

Words of My Perfect Teacher - Chapter One

The difficulty of finding the freedoms and advantages

The main subject of the chapter, the teaching on how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages, is preceded by an explanation of the proper way to listen to any spiritual instruction.

I. THE PROPER WAY TO LISTEN TO SPIRITUAL TEACHING

The proper way to listen to the teachings has two aspects: the right attitude and the right conduct.

1. Attitude

The right attitude combines the vast attitude of the bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, and the vast skill in means of the Secret Mantrayana.

1.1 THE VAST ATTITUDE OF THE BODHICITTA

There is not a single being in samsara, this immense ocean of suffering, who in the course of time without beginning has never been our father or mother. When they were our parents, these beings' only thought was to raise us with the greatest possible kindness, protecting us with great love and giving us the very best of their own food and clothing.

All of these beings, who have been so kind to us, want to be happy, and yet they have no idea how to put into practice what brings about happiness, the ten positive actions. None of them want to suffer, but they do not know how, to give up the ten negative actions at the root of all suffering. Their deepest wishes and what they actually do thus contradict each other. Poor beings, lost and confused, like a blind man abandoned in the middle of an empty plain!

Tell yourself: "It is for their well-being that I am going to listen to the profound Dharma and put it into practice. I will lead all these beings, my parents, tormented by the miseries of the six realms of existence, to the state of omniscient Buddhahood, freeing them from all the karmic phenomena, habitual patterns and sufferings of everyone of the six realms." It is important to have this attitude each time you listen to teachings or practise them.

Whenever you do something positive, whether of major or minor importance, it is indispensable to enhance it with the three supreme methods. Before beginning, arouse the bodhicitta as a skilful means to make sure that the action becomes a source of good for the future. While carrying out the action, avoid getting involved in any conceptualisation,¹ so that the merit cannot be destroyed by circumstances.² At the end, seal the action properly by dedicating the merit, which will ensure that it continually grows ever greater.³

The way you listen to the Dharma is very important. But even more important is the motivation with which you listen to it.

What makes an action good Or bad?
Not how it looks, nor whether it is big or small,
But the good or evil motivation behind it.

No matter how many teachings you have heard, to be motivated by ordinary concerns—such as a desire for greatness, fame or whatever—is not the way of the true Dharma. So, first of all, it is most important to turn inwards and change your motivation. If you can correct your attitude, skilful means will permeate your positive actions, and you will have set out on the path of great beings. If you cannot, you might think that you are studying and practising the Dharma but it will be no more than a semblance of the real thing. Therefore, whenever you listen to the teachings and whenever you practise, be it meditating on a deity, doing prostrations and circumambulations, or reciting a mantra—even a single mani—it is always essential to give rise to bodhicitta.

1.2 VAST SKILL IN MEANS: THE ATTITUDE OF THE SECRET MANTRAYANA

The *Torch of the Three Methods* says of the Secret Mantrayana:

It has the same goal but is free from all confusion,⁴
It is rich in methods and without difficulties.⁵
It is for those with sharp faculties. ⁶
The Mantra Vehicle is sublime.

The Mantrayana can be entered by many routes. It contains many methods for accumulating merit and wisdom, and profound skilful means to make the potential within us manifest without our having to undergo great hardships. The basis for these methods is the way we direct our aspirations:

Everything is circumstantial
And depends entirely on one's aspiration.

Do not consider the place where the Dharma is being taught, the teacher, the teachings and so on as ordinary and impure. As you listen, keep the five perfections clearly in mind:

The perfect *place* is the citadel of the absolute expanse, called Akanistha, "the Unexcelled." The perfect *teacher* is Samantabhadra, the dharmakaya. The perfect *assembly* consists of the male and female Bodhisattvas and deities⁸ of the mind lineage of the Conquerors and of the symbol lineage of the Vidyadharas.

Or you can think that the place where the Dharma is being taught is the Lotus-Light Palace of the Glorious Copper-coloured Mountain, the teacher who teaches is Padmasambhava of Oddiyana, and we, the audience, are the Eight Vidyadharas, the Twenty-five Disciples, and the dakas and dakinis.

Or consider that this perfect place is the Eastern Buddhafield, Manifest Joy, where the perfect teacher Vajrasattva, the perfect sambhogakaya, is teaching the assembly of the divinities of the Vajra Family and male and female Bodhisattvas.

Equally well, the perfect place where the Dharma is being taught can be the Western Buddhafield, the Blissful, the perfect teacher the Buddha Amitabha, and the assembly the male and female Bodhisattvas and deities of the Lotus family.

Whatever the case, the *teaching* is that of the Great Vehicle and the *time* is the ever-revolving wheel of eternity.

These visualizations⁹ are to help us understand how things are in reality. It is not that we are temporarily creating something that does not really exist.

