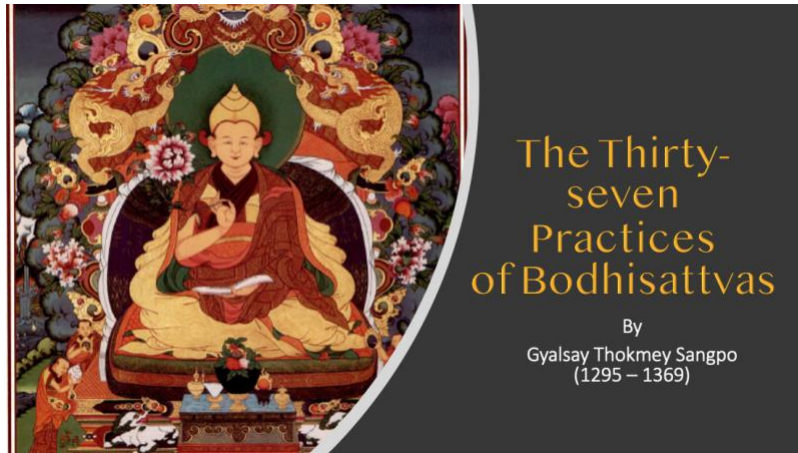


The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas



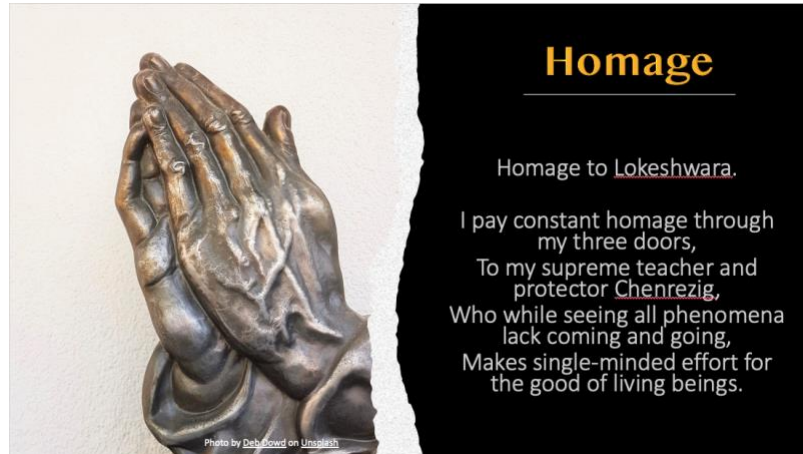
We are now embarking on a new journey through the text known as the *37 Practices of Bodhisattvas*. I am sure many of you have received this teaching before and therefore very familiar with it. If so, you may treat this as a revision class. This is a type of text that can be taught over ten days or in one session but it is important to note that this text contains the whole package of bodhisattva practices and is therefore profound and comprehensive. It encompasses the whole Lamrim. As we have already covered all the main lamrim topics, I will not go into much detail but will elaborate on the points that I feel require more emphasis.

What is this text about? These are the set of practices known as the noble path that all the buddhas of three times have travelled. A common path adopted by all the past buddhas to become buddhas. These are also the core practices of the present bodhisattvas. There are no other practices aside from these that bodhisattvas engage in on their passage to Buddhahood.

These sets of practices are also the source of all happiness and joy. Whoever engages in these practices will enjoy happiness because they entail curbing the self-cherishing attitude, which is the origin of suffering. Through this practice one can prevent falling into the abyss of the lower realms and securing a good rebirth that is conducive to one's spiritual journey. They lead to freedom from samsara and Buddhahood. Hence these are core practices for Mahayana practitioners, especially for those who have taken bodhisattva vows. When we adopt these practices as our own, we are then truly practicing the Mahayana teachings and won't need additional practices. Without these 37 practices, pursuing even highest yoga tantra practice will not bring beneficial results. So, these practices are extremely important and indispensable for a Mahayana practitioner. We are so fortunate that great beings such as Thokmey Sangpo has collated these sets of practices into a single text, so that that need not search all over into hundreds of sutras. It has been made so easy for us with clear instructions what a bodhisattva practitioner should or should not do. In this case, 37 sets of practices are laid out for us to follow.

