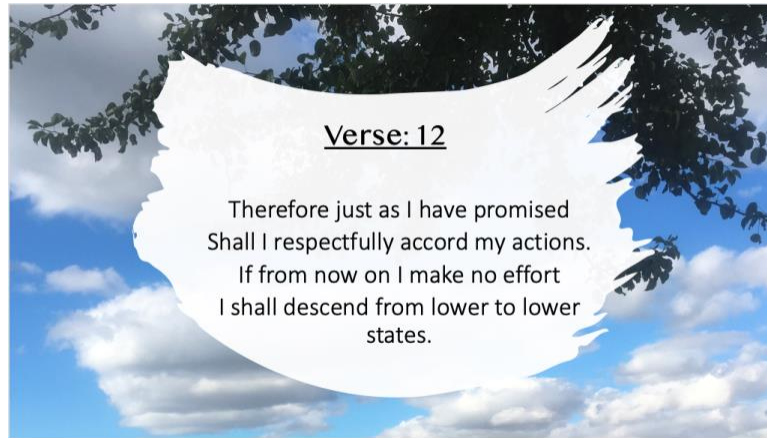
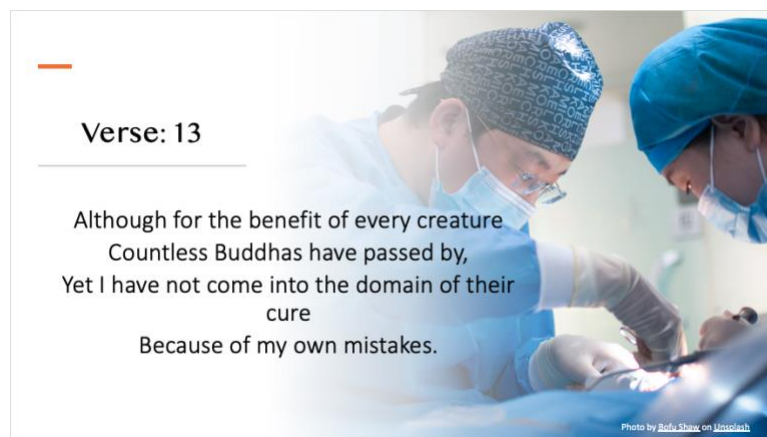


In the chapter on Conscientiousness, Shantideva employs various means to urge us to adopt conscientiousness. Up to here, the reasons for the adoption of conscientiousness is mainly based on our precepts – as per our pledges, that we need to upkeep or face unfavorable consequences. The following three stanzas implore us to persevere in the training.



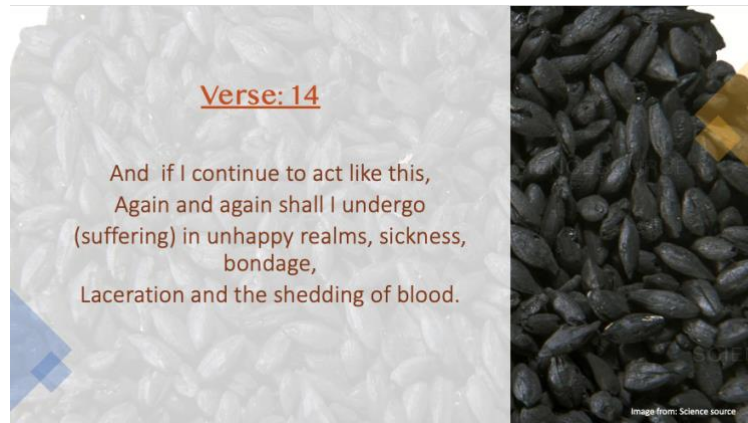
When training, challenges are inevitable but we need to persevere by seeing the meaning behind the hardship. Fredrick Nietzsche once said, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how”. When we see the long-term benefits for training, it is easier to bear the temporary challenges. As such, we need to regularly contemplate on the benefits of pursuing the bodhisattvas’ path in general and in particular, guarding the bodhisattva vows. Otherwise, we risk undermining our training in bodhisattva practices and risk becoming reckless to the point of violating our vows. Such transgressions result in suffering. Some may argue that Buddhas will liberate us from such consequences and therefore it is not a big deal to break our vows or forsake bodhicitta. The following verse refutes that notion.