The teacher embodies the essence of all Buddhas throughout the three times. He is the union of the Three Jewels: his body is the Sangha, his speech the Dharma, his mind the Buddha. He is the union of the Three Roots: his body is the teacher, his speech the yidam, his mind the dakini. He is the union of the three kayas: his body is the nirmanakaya, his speech is the sambhogakaya, his mind the dharmakaya. He is the embodiment of all the Buddhas of the past, source of all the Buddhas of the future and the representative of all the Buddhas of the present. Since he takes as his disciples degenerate beings like us, whom none of the thousand Buddhas of the Good Kalpa could help, his compassion and bounty exceed that of all Buddhas.

The teacher is the Buddha, the teacher is the Dharma,
The teacher is also the Sangha.
The teacher is the one who accomplishes everything.
The teacher is Glorious Vajradhara.

We, as the assembly gathered to listen to the teachings, use the basis of our own Buddha-nature, the support of our precious human life, the circumstance of having a spiritual friend and the method of following his advice, to become the Buddhas of the future. As the Hevajra Tantra says:

All beings are. Buddhas,
But this is concealed by adventitious stains.
When their stains are purified, their Buddhahood is revealed.

2. Conduct

The right conduct while listening to teachings is described in terms of what to avoid and what to do.

2.1 WHAT TO AVOID

Conduct to avoid includes the three defects of the pot, the six stains and the five wrong ways of remembering.

2.1.1 The Three Defects of the Pot

Not to listen is to be like a pot turned upside down. Not to be able to retain what you hear is to be like a pot with a hole in it. To mix negative emotions with what you hear is to be like a pot with poison in it.

The upside-down pot. When you are listening to the teachings, listen to what is being said and do not let yourself be distracted by anything else. Otherwise you will be like an upside-down pot on which liquid is being poured. Although you are physically present, you do not hear a word of the teaching.

The pot with a hole in it. If you just listen without remembering anything that you hear or understand, you will be like a pot with a leak: however much liquid is poured into it, nothing can stay. No matter how many teachings you hear, you can never assimilate them or put them into practice.

The pot containing poison. If you listen to the teachings with the wrong attitude, such as the desire to become great or famous, or a mind full of the five poisons, the Dharma will not only fail to help your mind; it will also be changed into something that is not Dharma at all, like nectar pouted into a pot containing poison.

This is why the Indian sage, Padampa Sangye, said:

Listen to the teachings like a deer listening to music;
Contemplate them like a northern nomad shearing sheep; *
Meditate on them like a dumb person savouring food; **
Practise them like a hungry yak eating grass;
Reach their result, like the sun coming out from behind the clouds.

** That is to say, meticulously, in their entirety, and without distraction.*

*** A dumb person can taste, but not describe the flavours he is tasting. In the same way, the taste of true meditation is beyond any description or concepts.*

When listening to the teachings, you should be like a deer so entranced by the sound of the *vina* that it does not notice the hidden hunter shooting his poisoned arrow. Put your hands together palm to palm and listen, every pore on your body tingling and your eyes wet with tears, never letting any other thought get in the way.

It is no good listening with only your body physically present, while your mind wanders off after your thoughts and your speech lets loose a rich store of gossip, saying whatever you like and looking around everywhere. When listening to teachings, you should even stop reciting prayers, counting mantras, or whatever other meritorious activities you may be doing.

After you have listened properly to a teaching in this way, it is then also important to retain the meaning of what has been said without ever forgetting it, and to continually put it into practice. For, as the Great Sage himself said:

I have shown you the methods
That lead to liberation.
But you should know
That liberation depends upon yourself.

The teacher gives the disciple instructions explaining how to listen to the, Dharma and how to apply it, how to give up negative actions, how to perform positive ones, and how to practise. It is up to the disciple to remember those instructions, forgetting nothing; to put them into practice; and to realise them.

Just listening to the Dharma is perhaps of some benefit by itself. But unless you remember what you hear,

you will not have the slightest knowledge of either the words or the meaning of the teaching—which is no different from not having heard it at all.

If you remember the teachings but mix them with your negative emotions, they will never be the pure Dharma. As the peerless Dagpo Rinpoche says:

Unless you practise Dharma according to the Dharma,
Dharma itself becomes the cause of evil rebirths.

Rid yourself of every wrong thought concerning the teacher and the Dharma, do not criticise or abuse your spiritual brothers and companions; be free of pride and contempt, abandon all bad thoughts. For all of these cause lower rebirths.

2.1.2 The Six Stains

In the *Well Explained Reasoning*, it says:

Pride, lack of faith and lack of effort,
Outward distraction, inward tension and discouragement;
These are the six stains.

Avoid these six: proudly believing yourself superior to the teacher who is explaining the Dharma, not trusting the master and his teachings, failing to apply yourself to the Dharma, getting distracted by external events, focussing your five senses too intently inwards, and being discouraged if, for example, a teaching is too long.

Of all negative emotions, pride and jealousy are the most difficult to recognise. Therefore, examine your mind minutely. Any feeling that there is something even the least bit special about your own qualities, whether worldly or spiritual, will make you blind to your own faults and unaware of others' good qualities. So renounce pride and always take a low position.

