is enthusiasm for virtue. It is a mind that takes delight and joy in virtue. When one's mind is under the influence of one's joyous effort, whether one is engaging in virtue physically or verbally, the mind is able to control and master one's body and speech.

Whatever virtuous or beneficial deeds that one is going to engage in, it is important to do so with a happy mind that looks forward to and enjoys such activities. This is important. When we have joyous effort, whatever we do with our body and speech can become virtue.

The laziness of procrastination: prioritising the happiness of this life over the Dharma

All of us are affected by laziness. Because of laziness, it is difficult for us to generate joyous effort. We are capable of engaging in many virtues, but somehow, because of laziness, we don't engage in the virtuous activities that we are capable of doing.

We are able to do many practices. We know that. Furthermore, all the favourable conditions, both external and internal, are gathered that enables us to engage in such virtuous practices. Yet, somehow we do not engage in virtue.

What is the reason for this? We need to analyse and check for ourselves the reasons why this is so. If we think about it, basically, we end up postponing the practice. We can do it. We have all the conditions to do it. We see that we can do it and we even have the idea, "It is a good thing to do. I must do these practices." But somehow, we always procrastinate and postpone doing these practices. "Maybe not today. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next month. Maybe next year."

Khen Rinpoche: Maybe next life?

We see the need to engage in virtue. We see that we can do it but we don't do it! We always think, "Maybe I will do it in the future." We need to analyse the reasons why we

procrastinate. The reason why the practice of virtue and the practice of Dharma are postponed is because, in our list of priorities, the Dharma is of a lower priority than the happiness and affairs of this life. Because of that, we devote all our time and energy to the happiness of this life. Then there is no time for the Dharma and the practice of virtue. Virtue is postponed and relegated to tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Even at the end of our life, we may still think of postponing it. Although we claim to be spiritual aspirants who are looking for freedom and liberation, in practice, this is not so. This is the laziness of procrastination.

Its antidote: the meditation on death and impermanence

The best antidote to the laziness of procrastination is the meditation on our impending death and impermanence. We are familiar with these instructions from the lam-rim. The continual and deep reflection on our impending death and impermanence are extremely important. We have to focus on them and we have to do this all the time. We have to think seriously about our mortality: how definitely we are going to die, how the time of our impending death is uncertain and how at the time of death nothing is of any use to us except the Dharma. We have heard these teachings many times. Now what we have to do is to meditate on these points continually.

There is a saying by one of the Kadampa masters that goes, “Since I do not know which will come first—tomorrow or death—therefore, I am going to focus on my practice now.” This advice is very useful to counteract any idea of procrastination that we may have.

So when we have such thoughts—“Maybe I will do it tomorrow”—then it is useful to think about this advice from the Kadampa masters. We have to reason with ourselves whether we can be really sure that we will not die tomorrow, that we will get something done tomorrow. Since death is certain and we are not sure when it is going to happen, then it is more important and profitable for us to do something that will benefit us in all our future lives.

Going to the lower realms

~ “*Can I endure those sufferings?*”

We have to bring to mind the likely consequences of actually dying without having done some real practice. What will be the consequences then? We have to bring to mind that the likely consequence is that we will go to the lower realms and be born in the hells or as a hungry ghost or an animal. We have all heard and read about the teachings on the sufferings of the hell beings, the hungry ghosts and animals. What we need to do is to think about them and put ourselves in those positions.

What if we end up in the lower realms because we didn’t manage to do any real practice in this life? We know the descriptions of all those terrible sufferings. We have to meditate and ask ourselves honestly, “If I was to end up in that situation, will I be able to endure it?” This is something we have to seriously meditate on.

If we don’t do anything that is beneficial, virtuous or meaningful in this life, then what other options are there after we die other than going to the lower realms?

We have to ask ourselves honestly, “Once I am there, can I endure those sufferings?”

~ *“Can I get out easily from the lower realms?”*

We also have to ask ourselves very honestly, “Can I get out easily from the lower realms? Is it so easy to get a human rebirth?” Once we are in the lower realms, we will engage in non-virtue all the time. If we analyse and think about this carefully, we will see that once we are in the lower realms, it is almost impossible to get out.

As a being in the lower realms—be it a hell being, a hungry ghost or an animal—is it even possible to develop a virtuous state of mind? If it is so difficult to generate a virtuous state of mind as a being in the lower realms, how is it possible then for that being to get out? There is no condition or basis for that to happen.

I think this is the best meditation and the best antidote. We have to ask ourselves honestly, “If I do go to the lower realms, can I get out once I am there? Is it possible to get out? Is it possible to engage in virtue?” If we were to put ourselves in that situation and imagine how difficult it will be, we will see that getting out is almost impossible once we end up there.