To benefit sentient beings, countless buddhas have come and gone. Yet we are still in this samsara undergoing incessant suffering. Despite countless buddhas’ efforts, we could not be cured of our chronic illness of delusions. This is because although the Buddhas’ compassionate hands are always stretched toward us, we fail to hold on to their hands. It is like a patient finding a great doctor but failing to take the prescribed medicines or doctor’s instructions. Simply reading the medicine bottle will not cure the illness. One needs to ingest the pills and follow the doctor’s advice. Likewise, unless


and until we put the teachings into practice, thousands buddhas appearing before us at the same time, will not save us. In commentaries, a burned seed is used as an analogy. No matter how fertile the soil is or how diligently we water it, a burned seed will not bear any fruits. In such a case, seed is at fault and not the other conditions. Likewise, if we fail to take the vows seriously and train in the precepts as taught by buddha, our sufferings will not end. Therefore, it is crucial to be conscientious and watchful of our physical and mental actions.

We can still argue that whilst past buddhas could not save us but the future buddhas can still save us. To address this, Shantideva states the following stanza.



As mentioned before, the sole reason why past buddhas could not liberate us is that we did not heed their advice. It is like asking someone for directions but ignoring those instructions. Buddhas have given very specific instructions: engage in the practice of abandoning non-virtue and cultivate virtue. We do the opposite. If we continue recklessly in this way, we will surely end up in lower realms, undergoing unimaginable misery. Even if we managed to obtain a human rebirth, our lives will be filled with all kinds of sufferings such as sickness and torture. However, if we implement the Buddha's instructions and train in the precepts accordingly, we can put an end to our sufferings. In sutras, Buddha highlights in the merit of observing ethical discipline during degenerated times. In one sutra, it says that the merit of observing even one precept is far greater than that of making offerings (of all kinds) to the buddhas for countless aeons. Moreover, the merit of keeping a pure vow during the degenerated time supersedes the forementioned merits. Hence Shantideva urges us to respect one's vows and protect them at all cost. Up to here, we contemplate on the negative consequences of failing to train in the precepts and generate firm determination to guard our vows and engage in the training with joyous enthusiasm.

Shantideva offers another approach for us to generate conscientiousness: Reflecting on the rarity of obtaining the precious human rebirth. Understanding how easy it is to commit non virtue and end up having a lower realm rebirth, the next stanza shows us how we may not obtain the optimum human rebirth again.




Ten Endowments	
5 personal endowments	5 endowments that pertain to others
Being born as human	Buddha has come
Being born in a central land	Dharma was taught
Having all the faculties intact	The teachings survive
Not having committed the most extreme negative actions	Followers exist
Having faith in the source	A feeling of compassion for others exist

Verse: 15

If the arising of a Tathagata,
Faith, the attainment of a huma body
And my being fit to cultivate virtue are scarce,
When will they be won again?

Shantideva argues that the chances of obtaining a human rebirth that is endowed with 10 endowments is slim. First of all, achieving a mere human rebirth is hard, not to mention of a one that is conducive to dharma practice. The main ingredient for a human rebirth is observing ethical discipline of avoiding the ten non-virtues. Mere disengagement with the ten non-virtues does not constitutes observing ethical discipline. It requires a conscious decision to abstain from committing the ten non-virtues. Unless one has taken some form of praktimoksha vows, one needs to generate the intent to refrain from, for instance, ten non-virtues on daily basis. We know from our own experience, we rarely cultivate such a mindset and therefore we are not engaging in the observance of ethical discipline. Without that, we lack the very ingredient that produces a human rebirth. Even if we obtain the human rebirth by some coincidence, there is no certainty that we will meet Buddha dharma as Buddha’s coming to earth is very rare. The chance is likened to a rare flower called Utumwara flower. This tree (Utumvara) bears flowers only once in a several thousand years. In addition, not all the buddhas that appear on earth will teach the Mahayana vehicle. On top of that, teachings of some buddhas last for a very short period of time. In that sense, our chances of meeting the Mahayana teachings are extremely rare. Therefore, we cannot assume that we will obtain the optimum human rebirth in the future. For that reason Shantideva asks, “*when will they* (the freedoms and endowments) *be won again?*”.