If you have no faith, the entrance to the Dharma is blocked. Of the four types of faith¹¹, aim for faith that is irreversible.

Your interest in the Dharma is the basis of what you will achieve. So depending on whether your degree of interest is superior, middling or inferior you will become a superior, middling or inferior practitioner. And if you are not at all interested in the Dharma, there will be no results at all. As the proverb puts it:

The Dharma is nobody's property. It belongs to whoever has the most endeavour.

The Buddha himself obtained the teachings at the price of hundreds of hardships. To obtain a single four-line verse, he gouged holes in his own flesh to serve as offering lamps, filling them with oil and planting in them thousands of burning wicks. He leapt into flaming pits, and drove a thousand iron nails into his body.¹³

Even if you have to face blazing infernos or razor-sharp blades, Search for the Dharma until you die.

Listen to the teachings, therefore, with great effort, ignoring heat, cold and all other trials.

The tendency of consciousness to get engrossed in the objects of the six senses¹⁴ is the root of all samsara's hallucinations and the source of all suffering. This is how the moth dies in the lamp-flame, because its visual consciousness is attracted to forms; how the stag is killed by the hunter, because its hearing draws it to sounds; how bees are swallowed by carnivorous plants, seduced by their smell; how fish are caught with bait, their sense of taste lured by its flavour; how elephants drown in the swamp because they love the physical feeling of mud. In the same way, whenever you are listening to the Dharma, teaching, meditating or practising, it is important not to follow tendencies from the past, not to entertain emotions about the future and not to let your present thoughts get distracted by anything around you. As Gyalse Rinpoche says:

Your past joys and sorrows are like drawings on water:
No trace of them remains. Don't run after them!
But should they come to mind, reflect on how success and failure come and go.
Is there anything you can trust besides Dharma, mani-reciters?¹⁵
Your future projects and plans are like nets cast in a dry riverbed:

They'll never bring what you want. Limit your desires and aspirations!
But should they come to mind, think how uncertain it is when you'll die:
Have you got time for anything other than Dharma, mani-reciters?
Your present work is like a job in a dream.
Since all such effort is pointless, cast it aside.
Consider even your honest earnings without any attachment.
Activities are without essence, mani-reciters!
Between meditation sessions, learn to control in this way all thoughts arising from the three poisons;
Until all thoughts and perceptions arise as the dharmakaya,
This is indispensable—remembering it whenever you need it,
Do not give rein to deluded thoughts, mani-reciters!

It is also said:

Don't invite the future. If you do,
You're like the father of Famous Moon!

This refers to the story of a poor man who came across a large pile barley. He put it in a big sack, tied it to a rafter, and then lay down beneath it and started to day-dream.

"This barley is going to make me really rich," he thought. "Once I'm rich, I'll get myself a wife ... She's bound to have a boy ... What shall I call him?"

Just then, the moon appeared and he decided to call his son Famous Moon. However, all this time a rat had been gnawing away at the rope that was holding up the sack. The rope suddenly snapped, the sack fell on the man and he was killed.

Such dreams about the past and the future will never come to fruition and are only a distraction. Give them up altogether. Be mindful and listen with attention and care.

Do not focus too intently, picking out individual words and points, like a dremor bear digging up marmots—each time you seize one item, you forget the one before, and will never get to understand the whole. Too much concentration also makes you sleepy. Instead, keep a balance between tight and loose.

Once, in the past, Ananda was teaching Srona to meditate. Srona had great difficulty getting it right. Sometimes he was too tense, sometimes too relaxed. Srona went to discuss the matter with the Buddha, who asked him: "When you were a layman, you were a good *vina*-player, weren't you?"

"Yes, I played very well."

"Did your *vina* sound best when the strings were very slack or when they were very taut?"

"It sounded best when they were neither too taut nor too loose."

"It is the same for your mind," said the Buddha; and by practising with advice Srona attained his goal.

Machik Labdron says:

Be firmly concentrated and loosely relaxed: ¹⁶
Here is an essential point for the View.

Do not let your mind get too tense or too inwardly concentrated; let your senses be naturally at ease, balanced between tension and relaxation.

You should not tire of listening to the teachings. Do not feel discouraged when you get hungry or thirsty during a teaching that goes on too long, or when you have to put up with discomfort caused the wind, sun, and so forth. Just be glad that you now have the freedoms and advantages of human life, that you have met an authentic teacher, and you can listen to his profound instructions.

The fact that you are at this moment listening to the profound Dharma is the fruit of merits accumulated over innumerable kalpas. It is like eating meal when you have only eaten once every hundred mealtimes throughout your life. So it is imperative to listen with joy, vowing to bear heat, cold and whatever trials and difficulties might arise, in order to receive teachings.

2.1.3 The Five Wrong Ways of Remembering.

Avoid remembering the words but forgetting the meaning,
Or remembering the meaning but forgetting the words.
Avoid remembering both but with no understanding,
Remembering them out of order, or remembering them incorrectly.