When we gather all these points, then a heartfelt yearning to make our life meaningful by engaging in virtue will arise naturally in our heart. This enthusiasm for virtue and the desire to practise Dharma have to come from within us. Nobody can give them to us. They cannot come from outside.

These qualities can only come about when we think about our own life in accordance with the teachings. It is through such serious, honest reflection that we can see for ourselves the need to do something meaningful with our lives by practising and engaging in virtue. We have to see this for ourselves.

Otherwise, there is no way we are going to engage in any beneficial activities. We will not make our lives meaningful and we are not going to engage in virtue as there is no reason for us to do so. When we don't see the reasons for ourselves, then we will not engage in practice. We will find the Dharma worthless. When we look at the Dharma now, we do not think that it is priceless. We do not treasure it because we do not see the reasons as to why we should practise the Dharma. Therefore, in order to practise Dharma, we have to see for ourselves the reasons why we should do so.

When we seriously reflect on these points, we can see for ourselves the need to practise virtue and to engage in something that will make our lives meaningful. Then naturally from our own side, we will engage in virtue happily. We will take joy and delight in our practice. This will show when we do our daily prayers, when we prostrate and circumambulate because we see the point of engaging in such practices. Whatever we do, we see the benefit of such practices and the reasons for doing them. Whatever virtue we engage in, we do so happily, with great enjoyment, without any difficulties or resistance. Therefore, when we can engage in our practice or approach life with this kind of enthusiasm, if we think about it, then there is some real hope of permanent everlasting happiness.

But we do not see the Dharma as valuable, as something to be treasured. Instead, high on our list of priorities are the happiness and affairs of this life. We devote all our time and energy, almost the entire day, to looking for the happiness of this life. We are totally emotionally immersed in and attached to the happiness of this life. We devote

completely our time and energy to this goal.

We also enjoy hanging around, doing nothing, gossiping with one another, trying to find out who is doing what and talking about this or that person. Isn't that how we spend our life? Essentially, these activities are distractions from the practice of virtue. They amount to a distracted life that is not thinking about virtue. Rather it is thinking of anything other than virtue—gossiping, one's career, accumulating wealth and the happiness of this life. When we get pleasure out of such activities, then we become even more attached to them.

Basically that is how we spend our life. If we analyse the mind that is completely immersed in the affairs of this life, it is non-virtue, i.e., there is no space in that mind for virtue. From one moment to the next, the mind is always moving from one affliction to another—ignorance, attachment, desire, anger and then back to attachment again. So in every single moment, we are immersed in and accumulating non-virtue.

Non-virtuous thoughts mean non-virtue. We are completely focussed on the affairs of this life, the happiness of this life and then getting attached to them. Living in this way, there is no space whatsoever for virtue. It is just non-virtue, i.e., in each and every single moment, we are only accumulating non-virtue.

What is the fruitional effect of non-virtue? There is only one possibility. The fruitional or ripening effect is rebirth in the lower realms. From this, we can see how in exchange for our preoccupation with and attachment to the happiness of this life, what we get in return is rebirth in the lower realms. That is not very smart of us, as it will only bring about problems and suffering.

If we are unable to generate the real wish to make our life meaningful by using it to engage in virtue and to practise the Dharma, if we do not transform that kind of mind set, then it doesn't matter how much studying, reading, learning or reflection of the Buddhadharma we do. It will be pointless because we will not achieve the intended purpose.

If we are really seeking freedom and liberation, then we need to seriously think about all these points that we have just discussed continually all the time. However, if we are not looking for liberation but just looking for the happiness of this life, then that is fine. We don't have to do this. But if we consider ourselves to be Buddhists and the seekers of liberation, then we have no choice but to think about these points.

PRACTISING THE DHARMA

When we talk about the holy Dharma, in a simple way, it is a virtuous state of mind. When we generate a virtuous state of mind, that is practising the holy Dharma. If we are able just to have the thought or wish to do something meaningful and beneficial for others, in a simple way, that is the holy Dharma. Generating such an attitude is the holy Dharma. If we understand this for ourselves, definitely we will be happy in this life when we practise the holy Dharma. The next life will also be a happy one. By practising the holy Dharma, we can achieve liberation and also omniscience or enlightenment. We have to realise this for ourselves.

If we think of the holy Dharma as an intention, thought or wish to benefit others, wanting to do something good for others, there is a kind of joy and satisfaction deep in our heart. However, on those occasions when we have negative feelings towards someone in particular, wanting to harm and do something bad to that person, if we look at that state of mind, deep down, it is a very unhappy and miserable mind. Having negative states of mind disturbs and harms us in this life. It doesn't benefit us. If it doesn't benefit us now in this life, how can it benefit us in future lives?