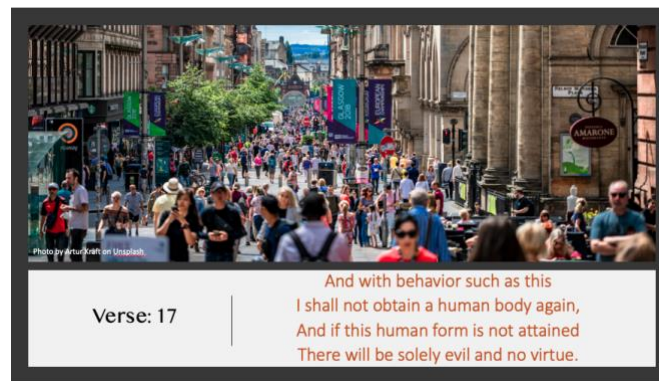
Verse: 16

Although today I am healthy,
Well-nourished and unafflicted,
Life is momentary and deceptive:
The body is like an object on loan for a
minute.

One may then argue that even if it is difficult to achieve human rebirth in the future, I still have this life and therefore it is ok. Shantideva reminds us of the impermanent nature of this life. At this moment, we may be healthy, have adequate resources to support our lives and no one is inflicting harm on us but this can all end abruptly. We hear of sudden deaths of seemingly healthy people. Our lives are not guaranteed. They are in constant flux and the passing of every second draws us nearer to our end. It is like the Minnehaha Falls (in the picture) - incessantly flowing away. We have no control over the momentariness of our lives. Even the very things that are supposed to sustain us

may kill us. For instance, people die from food poisoning, overeating and even from medicines. If sustenance can become lethal, what more the harmful factors. Our life is like a loaned item. It can be taken away from us any time, whether we are ready or not. It is deceptive to think that we own our lives and thereby have control over it. It is unwise to simply take comfort in being alive now and not prepare for future. Since death is certain but the time of death is uncertain, Shantideva urges us to be conscientious about practicing dharma while we are still alive.

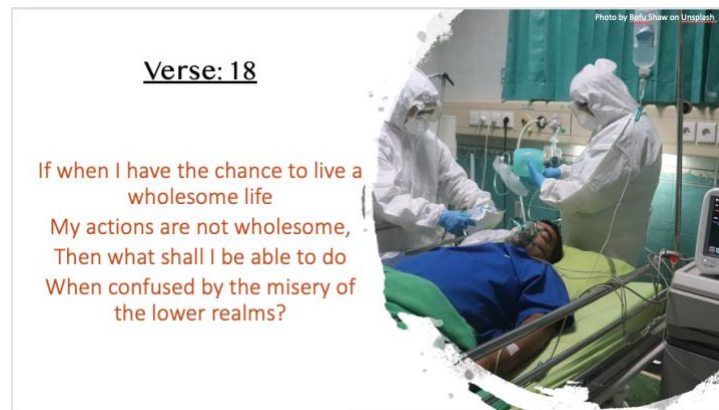
If we think that although we haven't done much good in this life, we can do so in our future rebirths, the next verse explains how such a hope may turn out to be a fantasy and therefore, dharma practice should start right now. If we fail to grab the opportunity to practice in this life,



the likelihood of achieving another human rebirth is extremely slim. Our physical and mental actions are quite often dominated by non-virtue. Negative emotions such as attachment, anger, jealousy, greed etc. arise without effort. However, positive thoughts such as compassion, love, patience etc. are hard to generate. These are clear indications of where we are going to be born in our next life. Kadampa masters have a saying that “Look at our present condition to know what we have done in the past; look at our present actions to know where we will go”. As such, taking into account of our present conduct and actions, our next destination is pretty much finalized i.e. the lower realms.

It might be tolerable if a lower realm rebirth were a short, one-time deal. However, once we end up in lower realms, there is hardly any opportunity to do virtue because we will be consumed by pain and suffering. Imagine doing a meditation while having a splitting headache or famished or thirty. Right now, we cannot focus on dharma practice when we experience some form of discomfort in this world, let alone the pains of the hell and hungry ghost realms that are far more intense. Likewise, in the animal realm – they may experience less suffering but they lack intelligence to understand even a single word of dharma. Try teaching your pet to cultivate compassion or practice the ten virtues. They will not understand. At best, some may be able to say the word but will not understand. When it comes to committing negative karma, beings in the lower realms commit them easily. For instance, when we take our dogs for a walk and when they see squirrels, the first reaction is to chase after them. Some fight with other dogs for no reason. Some even bite their owners. There are other dogs who attempt to attack passersby. When I go for a walk, I pass by houses that have dogs and some of them charge at me from behind the fence. When they bark, chase or attempt attacks, they are not propelled by virtuous minds such as love and compassion. They are driven by anger. Hence, they constantly commit negative karma. Hence, Shantideva says, “*I will not obtain a human body again*”.