Do not attach undue importance to elegant turns of phrase without making any attempt to analyze the profound meaning of the words, like a child gathering flowers. Words alone are of no benefit for the mind. On the other hand, do not disregard the way in which the teachings are expressed, as being just the words and therefore dispensable. For then, even if you grasp the profound meaning, you will no longer have the means through which to express it. Words and meaning will have lost their connection.¹⁷

If you remember the teaching without identifying the different levels—the expedient meaning, the real meaning and the indirect meaning—You will be confused about what the words refer to.¹⁸ This may lead you away from the true Dharma. If you remember it out of order, you will mix up the proper sequence of the teaching, and every time you listen to it, explain it, or meditate on it the confusion will be multiplied. If you remember incorrectly what has been said, endless wrong ideas will proliferate.¹⁹ This will spoil your mind and debase the teaching. Avoid all these errors and remember everything—the words, the meaning and the order of the teachings—properly and without any mistake.

However long and difficult the teaching may be, do not feel disheartened and wonder if it will ever end; persevere. And however short simple it may be, do not undervalue it as just elementary.

To remember both words and meaning perfectly, in the right order with everything properly linked together, is therefore indispensable.

2.2 WHAT TO DO

The conduct to be adopted while listening to teachings is explained as four metaphors, the six transcendent perfections, and other modes conduct.

2.2.1 The Four Metaphors

The *Sutra Arranged like a Tree* says:

Noble one, you should think of yourself as someone who is sick,
Of the Dharma as the remedy,
Of your spiritual friend as a skilful doctor
And of diligent practice as the way to recovery.

We are sick. From beginningless time, in this immense ocean of suffering that is samsara, we have been tormented by the illness of the three poisons and their fruit, the three kinds of suffering.

When people are seriously ill, they go to consult a good doctor. They follow the doctor's advice, take whatever medicine he prescribes, and do all they can to overcome the disease and get well. In the same way, you should cure yourself of the diseases of karma, negative emotions and suffering by following the prescriptions of that experienced doctor, the authentic teacher, and by taking the medicine of the Dharma.

Following a teacher without doing what he says is like disobeying your doctor, which leaves him no chance of treating your illness. Not taking the medicine of the Dharma—that is to say, not putting it into practice—is like having innumerable medications and prescriptions beside your bed but never touching them. That will never cure your disease.

These days, people say full of optimism, “Lama, look on me with compassion!” thinking that even if they have done many terrible things, they will never have to endure the consequences. They reckon that the teacher, in his compassion, will toss them up into the heavenly realms as if he were throwing a pebble. But when we speak of the teacher holding us with his compassion, what this really means is that he has lovingly accepted us as disciples, and that he gives us his profound instructions, opens our eyes to what to do and what not to do and shows us the way to liberation taught by the Conqueror. What greater compassion could

there be? It is up to us whether or not we take advantage of this compassion and actually pursue the path of liberation.

Now that we have this free and well-endowed human birth, now that we know what we should and should not do, our decision at this juncture, when we have the freedom to choose, marks the turning-point which will

determine our fate, for better or worse, far into the future.²⁰ It is crucial that we choose between samsara and nirvana once and for all and put the instructions of our teacher into practice.

Those who conduct village ceremonies will have you believe that on your death-bed you can still go up or down, as if you were steering a horse by the reins. But by that time, unless you have already mastered the path,

the fierce wind of your past actions will be chasing after you, while in front a terrifying black darkness rushes toward you as you are driven helplessly down the long and perilous path of the intermediate state. The

Lord of Death's countless henchmen will be pursuing you, crying, "Kill! Kill! Strike! Strike!" How could such a moment—when there is no place to run to and nowhere to hide, no refuge and no hope, when you are desperate and have no idea what to do—how could such a moment be a turning point at which you control whether you go up or down? As the Great One of Oddiyana says:

By the time empowerment is being given to the card marked with your name,²¹ it's too late! Your consciousness, already wandering in the intermediate state like a dazed dog, will find it very hard to even think of higher realms.

In fact the turning point, the only time that you really can direct yourself up or down as if steering a horse with the reins, is right now, while you are still alive.

As a human being, your positive actions are more powerful than those of other kinds of being. This gives you, on the one hand, an opportunity here and now in this very life to cast rebirth aside once and for all.²² But your negative actions are more powerful too; thus you are also quite capable of making sure, on the other hand, that you will never get free, from the depths of the lower realms. So now that you have met the teacher, the skilful doctor, and the Dharma, the elixir that conquers death, this is the moment to apply the four metaphors, putting the teachings you have heard into practice, and travelling the path of liberation.

The *Treasury of Precious Qualities* describes four wrong notions that must be avoided, which are the opposite of the four metaphors we have mentioned:

Shallow-tongued men with evil natures
Approach the teacher as if he were a musk-deer.
Having extracted the musk, the perfect Dharma,
Full of joy, they sneer at the samaya.