The author of this text is Gyalsey Thokmey Sangpo, an undisputed bodhisattva. Born in 1295, he lost his parents at a young age and was raised by his grandmother. He joined the monastery at age 14 and received the name Sangpo Pal. After receiving teachings on Abhidharma, he was able to answer any questions quickly and therefore called "Thokmey" which literally means "unobstructed". Later the title "Gyalsay" was added as an honorific term. Gyalsay literally means the son of buddha, meaning

bodhisattva. Scholars and practitioners of that time unanimously recognized Thokmey Sangpo as a bodhisattva. His Holiness the Dalai lama always tells the story of how the Omniscient Buton Rinpoche calls upon Thokmey Sangpo to heal him by saying; “You are a bodhisattva and therefore your prayers can heal my sickness.” He has many renowned students and one of them was Jetsun Rendawa who was the main teacher of Lama Tsongkhapa.



As with all Tibetan Buddhist writings, this text begins with a homage. One reason is to receive blessings and to successfully complete the composition. Another reason is to display humility and to remember the kindness of one’s gurus. When one composes a text like this, one is transferring the realizations into words and that realization was born due to the kindness of one’s guru and therefore the author pays homage to one’s guru. The homage is made to one’s guru and Chenresig (Avaloketeshwara), as this teaching is about bodhisattva practices that are premised on compassion and Chenresig is the manifested body of compassion of all buddhas. Out of compassion, Chenresig’s gaze remains locked on sentient beings.

The text begins with “Homage to Lokeshwara”. Lokeshwara which literally means “the accomplished master of the world”, is another name for Chenresig. The author then makes the actual homage by saying;

*I pay constant homage through my three doors,
To my supreme teacher and protector Chenresig,
Who while seeing all phenomena lack coming and going,
Makes single-minded effort for the good of living beings.*

The three doors refer to one’s body, speech and mind. Physical homage includes offering prostrations, showing respect, providing help etc. Verbal homage entails offering praise and prayers. Mental homage, which is generating faith, respect and remembering the kindness of one’s guru or Chenresig is the most important homage. When we have mental homage, the other two will naturally follow. The next two lines state the enlightened qualities of one’s guru and Chenresig, citing the reasons for the homage. “*Seeing phenomena lack coming and going*” refers to seeing the ultimate nature of Coming and Going. Coming and going, cessation and origination, and so, exist conventionally but at the ultimate level, they do not exist. In other words, coming and going, arising and ceasing all lack independent or inherent existence because their existence is dependent on conditions and factors. So here, the author is saying that both guru and Chenresig have achieved the direct realization of ultimate truth (emptiness). The next stanza says that they make single-minded effort for the good of living beings.

This refers to conventional truth. Although things lack inherent existence, they exist as dependent-arising. Conventionally, sentient beings exist and their sufferings also exist. As such one's guru and Chenresig both strive to liberate sentient beings from the ocean of suffering. These two lines states that both guru and Chenresig perceive the Two Truths. Realizing the Two Truths is not that a great deal/feat. However, word "while" is the key in highlighting their enlightened qualities. The word "while" suggests that they can perceive the Two Truths at the same time.

The ability to perceive the Two Truths simultaneously is an enlightened quality. Even the Arya beings who are at the tenth Bhumi cannot see the Two Truths at the same time. They require alternation between meditative equipoise and post meditative state, i.e. when one is in the meditative equipoise, one may be able to perceive emptiness but during that time, awareness of conventional truth gets "suspended". Convention/ordinary perception resumes only after arising from the meditative state. However, enlightened beings perceive conventional phenomena **while** having direct perception into the ultimate nature of things, i.e. they perceive conventional and ultimate truth simultaneously. As this ability is a quality possessed only by buddhas, it is a worthy reason to offer homage.

Another way to understand the meaning of the two lines (*Who while seeing all phenomena ...good of living beings*) is in relation to the two Kayas or Truth Bodies, namely the Dharmakaya (Wisdom Truth Body) which benefits oneself and the Nirmanakaya (Buddha's Form Body), to benefit others. One's guru and Chenresig has perfected both Kayas by achieving one's own goal of enlightenment and as well as the means to benefit others through form. Gyalsey Thokmey Sangpo highlights that quality when making the homage.