Another reason why it is hard to escape the lower realms once born there is due to the inability to generate virtuous mind at the time of death. Remember we emphasize the importance of virtuous mind at the time of death. With a virtuous mind, it brings up one's positive karma and thereby throws one into higher rebirth. How can an animal cultivate a virtuous mindset at the time of death? Without the virtuous mindset at the time of death as a determining factor, the birth is then determined by the heaviness of karma (between positive and negative karma). If unwholesome karma is dominant, the next rebirth too will be in the lower realms. Thus, the next verse reiterates the importance of focusing on dharma practice right now.



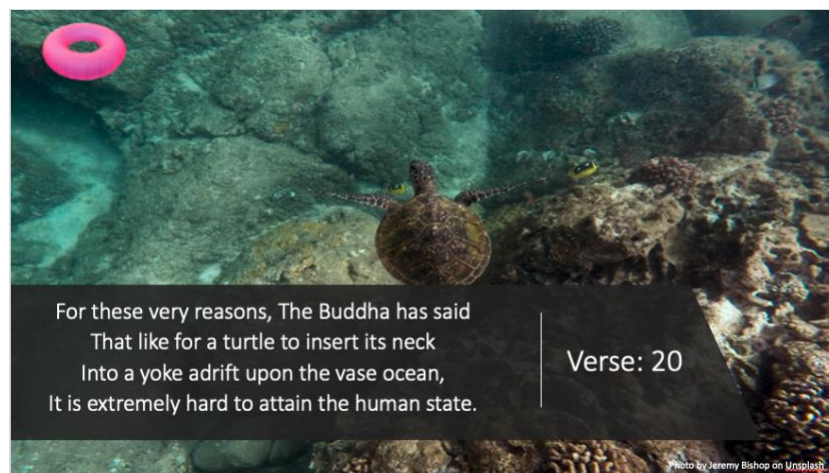
At the moment, we have not yet fallen into the abyss of the three lower realms. We still have the precious human life and all the conducive factors to practice dharma. If in spite of that, we still fail to utilize this rare opportunity to practice dharma and instead recklessly engage in negative actions, we are bound to undergo tremendous suffering in the future. At that time, there is nothing we can do other than to be overwhelmed by regret and mental anguish. It will be too late then! We hear about Covid patients undergoing so much pain but such pain and suffering is nothing compared to the misery associated with hell and preta realms. At this stage of our human lives, we are not helpless. The reins are in our hands and we can steer away from lower realms by employing conscientiousness in our physical and mental actions. Chandrakirti says in the Madhyamakavatara:

If, when free and living with favourable conditions,
We do not retain this status we enjoy,
We will fall into the abyss and be at the mercy of others.
What could enable us to rise up again from such a state?

We should therefore fully utilize this freedom and ensure we do not fall into the abyss. This is achieved by engaging in the practice of abandoning non-virtue and cultivating virtue.



This verse discusses the difficulty of escaping from lower realms once born there. It is said that the number of beings re-obtaining higher rebirth is so low compared to those who regress from higher to lower rebirths. Buddha illustrated this point by using sand as an example. The number of beings who regress from higher rebirth to lower rebirth is likened to the amount of sand in buddha’s hand whereas, those who continue to achieve higher rebirth is similar to the amount of sand that is collected on buddha’s fingernail. The amount of sand grains amassed in one’s hand is far greater than the sand grains on the fingernail. Given the fact that many do not motivate to observe ethical discipline, which is the main ingredient for higher rebirth, this huge difference is understandable. First of all, people who understand the importance of observing ethical discipline of avoiding the ten non-virtues are very few. Amongst the handful who know, those who observe ethical discipline are even fewer. On the other hand, there are countless persons who flagrantly neglect the laws of karma and commit unwholesome actions. Therefore, many end up in lower realms. If we fail to take serious steps to rectify our habit, Shantideva says that we will not even hear the term “higher rebirth” for aeons, let alone obtaining one. This is illustrated by an analogy in the following verse.



The analogy to illustrate the rarity of obtaining the optimum human rebirth is that of a blind turtle (and turtles have long lives) who remains most of the time undersea and only comes up to the surface once every hundred years. There is a ring on surface of the sea that floats in all directions due to the strong waves. In such scenario, what are the odds of this turtle coming up to the surface in time to meet the ring and insert its neck through that ring? Nearly impossible. This is why Shantideva says that “*it is extremely hard to attain human state.*”