Such people behave as though their spiritual teacher were a musk-deer; the Dharma were the musk, they themselves the hunters, and intense practice the way to kill the deer with an arrow or a trap. They do not practise the teachings they have received and feel no gratitude toward the teacher. They use dharma to accumulate evil actions, which will draw them down like a millstone to the lower realms.

2.2.2 The Six Transcendent perfections

In the *Tantra of Thorough Comprehension of the Instructions on all Dharma Practices*, it says:

Make excellent offerings such as flowers and cushions,
Put the place in order and control your behaviour,
Do not harm any living being,
Have genuine faith in your teacher,
Listen to his instructions without distraction
And question him in order to dispel your doubts;
These are the six transcendent perfections of a listener.

A person listening to the teaching should practise the six transcendent perfections as follows:

Prepare the teacher's seat, arrange cushions upon it, offer a mandala, flowers and other offerings. This is the practice of *generosity*.

Sweep clean the place or room after carefully settling the dust with water, and refrain from all disrespectful conduct. This is the practice of *discipline*.

Avoid harm to living beings, even the smallest of insects, and bear heat, and all other difficulties. This is the practice of *patience*.

Lay aside any wrong views concerning the teacher and the teaching and joyfully with genuine faith. This is the practice of *diligence*.

Listen to the Lama's instructions without distraction. This is the practice of *concentration*.

Ask questions to clear up any hesitations and doubts. This is the practice of *wisdom*.

2.2.3 Other Modes of Conduct

All forms of disrespectful behaviour should be avoided. The *Vinaya* says:

Do not teach those who have no respect,
Who cover their heads although in good health,
Who carry canes, weapons and parasols,
Or whose heads are swathed in turbans.

And the *Jatakas*:

Take the lowest seat.
Cultivate the dignified bearing of thorough discipline.
With your eyes brimming with joy,
Drink in the words like nectar
And be completely concentrated.
That is the way to listen to the teaching.

II. THE TEACHING ITSELF: AN EXPLANATION OF HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO FIND THE FREEDOMS AND ADVANTAGES

The main subject of the chapter is explained in four sections: reflecting on the nature of freedom, reflecting on the particular advantages related to Dharma, reflecting on images that show how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages, and reflecting on numerical comparisons.

1. Reflecting on the nature of freedom

In general, here, “freedom” means to have the opportunity to practise Dharma and not to be born in one of the eight states without that opportunity. “Lack of freedom” refers to those eight states where there is no such opportunity:

Being born in the hells, in the preta realm,
As an animal, a long-lived god or a barbarian,
Having wrong views, being born when there is no Buddha
Or being born deaf and mute; these are the eight states without freedom.

Beings reborn in hell have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because they are constantly tormented by intense heat or cold.

The *pretas* have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because of suffering they experience from hunger and thirst.

Animals have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because undergo slavery and suffer from the attacks of other animals.

The long-lived gods have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because they spend their time in a state of mental blankness.²³

Those born in border countries have no opportunity to practise Dharma because the doctrine of the Buddha is unknown in such places.

Those born as *tirthikas** or with similar wrong views have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because their minds are so influenced those mistaken beliefs.

Those born during a dark kalpa have no opportunity to practise Dharma because they never even hear of the Three Jewels, and cannot distinguish good from bad.

Those born mute or mentally deficient have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because their faculties are incomplete.

** Tirthika, (mu rtes pa): an adherent of non-Buddhist religious or philosophical traditions, implying the wrong views described in Chapter 4, section 1.10*

The inhabitants of the three lower realms suffer constantly from cold, hunger, thirst and other torments, as a result of their past negative actions; they have no opportunity to practise the Dharma.

“Barbarians” means those who live in the thirty-two border countries, such as Lo Khatha,²⁴ and all those who consider harming others an act faith or whose savage beliefs see taking life as good. These people inhabiting the outlying territories have human form, but their minds lack the right orientation and they cannot attune themselves to the Dharma. Inheriting from their forefathers such pernicious customs as marriage to their mothers, they live in a way that is the very opposite of Dharma practice. Everything they do is evil, and it is in techniques of such harmful activities as killing insects and hunting wild beasts that they truly excel. Many of them fall into lower realms as soon as they die. For such people is no opportunity to practise the Dharma.

The long-lived gods are those gods who are absorbed in a state of mental blankness. Beings are born in this realm as a result of believing liberation is a state in which all mental activities, good or bad, are absent, and of meditating upon that state. They remain in such states of concentration for great kalpas on end. But once the effect of the past actions that produced that condition has exhausted itself they are reborn in the lower realms because of their wrong views. They, too, lack any opportunity to practise the Dharma.

The term “wrong views” includes, in general, eternalist and nihilist beliefs, which are views contrary to, and outside, the teaching of the Buddha. Such views spoil our minds and prevent us from aspiring to the authentic Dharma, to the extent that we no longer have the opportunity practise it. Here in Tibet, because the second Buddha, Padmasambhava of Oddiyana, entrusted the protection of the land to the twelve Tenma, the tirthikas themselves have not really been able to penetrate. However, anyone whose understanding is like that of the tirthikas, and contrary to that of the authentic Dharma and authentic masters, will thereby be deprived of the opportunity to practise according to those true teachings. The monk Sunaksatra spent twenty-five years as Lord Buddha’s attendant and yet, because he did not have the slightest faith and held only wrong views, ended up being reborn as a preta in a flower-garden.