Paying homage to one's guru is important in Buddhism and it is found in scriptures of the Sutra and Vinaya. These days, there is much knowledge in the form of books and even on the internet but why aren't there more realized scholars and more Buddhas? Because it requires a teacher to bring that knowledge to life, to offer clarification and guidance (and of course, it also needs the student to be diligent in practice). The guru is the conduit of the Buddha's teachings. In that sense, whatever small realization we have gained through practice is due to the kindness of one's guru and for that reason, we see in some prayers, gurus being compared to Buddhas and praised for their superior kindness. Many Buddhas have come and gone but we could not be saved by them as stated in Bodhicaryavatara:

*Although for the benefit of every creature
Countless Buddhas have passed by,
Yet I have not come into the domain of their cure
Because of my own mistakes.*

It is our guru however that has continued the Buddha's work and saved us by showing the path as said in the Lama Choepa:

*To those untamed by countless Buddhas
The unruly transmigratory beings of this degenerated age who are difficult to subdue
You accurately show the good way of those gone to bliss.
Compassionate refuge savior, I make requests to you.*

One's guru is like the emissary of Buddha and through him/her, we enjoy the nectar of Buddha's teaching. Since there is no buddha manifesting in the world right now, imagine how difficult it would be to access the medicine of the Buddha's teachings if it weren't for our gurus. From whom would we learn effective means to overcome our suffering? Without our gurus, we would not know what the

ethical discipline of the ten non-virtues is, let alone practice them. For that reason, relying properly on our guru is said to be the foundation of all good qualities and source of lasting happiness.

However, as I have repeatedly mentioned before, we need to be extremely careful in taking someone as one's guru because this person will be our guide on our entire spiritual life, so once we accept a person as one's guru, there are dire consequences if we fail to properly rely on him/her. In the Lamrim, one is advised not to rush into choosing a guru. One needs to thoroughly investigate whether the person possesses the qualities required for a teacher. Likewise, teachers are advised to scrutinize the student before accepting him/her as student. Although there are two schools of thought in terms of how the guru-student relationship is established, I subscribe to the view that just listening to teaching does not automatically induct a guru-student relationship. For example, you have been listening to my talk for almost three years but as long as you do not decide to treat me as your guru, we have not established guru-disciple relationship. However, I believe this liberal approach does not apply when taking initiation. Once taken an empowerment from a lama, one has automatically established the guru-disciple relationship from the conferring Lama. So be careful on this.

The Pledge

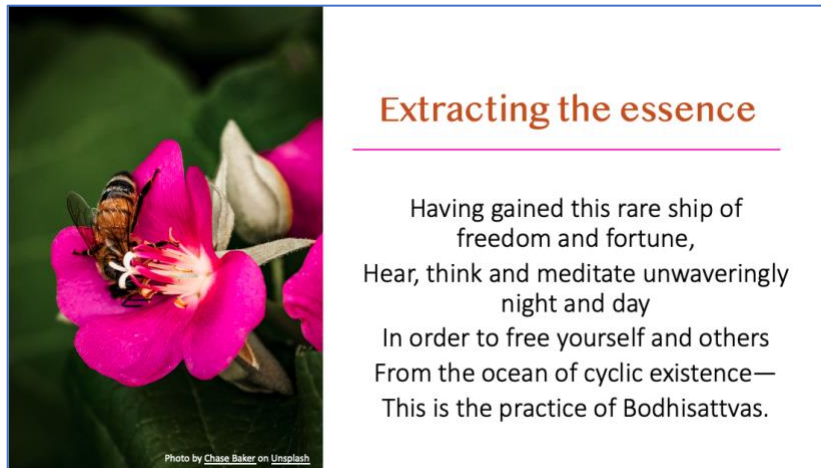
Perfect Buddhas, source of all
well being and happiness,
Arise from accomplishing the
excellent teachings,
And this depends on knowing
the practices,
So I will explain the practices of
Bodhisattvas.



Photo by Goh Yan on Unsplash

The next stanza is the author's pledge. The purpose of a pledge is to successfully complete the composition. How this works is that great beings do not make many promises and once they vow to do something, they will fulfill their promises. In this case, Thokmey Sangpo pledges to write about the practices of bodhisattvas. All the buddhas of the three times were once ordinary like us. The ones we visualize in our refuge field and make prostrations and reverence were once like us. They too have taken countless births in lower realms and underwent tremendous suffering. At one time, they were under the control of afflictions and self-cherishing attitude. However, through practice, following the instructions of buddhas, they were able to overcome the afflictions and free themselves from the clutches of self-cherishing attitude. They developed bodhicitta, took bodhisattva vows and engaged in the path and practices of bodhisattvas. Eventually they became buddha. This transformation from an ordinary person to an enlightened being was a result of practicing the buddha's teaching and that is what is meant by "*Arise from accomplishing the excellent teachings*". However, to effectively engage in bodhisattva practices, one needs to understand what they are and how to engage in them. One needs to first listen to teachings and therefore Thokmey Sangpo pledges to explain the bodhisattva practices. Understanding is important but application is far more important. Knowledge without actual practice is said to be like a wealthy but stingy person. Despite his wealth, a stingy person will be miserly with himself, let alone others, rendering his wealth useless. Similarly, if our Dharma knowledge were to

remain intellectual and not experiential, it would defy the purpose of bringing benefit to all. So, the takeaway is to assimilate the teachings into our daily lives. That will make tuning into Dharma talks worthwhile. From here begins the actual bodhisattva practices.