These couple of points are very important. We really have to think about them seriously for ourselves. In short, once we are able to gain mastery and control over our mind, directing it towards virtue, that mind will be able to exert a positive influence over our body and speech. Then whatever we do with our body, speech and mind, we can easily make them virtuous.

When we learn the Dharma and listen to the teachings, we need to do so enthusiastically. When we reflect on the teachings, we also need to do that enthusiastically. Likewise, when we are meditating, we need to do so enthusiastically. From our own side, we must really want the Dharma. Therefore, the activities of hearing, reflection and meditation have to be done willingly, happily and enthusiastically. Otherwise, it will be tough going.

If we look at Tibetan monasteries on the top of the front of the building, there is usually a Dharma wheel. On its left and right are a buck and doe (male and female deers respectively). They sit there with their ears pointed upright in an alert posture. We will not see a buck and doe on top of a monastery depicted with their ears drooping down.

The dharmachakra or Dharma wheel has eight spokes symbolising the eightfold noble path (or the eight branches of the arya path). The buck and doe on the left and right of the Dharma wheel are focussed on the Dharma wheel. Their upright ears symbolise listening to the teachings intently with concentration. Deers in the wild are always alert even at night when they are resting. They have to be very alert because they need to protect themselves from predators and hunters. They are ready to run on hearing the slightest sound. Likewise, whenever we are listening to an explanation of and learning the Dharma, we have to listen intently with a very alert mind.

Khen Rinpoche: So are your ears up or down?

“WHY MUST I STUDY SO MUCH?”

There are many people who believe that in order to practise the Dharma, one does not need to learn and study so much. Such people always ask, “Why must I study all these topics? Why are they so complicated? Why must I study so much? One just needs to practise.” We often get such questions.

Khen Rinpoche: Do you think like that?

In answer to this, Maitreya Buddha said, “If there is no need to study in order to practise, what is the purpose of Buddha Shakyamuni teaching the three scriptural collections?”

That is Maitreya Buddha's answer. If there is no need to study so extensively in order to practise, it absurdly follows that there is no real purpose behind Buddha Shakyamuni

revealing all those teachings that form the three scriptural collections, the *Tripitaka*. Therefore, the meaning of this answer to the first question is that we do need to study extensively.

The second question: “I accept I need to study but do I really need to meditate on what I have studied?” The reply from Maitreya Buddha is this: “If there is no need to meditate on what you have heard, then why did all the past holy beings meditate?”

So Maitreya Buddha is saying that it is insufficient just to study. We must practise and familiarise ourselves with what we have learnt. To meditate means to familiarise ourselves with the subject.

In general, the more teachings we learn, the greater will be our wisdom of hearing. The more teachings we hear, the more we learn, the more we study, generally speaking, our wisdom arisen from hearing will be greater.

Somebody may say, “So what?”

When we have more knowledge, we will have more things to think about, more things to reflect upon and more material to work with. With more material to reflect on, that will be commensurate with a greater wisdom from reflection.

Somebody may then say, “So you have more wisdom from reflection. So what?”

But it is a big deal! Because the greater the wisdom arising from one’s reflection, the greater will be one’s ability to approach a single meditation topic from various angles. This is something that other people cannot do. We will be able to approach the topic from various perspectives and different angles, and when we can do that, the quality of our familiarisation and meditation will also be better.

While this applies to the Dharma, it can also apply to the secular world. Generally speaking, the more educated a person is, the greater is his ability to think and analyse. If the person is able to think more deeply, he will have more options that he can explore and achieve.

So asking, “Why do I need to study so much in order to practise the Dharma?” is like asking, “Why do I need to study so much in order to get a good job or to do many things in life?” Then we also do not need to study to be able to work. We can just do it.

Khen Rinpoche: Why do you study so hard?

There is really not much of a choice if we are looking for liberation and enlightenment. The method is the Dharma. But because the Dharma is so vast and profound, it is not simply coming to an understanding, “This is virtue and that is non-virtue.” It is not that simple.

Since the Dharma is not simple and is very deep and profound, then there is no choice but to learn to know more. This is the reason why the teachings emphasise that the practice of meditation and familiarising ourselves with virtue have to be preceded by analysis and reflection.

Reflection in turn must be preceded by studying, whether it be reading or listening to the teachings. So in order for us to practise well and to be able to meditate well, we have no choice but to learn and study.

At the same time, the teachings emphasise that there is no benefit to studying alone as that will not change the mind. The whole point of learning the Dharma is to put into practice what we have learnt so we must meditate on what we have learnt. If we do this as advised and in an proper order—first learning and at the same time, reflecting on what we have learnt followed by meditating on and familiarising ourselves with what we have ascertained—then there is no doubt that our mind will be transformed and change for the better.