Birth in a dark kalpa means to be reborn in a period during which there no Buddha. In a universe where no Buddha has appeared, no-one has ever even heard of the Three Jewels. As there is no Dharma, there is no opportunity to practise it.

The mind of a person born deaf and mute cannot function properly and the process of listening to the teachings, expounding them, reflecting on them and putting them into practice is impeded. The description “deaf mute” usually refers to a speech dysfunction. It becomes a condition without the opportunity for Dharma when the usual human ability to use and understand language is absent. This category therefore also includes those whose mental disability makes them unable to comprehend the teachings and thus deprives them of the opportunity to practise them.

2. Reflecting on the particular advantages related to Dharma

Under this heading are included five individual advantages and five circumstantial advantages.

2.1 THE FIVE INDIVIDUAL ADVANTAGES

Nagarjuna lists them as follows:

Born a human, in a central place, with all one's faculties,
Without a conflicting lifestyle and with faith in the Dharma.

Without a human life, it would not be possible even to encounter the Dharma. So this human body is the advantage of *support*.

Had you been born in a remote place where Dharma was unheard of you would never have come across it. But the region you were born in is central as far as Dharma is concerned and so you have the advantage of *place*.

Not to have all your sense faculties intact would be a hindrance to the practice of Dharma. If you are free of such disabilities, you have the advantage of *possessing the sense faculties*.

If you had a conflicting lifestyle, you would always be immersed in negative actions and at variance with the Dharma. Since you now have the wish to do positive actions, this is the advantage of *intention*.

If you had no faith in the Buddha's teachings you would not feel any inclination for the Dharma. Having the ability to turn your mind to Dharma, as you are doing now, constitutes the advantage of *faith*.

Because these five advantages need to be complete with regard to one's own make-up, they are called the *five individual advantages*.

To practice the real, authentic Dharma, it is absolutely necessary to be a human being. Now, suppose that you did not have the support of a human form, but had the highest form of life in the three lower realms, that of an animal—even the most beautiful and highly prized animal known to man. If someone said to you, "Say *Om mani padme hum* once and you will become a Buddha," you would be quite incapable of understanding his words or grasping their meaning, nor would you be able to utter a word. In fact, even if you were dying of cold, you would be unable to think of anything to do but lie in a heap—whereas a man, no matter how weak, would know how to shelter in a cave or under a tree, and would gather wood and make a fire to warm his face and hands. If animals are incapable of even such simple things, how could they ever conceive of practising Dharma?

Gods and other beings of the kind, however superior their physical form, do not meet the requirements laid down for taking the *pratimoksa* vows, and therefore cannot assimilate the Dharma in its totality.

As to what is meant by a "central region," one should distinguish between a geographically central region and a place that is central in terms of the Dharma.

Geographically speaking, the central region is generally said to be the Vajra Seat at Bodh Gaya²⁵ in India, at the centre of Jambudvīpa, the Southern Continent. The thousand Buddhas of the Good Kalpa all attain enlightenment there. Even in the universal destruction at the end of the kalpa, the four elements cannot harm it, and it remains there as if suspended in space. At its centre grows the Tree of Enlightenment. This place, with all the towns of India around it, is therefore considered the central region in terms of geography.

In Dharma terms, a central place is wherever the Dharma—the teaching Lord Buddha—exists. All other regions are said to be peripheral.

In the distant past, from the time Lord Buddha came into this world and as long as his doctrine still existed in India, that land was central in terms of both geography and Dharma. However, now that it has fallen into the hands of the tirthikas and the doctrine of the Conqueror has disappeared in that region, as far as Dharma is concerned even Bodh Gaya is a peripheral place.

In the days of the Buddha, Tibet, the Land of Snows, was called "the border country of Tibet," because it was a sparsely populated land to which the doctrine had not yet spread. Later, the population increased little by little, and there reigned several kings who were emanations of the Buddhas. The Dharma first appeared

in Tibet during the reign of Lha-Thothori Nyentsen, when the *Sutra of a Hundred Invocations and Prostrations*, a *tsa-tsa* mould and other objects fell on to the palace roof.

Five generations later, in accordance with prophecies that he would understand the meaning of the sutra, there appeared the Dharma King Songtsen Gampo, an emanation of the Sublime Compassionate One.* During Songtsen Gampo's reign, the translator Thonmi Sambhota was sent to India to study its languages and scripts. On his return he introduced an alphabet to Tibet for the first time. He translated into Tibetan twenty-one sutras and tantras of Avalokitesvara, *The Powerful Secret*, and various other texts. The king himself displayed multiple forms, and along with his minister Gartongtsen, he used miraculous means to defend the country. He took as his queens two princesses, one Chinese and one from Nepal, who brought with them numerous representations of the Buddha's body, speech and mind including the statues called the Jowo Mikyo Dorje and the Jowo Sakyamuni, the actual representatives of the Buddha.²⁶ The king built the series of temples known as the Thadul and Yangdul, of which the principal one was the Rasa Trulnang.²⁷ In this way he established Buddhism in Tibet.

*Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

His fifth successor, King Trisong Detsen, invited one hundred and eight pandits to Tibet, including Padmasambhava, the Preceptor of Oddiyana, the greatest of the mantra-holders, unequalled throughout the three worlds. To uphold representations of the Buddhas' form, Trisong Detsen had temples built, including "unchanging, spontaneously arisen" Samye. To uphold the Buddha's speech, the authentic Dharma, one hundred and eight translators, including the great Vairotsana, learned the art of translation and translated all the main sutras, tantras and sastras then current in the noble land of India. The "Seven Men for Testing" and others were ordained as monks, forming the Sangha, to uphold Buddha's mind.

From that time onwards up to the present day, the teachings of the Buddha have shone like the sun in Tibet and, despite ups and downs, the doctrine of the Conqueror has never been lost in either of its aspects, transmission or realization. Thus Tibet, as far as the Dharma is concerned, is a central country.

A person lacking any of the five sense faculties does not meet the requirements laid down for taking the monastic vows. Moreover, someone who does not have the good fortune to be able to see representations of the Conqueror to inspire his devotion, or to read and hear the precious and excellent teachings as the material for study and reflection, will not be fully capable of receiving the Dharma.

"Conflicting lifestyle" refers, strictly speaking, to the lifestyles of people born in communities of hunters, prostitutes and so forth, who are involved in these negative activities from their earliest youth. But in fact it also includes anyone whose every thought, word and deed is contrary to the Dharma—for even those not born into such lifestyles can easily slip into them later in life. It is therefore essential to avoid doing anything which conflicts with the authentic Dharma.

If your faith is not in the Buddha's teachings but in powerful gods, nagas and so forth, or in other doctrines such as those of the tirthikas, then, no matter how much faith you might place in them, none of them can protect you from the sufferings of samsara or from rebirth in lower realms. But if you have acquired a properly reasoned faith in the Conqueror's doctrine, which unites transmission and realization, you are without doubt a fit vessel for the true Dharma. And that is the greatest of the five individual advantages.

2.2 THE FIVE CIRCUMSTANTIAL ADVANTAGES

A Buddha has appeared and has preached the Dharma,
His teachings still exist and can be followed,
There are those who are kind-hearted toward others.

Those not born in a bright kalpa, one in which a Buddha has appeared, have never even heard of the Dharma. But we are now in a kalpa in which a Buddha has come, and so we possess the advantage of the presence of the particular *teacher*.

Although a Buddha has come, if he had not taught no-one would benefit. But since the Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma according to three levels, we have the advantage of the *teaching of the Dharma*.

Although he has taught, had his doctrine died out it would no longer be there to help us. But the period dur-

ing which the doctrine will remain extant has not yet ended, so we have the advantage of the *time*.

Although the teachings still exist, unless we follow them they can be of no benefit to us. But since we have taken up the Dharma, we possess the advantage of *our own good fortune*.

Although we have taken up the Dharma, without the favourable circumstance of being accepted by a spiritual friend we would never come to know what the Dharma is really about. But since a spiritual friend has accepted us, we possess the advantage of his *extraordinary compassion*.

Because these five factors need to be complete with regard to circumstances other than one's own, they are called the *five circumstantial advantages*.

The time it takes for the universe to form, to stay in existence, to be destroyed and to remain in a state of emptiness is called a kalpa. A kalpa in which a perfect Buddha appears in the world is called a "bright kalpa;" while one in which a Buddha does not appear is called a "dark kalpa." Long ago, during the great Kalpa of Manifest Joy, thirty-three thousand Buddhas appeared. A hundred dark kalpas followed. Then, during the Perfect Kalpa, eight hundred million Buddhas appeared, again followed by a hundred kalpas without Dharma. Then eight hundred and forty million Buddhas appeared during the Excellent Kalpa, after which there were five hundred dark kalpas. During the Kalpa Delightful to See, eight hundred million Buddhas appeared, and then there were seven hundred kalpas of darkness. Sixty thousand Buddhas appeared during the Joyous Kalpa. Then came our own kalpa, the Good Kalpa.

Before our kalpa arose, this cosmos of a billion universes was an immense ocean on whose surface appeared a thousand thousand-petalled lotuses. The gods of the Brahma-world, wondering how this could be, through clairvoyance understood it to signify that during this kalpa one thousand Buddhas would appear. "This will be a good kalpa," they said, and "Good" became its name.