1. Extracting the essence of the precious human rebirth

The first of the 37 practices is about extracting the essence from the precious human body that we have obtained. Thokmey Sangpo is urging us to take full advantage of our life which is not only free from the eight unfavourable states but also endowed with conditions that are conducive to dharma practice. We have covered the topic of 8 leisures and 10 endowments before. So, I will not repeat here. Basically, the human life we have now is referred to as “*dellor*” in Tibetan which means we have the freedom to practice dharma as well as the necessary conditions to practice dharma. If we were in one of the eight unfavorable conditions (hell, hungry-ghost, animal, long-lived god, remote land, deficient faculties, no buddhas appeared & holding wrong views), we do not have the freedom or leisure to engage in dharma practices. Not only we are free from the eight states, we have also met dharma and dharma-teachers and have access to teachings of great teachers. Even during the pandemic, we have been so fortunate to frequently receive teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the comfort of our homes. So, we have all the necessary facilities. A life endowed with such conditions has great many potentials – not just happiness in this life but also ensuring good rebirth, nirvana and even enlightenment can be achieved if we put effort. Right now, what is lacking is our determination and effort.

As seen in the image, the way honeybees extract nectar from flowers and they waste nothing by collecting the last drop of available nectar. Hence, Thokmey Sangpo urges us to extract the essence of this life through engaging in dharma practices. However, sometimes despite our determination, we get distracted by other worldly activities. As ordinary beings, we need to be mindful and avoid such conditions and hence the second practice.



Attached to your loved ones you're
stirred up like water.
Hating your enemies you burn like fire.
In the darkness of confusion you forget
what to adopt and discard.
Give up your homeland—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Giving up homeland - the source of 3 poisons

2. Give up the homeland (circumstances that fuel the 3 poisons)

The second practice is about countering the three poisons: ignorance, attachment and anger. As a beginner, it may be difficult to apply the direct antidotes to these afflictions. The best solution at the beginner's stage is to avoid the conditions that give rise to the three poisons.

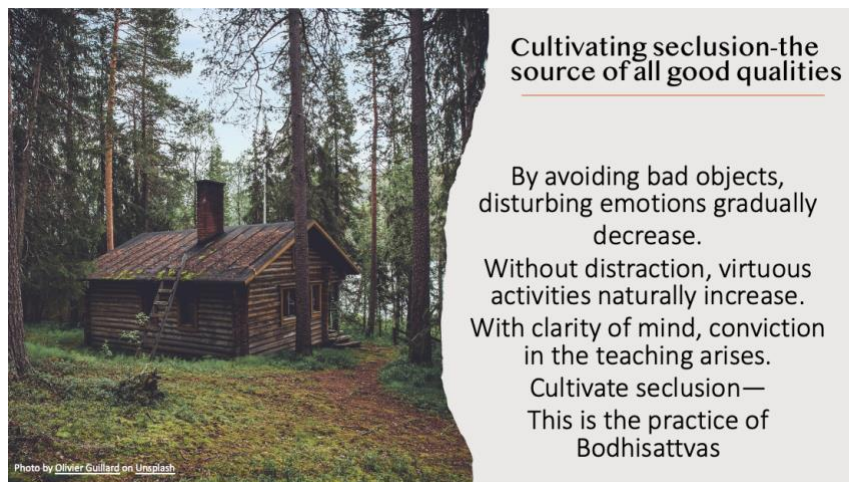
As human beings, we naturally develop attachment to people whom we like and aversion/anger to those whom we dislike. This root of this is our ignorance. When we are ignorant of the reality of the "Self" and how the self actually exists, we mistakenly grasp at an independent existing or solid "I" and thereby develop strong attachment to the self. As a result, we develop attachment to those whom we like (because we think they help us) and aversion against those whom we do not like (because we think they harm us).