DISADVANTAGES OF NOT REMEMBERING DEATH & IMPERMANENCE

The best and the most important antidote to our laziness of procrastination is the meditation on our impending death and impermanence. In the lam-rim teachings, there is a discussion on the disadvantages or faults of not remembering our impending death and impermanence. When we don't actively remember our impending death, we will not remember the Dharma at all. Why do we not remember the Dharma or the practice of virtue? The reason is that we forget that we are going to die!

Another fault of not remembering our impending death or impermanence is that even if we do remember the Dharma, we do not practise it. Why is that so? What is the reason? It goes back again to not being aware of and not remembering that we are going to die.

Even if at those times when we do remember the Dharma and we actually get down to doing some practice, such practice does not become real Dharma practice. It is not pure practice because it is tainted with our preoccupation with the affairs of this life and our attachment to the happiness of this life.

Most of us probably are in this kind of situation. We may end up doing some kind of practice but our practice does not end up as real Dharma practice. It is basically polluted and contaminated, the reason being that once again, we have forgotten about our impending death since we do not think about death and impermanence.

Even for those people who are able to remember the Dharma—whatever practice they do is pure practice and real Dharma—they are not able to sustain it. Although they are able to practise Dharma purely, they are unable to sustain their practice earnestly. That again is a fault of not remembering death and impermanence well.

The topic of our death and impermanence is not intellectually challenging at all. It is straightforward and so easy to understand. It is not complicated. What we have to do is to actively remember, reflect on and really think about this topic continually every day.

We need to recognise that we are going to die but we don't know when the time of our death will be. When we talk about death and impermanence and we use the word, impermanence, it is not referring to impermanence as something out there. Rather it is referring to our own life span, the fact that we are impermanent and all of us are going to die sooner or later. It is just that we don't know when. This is the kind of recognition of death and impermanence that we need to have.

If we are able to recognise our own mortality and impermanence, then it becomes easy to stop negative thoughts like desire, attachment and anger. As said in the lam-rim, among all the recognitions, the recognition of our death and impermanence is supreme. Why? Because the moment we remember our own mortality—that we are going to die—then at the time of death, whatever negative thoughts we may have, be it anger, desire, attachment or pride, they do not matter to us anymore. The moment the recognition of our own death comes, those thoughts will be pacified immediately. This is why the teachings say that the recognition of our own death and impermanence is the best of all recognitions.

In the study of Buddhist philosophy, there is the study of dialectics where one analyses a topic through the use of reasoning. Let us say one is studying the topic of impermanence. One can point to any object as the object of enquiry. Then one proves that the object is impermanent due to certain reasons.

In classical debate, it is often said, “The vase is impermanent because it is a product.” Intellectually we know that the vase cannot be permanent. Obviously, it is impermanent because it is a product.

If somebody were to say, “The vase is permanent,” it is shocking and very surprising. “How can that be?” We understand that the vase is impermanent and if somebody tells us that the vase is permanent, we will brush it off as nonsense.

But the person who holds on to the view that the vase is impermanent is at the same time holding on to his own life span and himself to be permanent. Isn't that even more surprising?

We try to grabble with the concept of impermanence. We understand the concept of impermanence but our understanding of impermanence must be applied mainly to ourselves. It is not so much an inquiry of impermanence as it pertains to the world, the vase and so forth. We need to grasp the concept of impermanence and then apply it to ourselves, our own life span and our own impending death. This is what we need to understand.

If we can get some idea and some feeling for our own impermanence and our own impending death, that understanding alone helps tremendously in weakening or pacifying whatever strong desire, attachment, jealousy, pride, anger and negative sense of competitiveness that we may have. These are all naturally pacified.

We should experiment and check this out for ourselves—thinking about our own mortality and how definitely we will die one day. As we have no idea when we will die, it could be very soon. When we think about this and gain an understanding of it, we can experiment and see for ourselves whether our negative thoughts and emotions become weaker. This is very important and something we have to check out for ourselves. We have to experience the benefit for ourselves, to gain this little experience and taste the Dharma. That is very important. Once we have tasted the Dharma, this will be the motivating factor for us to keep on going. You will know that the Dharma is helpful, that it works. This is the basis for us to persevere and carry on.

What I am trying to say today is that whatever we do, especially when it relates to the

practice of virtue, Dharma practice—specifically listening to the Dharma, studying the Dharma, reading and thinking about the Dharma—must be done with a happy mind. We must want to do it happily and we must have enthusiasm for the Dharma. That is important. That is joyous perseverance. In order to develop such joyous perseverance, one has to identify the obstacles, work on them and eliminate them as much as possible.

We will start on Chapter Eight this coming Thursday.

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Examination on *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*: Sunday, 20 Feb 2016 @ 3.30pm. One hour paper.

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Patricia Lee and Rachel Tan; edited by Cecilia Tsong.