

Master Tsong-kha-pa's Letter in Reply to the Tsha-kho Pon-po, Nga-wang Drak-pa

Namo Guru Manjughosha.

A friend to beings unbeknownst to them,
The most sublime of best companions,
The only friend to all those destitute—
I prostrate to the teacher most supreme!

By seeing that your sacred Teachings are
The only sustenance for living beings;
I therefore, with a heart of sympathy,
Impart these words upon my disciple.

The ground of good and joy for beings of all nine births,
The excellent Dharma of victorious Conquerors—
May you, my child, forever be victorious
Upholding them in full, not short of strength!

I've heard that you—your mind so keen—
Have made the margin lands unlit by sunlight of the Teaching
Filled with children of the Shakya who
Uphold the Teacher's stainless discipline.

Letters clearly stating all these things,
With good words in good meaning, and some gifts,
Were brought to me by monastics who were
Ordained by virtue of your kindnesses.

My mind then, like the cotton, flies,
Ushered by the scented breeze
Arisen from your faultless deeds,
Arriving in those places there.

The three Collections contain all the Buddha's Teachings;
The threefold trainings, therefore, are the Teachings' core.
Among them all, the foremost one is discipline,
Which—as it's taught—is rooted in *Vinaya*.

Thus, for the excellent Dharma of *Vinaya*'s ways
Extensively set forth in Buddha's excellent speech,
Why won't the skillful, learned ones well versed
In stages of the Teachings take delight?

Today, that '*calm abiding's concentration is a must
Before great insight, wisdom's training*'—such words can still be heard;
And yet, that '*higher training in the precepts are a must
To generate pristine samadhi*'—Not even these words remain!

To be so brave in taking vows but then leave them aside—
Is most inferior of the inferior ways.

To diligently safeguard any precepts one adopts—
This is the way of truly noble ones.

When seeing this, toward one's faulted body, speech, and mind,
Repeatedly use vigilance to check,
Along with mindfulness, conscientious shame, and carefulness,
To strive and tame the wild horse of the senses
From going down mistaken paths, so that the mind
Can come to settle onto any virtuous object
Fully and in any way as one desires.
Thus praised are precepts as a cause of samadhi.

If free from all defilements of transgression,
With mind unmovable from virtuous objects,
The true nature of selflessness emerges clear
Just like the moon within a pond pristine and calm.

As such, to fully understand the keys
Along the pathway of the threefold trainings,
Since this depends on knowing the three Collections,
One should rely on someone wise and study them.

The only goal of learning is to practice it—
The skillful teachers have said this for many times.
Therefore for anything one learns and understands,
Without delay, apply it right away!

So far, these are brief statements of the reasons why ethical discipline constitutes the root of the path. One should therefore cherish these well, and repeatedly develop a sense of certainty regarding them.

In marginal, uncultivated lands, you have established communities with many renunciates, and are teaching the *Vinaya*. This is truly excellent! If one mainly values receiving the precepts but does not establish the practices to uphold the discipline and purify transgressions, there is no way for the discipline to be clean. Therefore, you should by all means establish there the practices for them to safeguard it well by understanding the transgressions; as well as, if one does transgress the guidelines set forth by the Buddha due to the four causes of transgression—ignorance and so forth—to purify it by repenting and correcting oneself. Do not ignore a transgression without thinking about it. Once a downfall occurs, purify it immediately. Also give rise to moral shame, conscience, mindfulness, carefulness, and so forth. This way, one can make the discipline pure.

Also in this respect, regarding virtue and non-virtue in general, do not regard the words on the benefits of virtue as mere encouragement; nor the words on the dangers of non-virtue as mere threats. One must develop a deep, heartfelt sense of certainty about them; and in particular, through repeated familiarization, one should develop certainty regarding the benefits of upholding the discipline and the faults of not upholding it. Otherwise, one would end up upholding discipline to please others, or for gains and praise, which would be missing the point.

The obstacle to truly practicing like this lies in preoccupation with the activities of this lifetime, which comes from the perception that one will remain on and on in this life. The most thorough antidote for this is the mindfulness of death. Therefore, one must frequently cultivate the mindfulness of death.

All in all, the unmistakable reality of karma is a specialty of omniscience, so one should often consult *Mindfulness of the Excellent Teaching*, the *Hundred Actions Sutra*, the *Hundred Bodhisattva Stories*, the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, the prefaces in the discipline, and the numerous other sutras and commentaries, and do one's best to strengthen one's conviction in karma. For non-virtues committed in the past, one should purify them completely through the four powers, as well as guard against and thereby completely sever any pathways of newly engaging in them. With regards to virtuous karma created in the past, one should expand and increase them through making great aspirations. As for virtues that have not been developed in the past, one should not be satisfied with having merely some virtue, but should employ various means to give rise to them.

No matter how much one is able to do, or whether these efforts can constitute actual practice or just an approximation, they should all be guided by the spirit of enlightenment—This is an even greater key.

In numerous sutras and tantras, the victorious Buddha praises the view of emptiness. It is through undermining all observed objects of intrinsic sign apprehension that it severs the extremes of existence and non-existence. And it is through being a helpful factor in developing a deep, definite understanding of karma and its effects, causing one to adopt and cast aside even subtle virtue and non-virtue, that it severs the extremes of existence and annihilation. However, most sentient beings either hold the view of permanence which regards emptiness as an independent reality, or the view of annihilation which undermines everything conventional. Emptiness is therefore extremely difficult to realize. And even if one does realize it, those who qualify as proper vessels to receive the teaching are extremely rare.

Thus, if one has conviction in such reality, one should cultivate the causes for realizing it—eliminate karmic obstructions, accumulate collections, make extensive aspirations, and rely on well-learned teachers to learn the texts on this topic well. Do not be satisfied with knowing just a small part, but use discerning wisdom to seek it through extensive analysis. Regarding the aforementioned content, if one can engage in their practice in alternation with their learning and teaching, one's certainty in understanding will become greater, and this will also serve to remedy the afflictions.

Thus, I hope you can practice just like this!

Wholeheartedly reverent of the Conqueror's teachings,
Not lacking in your power of discernment,
And training in accordance with great beings,
To you, intelligent Nga-wang Drak-pa—
I hope that you will follow that which I have said,
And for all lives, may we together cultivate
The deeds and aspirations. Then upon my buddhahood,
I shall bring you the foremost nectar of the Dharma.

This has been composed upon the occasion that the true excellent teacher, the great Abbott Ngawang Drak-pa of Tsha-kho, founded the great unprecedented monastic communities in the eastern region of Gyal-mo-long, and sent a letter here. In reply, the auspicious learned bhikshu Lo-sang Drak-pa sent this writing from Teu-ra in the region of Ye. May all be auspicious!