Some circumstances allow afflictions to arise easily. Thokmey Sangpo points to such circumstances as the "homeland", a source of three poisons. An example of this is the householder's life. When one leads a life of a householder, many situations engender attachment or anger. For instance, many parents develop bias towards their children's needs due to attachment. For that reason, Gyalsey Thokmey likens our attachment to the flow of water. It arises incessantly and steadily. Because of our attachment to ourselves and those in our inner circle, we are likely to get upset when something undesirable happens to those we are attached to. Likewise, worry and concern follow suit. As a householder, there are many added worries such as anxiety over one's partner or children or even in-laws. Sometimes in-laws become the source of agitation and anger. Compare this to the life of a monk in the monastery, away from home. As long as subsistence needs are met, there is no real worry. A friend of mine who is a former monk told me that when a group of touring monks stayed at his place, his teenage daughters spent most of their time with the monks and thinking over it, he reckoned it was because of the monks' "happy vibes" due to having far fewer worldly concerns. He said that when lay people meet for a coffee, after five minutes into the conversation, they start grumbling to each other about their woes – from their spouses to children to work or their in-laws. That is one reason why Gyalsey Thokmey Sangpo suggests we give up the "homeland" – any circumstance that fuel the 3 poisons.

Using the example of a householder's life and how it can trigger the 3 poisons easily is how complicated it can become over small issues. Recently, a friend shared an account of how cutting a

fruit can be quite complicated. You have to have the right knife and the right cutting board. He said that one time he was trying to cut a fruit and was told that he should use a particular type of knife and given a lesson on different knives for different purposes: knives for meat, vegetables, fruits and even separate for butter. Having such a variety creates more opportunities for attachment and anger to surface. Back in monastery, we have one knife: the cleaver. It is used for everything. Whether cutting a tree, vegetable or fruits, out will come the cleaver. In olden days, monks possessed only a collection of scriptural texts and a change of robes. They lived a very simple life and that helped to reduce afflictions, especially attachment.

When we hold hatred against someone, instead of harming the other person, it destroys our own peace of mind. It's aptly said to be like oneself drinking poison but wishing the other person to die. Gyalsey Thokmey says "Hating your enemies, you burn like fire". It is so true. The one who clutches at a burning ember is the one that feels the burn. We may hold a strong grudge against someone and plot all kinds of harm against the person. Instead of harming the other person, it makes us lose our sleep, if not destroys our peace of mind altogether. Nothing wholesome comes out of hatred. At the root of it lies ignorance. Ignorance blind us from seeing the truth and therefore clouds our judgment in terms of what is to be abandoned and what is to be adopted. Overcoming the three poisons is an important goal of a bodhisattva and the best way as a beginner is to avoid situations that give rise to afflictions. Hence, the need to abandon one's homeland.

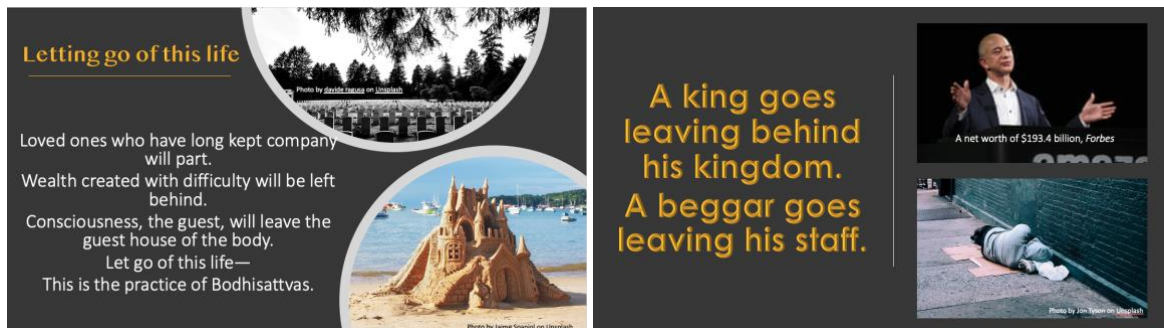


3. Cultivate seclusion

Having abandoned the “homeland” – circumstances that allow delusions to easily arise, the next step is to cultivate seclusion. It is logical that since the homeland is the source of afflictions, we need to go to a place that mitigates the arising of the three poisons. Hence, we need to seek out a more remote place which has its own benefits. A secluded place tends to have fewer objects of distraction and thereby there is less likelihood of activating the 3 poisons. Even when we do meditation at home, when the kids are running about and phone calls come in regularly, it is difficult to engage in a good meditation. We need to find a quiet place so that we can focus and meditate. Another benefit is that such a secluded place enables us more time to practice dharma. The main reason why a householder fails to maximize the precious human life is because of the worldly obligations that hinder dharma practices. As a householder, one has to work to earn a living, take care of the family and so on and

that leaves little time for dharma practice. Being at a secluded place frees one from those obligations and can devote all the time to dharma practice.

It is also a matter of the clarity of mind it brings. When in a secluded place, one's mind is relieved of the commotions of the world and therefore we are able to think more clearly and as a result, our meditation becomes more effective. We know this from our own experience. When we try to meditate after returning from a day's work, we are often unable to calm our mind, let alone do actual meditation. Our brain is filled with day's activities that we can hardly focus on the object of meditation. As such, Gyalsey Thokmey advises us to seek a secluded place if we are serious about dharma practice.



4. Letting go of this life

The fourth practice is to let go of our concerns for this life. Abandoning the “homeland” (things that trigger our afflictions) and seeking seclusion is not enough to secure an authentic dharma practice. Meditators in caves may have abandoned the homeland and minimized the comforts of life, yet remain affected by what others say about them. They wonder whether people are praising or criticizing their choice of seclusion. Such concerns will stain one's practice because it is motivated solely by wanting praise or seeking good reputation. Hence, merely making changes to one's external conditions such as living in a remote place, is not enough. As long as our interest in this life's issues remains intact, no real dharma practice can occur. Leaving aside the quality of our practice, we do not find even time to practice dharma because of our obsession over this life's concerns. We know this from our own experience. If we look back in the past two weeks, how much time have we committed to dharma practice? What else has occupied our time and effort? For many of us, most of our time was taken up with worldly concerns. Even when we engage in dharma practice, often we are motivated by concerns for this life. For instance, we do practices such as Tara practices to remove obstacles or Medicine Buddha puja to improve our health, often leaving out good rebirth let alone attaining Nirvana and enlightenment! It is all about this life. According to Lamrim teachings, technically such practices are not dharma practices. In order to qualify as a dharma practice, one's intent should at least cover the next life, though ideally extend to full enlightenment.

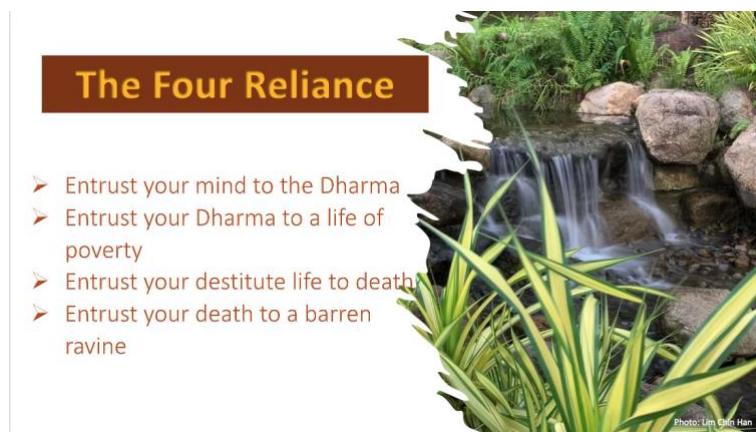
What binds us to this life's concerns is our attachment to material possessions and people whom we have developed a close relationship with. One way to let go of our concerns for this life is to reflect on our impending death. Our death is certain. Everybody who was born has to die eventually. Nobody is immortal. Even Shakyamuni Buddha had to display Parinirvana. Many great beings have appeared on this earth but now they exist only in history books. All those who have come, are gone. If we at least knew the time of our death, it would not be so bad as we could then prepare for it. Unfortunately, the time of death is uncertain. Some die even at birth. We have seen children die before their parents

and seemingly healthy adults drop dead at work. There is no fixed sequence where the old die before the young and the sick before the healthy. Death will not wait for us to finish our project nor will it wait for our retirement. It will appear when we least expect it. When this happens, nothing can help except the virtues we have accumulated because a virtuous mind enables us to have a stable and peaceful mind. A popular quote by a Tibetan Muslim scholar captures the point when he says;

“The King goes leaving behind his kingdom.
A beggar goes leaving his staff.”

In Tibet, beggars carry a staff to protect themselves from dogs when they go for begging from house to house as Tibetan houses tend to have dogs. So, the staff is an valuable possession to them. However, when death comes, the staff is left being. Similarly with a dead king who has to leave his position and country. Billionaires like Jeff Bezos can buy anything now but when the time comes, he will have to leave all his wealth behind and be no different from a homeless person. Both will go empty handed.

We devote so much time and effort to our loved ones and even commit negative karma for their sake. The Tibetan phrase for this is “DraDul NyenKyong” which literally means “to defeat one’s enemies and protect one’s family”. Most of our time is spent this way. However, when death comes, we have to part with our family. We are born alone and will leave alone too. No matter how many loved ones surround us at the deathbed, none can accompany us and therefore no one can help us. We have a saying in Tibetan, “Just like a strain of hair that is pulled out of butter, we journey to our next life alone”. When a strain of hair is pulled out of butter, not an iota of butter gets struck on the hair. Likewise, at the time of death, we have to leave everything behind. This applies to our material things. No matter how much wealth we have amassed over the years, we do not have the power to carry with us even a needle and thread, let alone our money, houses and cars. Even our own body that we have treasured so much and taken great care of, has to be left behind. Gyalsey Thokmey Sangpo likens our body to a guest house. Guests will eventually check out from the guest house and move on - leaving the guest house behind. Likewise, our own body will be left by its occupant, the consciousness. So, there is no point in being so attached to this life. When we loosen the grip on this life’s affairs, our focus is able to shift to long-term concerns i.e. concern for the future lives, that are most certainly heading our way. We will be not fixated on this life’s interest alone. As a result, this life’s concerns become peripheral and achieving long-term goals such as good rebirth, nirvana and Buddhahood can be prioritized.



When it comes to letting go of the concerns for this life, the Kadampa masters adopt a four-fold attitude which is known as the Four Trust or Reliance.

1. **Entrust your mind to the Dharma:** This refers to prioritizing one's dharma practice over everything. For ordinary people, the pursuit of wealth, status, and power take priority and therefore commit most of our time fulfilling these worldly goals. However, a real practitioner see the pointlessness of such pursuit and therefore devote their time on dharma practice only.
2. **Entrust your Dharma to a life of poverty:** When we prioritize dharma practice over everything, this might give rise to the fear of becoming poor, thereby discouraging many from devoting to dharma practice. When such fear arises, Kadampa masters employ the second reliance which is about having a specific mindset: "Yes, I may end up on the street and may even have to beg for survival but let it be as long as I am able to practice dharma. I have been a homeless beggar countless times in past lives but never because of devoting to dharma practice. As such, I will now persevere in devoting my time and effort to spiritual practices, no matter what happens". When we are able to set our mind in this way, we develop a kind of courage and nothing, especially desire for this life's comfort, deter us from dharma practice.
3. **Entrust our destitute life to death:** When we decide to devote our time to dharma practice, worldly thoughts such as the fear of losing our status or dying due to lack of resources arises. When such thought arises, we should think, "Yes, I may die from lack of sustenance but it is worthwhile to die for dharma. I have died of hunger countless time in the past but never once for dharma?. Let's be clear about the point being made here: Dharma does not require us to die for it. The idea here is that one is encouraged to develop the resolve and single mindedness to commit one's life to cultivating ethics and be in the service of others, even in the face of hardship and death. Such attitude helps us to remain on track to enlightenment and never get distracted by the obsession for worldly comforts. It is said that a real practitioner will never die from hunger. In Tibet, there are many meditators and some even live high up in the mountains but one never hears of any of them dying from hunger. Instead, either natural resources or people to take care of their basic needs come about. I know of a family in Bhutan who carry bags packed with rations (weighing over 30kgs) to retreaters up in the mountains. It is said that Buddha has dedicated his remaining merit (the Buddha had amassed much merit by coming to earth to benefit sentient beings and did not exhaust his merit) to genuine practitioners to always have adequate resources. As such, it is believed that if we are serious about our practice, we will not die from hunger.
4. **Entrust your death to a barren ravine:** Another thought that hinders our commitment to dharma is the concern of what would happen to our body when we die. Genuine practitioners have no attachment to their bodies. This apprehension follows from the first three reliances. The view is that since we commit our life to spiritual practice, we will be poor and there will be no one to look after us, especially at death. As such when we die, nobody would even know about it and every likelihood that our bodies will be left in a barren ravine. To counter such fear, we remind ourselves that as training the mind is more important than tending to an impermanent body, it doesn't matter what happens to our body after death but more crucial to practice dharma. Therefore, why worry about whether our body rots in an empty ravine or in a palace. The above attitudes are to counter worldly concerns that deter us from committing to dharma practices fully. Past Kadampa masters lived by these four axioms throughout their lives and into their deaths.



5. Giving up bad company

This stanza is in relation to distancing oneself from a bad company. The first three lines list the criteria of a “bad friend”. Gungthang Rinpoche, a great scholar says that a bad company does not need to have horns. If so, it would be easy for us to spot them and thereby avoid them. Bad friends refer to those who influence us to engage in activities that give rise to our afflictions and distract us from doing virtue. They may do so unintentionally or intentionally, directly or indirectly but the criteria is that they cause our afflictions to get triggered through discouraging us from doing virtuous activities such as listening to dharma, contemplating on its meaning and meditating. For instance, they may encourage us to accompany them to late night parties or for a drink. Constant engagement in such activities would eventually make us lose interest in dharma practices and over time, cause our our love and compassion for others to decline. This would then result in abandoning bodhicitta and working for others. Eventually, the doors to Buddhahood will be closed. So, bad friends are those who makes us engage in non-virtue and hinders our engagement in virtuous actions. As such, Gyalsey Thokmey counted disassociating with bad friends as one of the bodhisattva practices. “Disassociating” doesn’t mean abandoning them and not caring about them but rather, not frequently being in their company.



Relying on a spiritual teacher

When you rely on them your faults
come to an end
And your good qualities grow like the
waxing moon.
Cherish your spiritual teachers
Even more than your own body—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

6. Relying on a spiritual teacher

After distancing ourselves from bad company, we should now rely on a virtuous friend. The Tibetan term used here is “GeyWai SheNyen” which literally means virtuous friend. The top virtuous friend

is one's spiritual teacher or guru and hence this verse highlights the importance of proper reliance on a spiritual teacher. There are valid reasons to do so. In the Lamrim teachings, it is stated that the underlying reason for relying on a spiritual teacher is that we want gain and not loss. It makes perfect sense because a qualified teacher is only concerned about helping his/her students in their spiritual development and therefore the instructions our gurus give us pertain to curtailing our afflictions that are source of our suffering. In other words, the instructions entail cultivating virtue and refraining from non-virtue and following them would bring an end to our afflictions as well as increase our virtue and positive qualities. This progress is likened to the way a moon gradually progresses from a new moon to the full moon. For that reason, it is imperative to rely on one's guru properly.

Proper reliance on one's spiritual teacher is emphasized in Lamrim teachings. The main reason is that our spiritual teachers are the conduits of Buddha's precious teachings. If books alone were sufficient for spiritual development, the amount of information in libraries and the internet ought to have produced tens of thousands of Buddhas by now. And yet, this is not so. Teachers have an integral role in explaining, clarifying and bringing the teachings to life for the student. Without the spiritual masters, despite our fortune to be born in the time where Buddha's teaching is still alive, there would be no means to receive the instructions that were passed on by Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha has come and gone. We were not able to receive teachings directly from him. Obviously, we missed the train. It is our gurus who have remained to transmit the teachings of Buddha and thereby lead us on the path to liberation. In that sense, for us, our spiritual teachers are more (directly) helpful and kinder than Shakyamuni Buddha. As such, it is important to acknowledge their vital role in our spiritual development and give meaning to this life as well. Of course, it is up to individuals whether one wants to take someone as one's spiritual teacher or not but once the student-teacher relationship is established, there are protocols to be followed. Some people disregard these protocols as mere cultural remnants but they are not. There are profound reasons for these protocols to be established and failure to follow the protocol has serious ramifications.

The story of Milarepa illustrates the importance of undeterred faith and devotion to one's guru. Despite Lama Marpa's harsh treatment, Milarepa never lost his devotion towards his Guru and underwent enormous physical and mental hardships simply to fulfil his teacher's command. Gradually, through Lama Marpa's skillful means, Milarepa was able to purify all his heavy negative karmas and eventually attain Buddhahood. However, it is completely another story with us. We find it difficult when our gurus' instructions do not fit with our ideas or get angry when our spiritual masters are strict with us. In actual practice, we should view their scolding and even beating as lessons and a means to help us. Kadampa masters have a saying:

Fierce scolding is a wrathful mantra,
If obstacles to be removed, this would.
Brutal beating is a blessing,
If attainments to be achieved, this would.

Such is the attitude one is advised to adopt. There was a monk in Gaden Monastery, India, who was an attendant to a former abbot. This ex-abbot had a condition known as "Lung" which caused his anger to rise easily even over small things. Due to his condition, the abbot often beat this attendant. However, this attendant who is also a student of the abbot was able to perceive the beatings as blessing and therefore every time a beating began, he would chant; "May all my negative karmas be purified. May all my obstacles be removed. May I be blessed". The abbot passed away long time ago but the attendant is still alive – healthy and happy. I think this must be due to his unshakeable faith in his guru

and proper reliance on him. We should follow the example of this attendant. Bodhisattva Thokmey Sangpo urges us to cherish our spiritual master even more than our own body.