From the time when beings' lifespan was eighty thousand years and the Buddha Destroyer-of-samsara appeared, and up to the time when beings will live incalculably long and the Buddha Infinite-Aspiration will come, one thousand Buddhas will have taken their place in this world on the Vajra Seat at the centre of the Continent of Jambudvīpa. Each them will have attained perfect Buddhahood there and turned the Wheel of Dharma. Therefore our present kalpa is a bright kalpa.

It will be followed by sixty peripheral, bad kalpas, and after that, in the Kalpa of Vast Numbers, ten thousand Buddhas will appear. Then another ten thousand bad kalpas will ensue. In this alternation of bright and dark kalpas, should we happen to be born during a dark kalpa, we would never even hear that there was such a thing as the Three Jewels.

Moreover, as the Great One of Oddiyana points out, the Secret Mantra Vajrayana in particular is taught only rarely:

Long ago, during the very first kalpa, the Kalpa of the Complete Array, the teachings of the Secret Mantrayana were promulgated by the Buddha known as Once-Come-King and achieved great renown. The teachings we have now, those of the present Buddha Sakyamuni also include the Secret Mantrayana. In ten million kalpas' time, during the Kalpa of the Array of Flowers, the Buddha Manjushri will come, as I have come now, to reveal the Secret Mantra teachings on a vast scale. This is so because beings in these three kalpas are suitable recipients for the Secret Mantras, and the reason why the Mantrayana teachings do not appear at other times is because the beings of those times are not capable of making use of them.²⁸

In this Good Kalpa, at the present time when the span of human life is a hundred years, the perfect Buddha Sakyamuni has come to the world and so it is a bright kalpa.

Suppose that a Buddha had come, but was still in meditation and not yet taught the Dharma. As long as the light of his Dharma had not appeared, his having come would make no difference to us. It would be just as if he had never come at all.

On attaining total and perfect Buddhahood upon the Vajra Seat, our Teacher exclaimed:

I have found a Dharma like ambrosia,
Deep, peaceful, simple, uncompounded, radiant.

If I explain it no-one will understand,
So I shall stay here silent in the forest.

Accordingly, for seven weeks he did not teach, until Brahma and Indra begged him to turn the Wheel of the Dharma.

Furthermore, if those who hold the authentic teaching do not explain it, it is difficult for the Dharma to be of any real benefit to beings. An example is the great Smrtijnana of India, who came to Tibet because his mother had been reborn there in one of the ephemeral hells. His interpreter died on the journey, and Smrtijnana, who was wandering around the province of Kham unable to speak a word of the language, became a shepherd and died there without having been of very much benefit to anyone. When Jowo Atisa later arrived in Tibet and learned what had happened, he cried out: “How’ sad! Tibetans, your merit is weak! Nowhere in India, East or West, was there a pandita better than Smrtijnana,” and, placing his hands together, he wept.

For us, the Buddha Sakyamuni has turned the Wheel of the Dharma on three levels and, manifesting an inconceivable number of forms according to the needs and capacities of those to be helped, leads disciples through the nine vehicles of his teaching to maturity and liberation.

Even during a kalpa in which a Buddha has appeared and given teachings, once the time for those teachings to endure has come to an end and the authentic Dharma he has taught disappears it is exactly the same as in a dark kalpa. The period between the disappearance of one Buddha’s teachings and the next Buddha’s teachings being given is described as “devoid of Dharma.” In fortunate places where beings have adequate merit, pratyekabuddhas appear but the doctrine is not taught or practised.

These days we still have the teachings of the Buddha Sakyamuni. Their degree of survival follows a tenfold sequence. First, there are three periods, each consisting of five hundred parts.²⁹ During this time, there appears the “teaching of the heart of Samantabhadra,” which is the *fruit*.³⁰ Then come three periods of five hundred parts for *accomplishment*.³¹ These are followed by three periods of five hundred parts for *transmission*. Finally, one period of five hundred parts arises when *only the symbols are retained*. Altogether, this makes ten periods, each of five hundred parts. At present we have reached the seventh or eighth period. We live in an age of increase in the five degenerations—those of lifespan, beliefs, emotions, time and beings. Nonetheless, the doctrine of transmission and realization does still exist. As it has not died out, we still possess the advantage of *having the Dharma in its entirety*.

That the Doctrine is still present, however, is irrelevant unless you make use of it—just as the rising sun, although it lights up the whole world, does not make the slightest difference to a blind man. And, just as the waters of a great lake cannot quench the thirst of a traveller arriving at its shore unless he actually drinks from them, the Dharma of transmission and realization cannot infiltrate your mind by itself.

To enter the Dharma just to protect yourself from sickness and negative influences in this life, or because you fear the sufferings of the three lower realms in future lives, is called “Dharma as protection against fears,” and is not the right way to set out on the path.

To enter the Dharma merely to have food, clothing and so on in this life, or to obtain the pleasant reward of a divine or human rebirth in the next, is called “Dharma as quest for excellence.”

To enter the Dharma understanding that the whole of samsara has no meaning, striving to find a way to be free from it, is called “taking up the teaching by arriving at the starting point of the path.”

Even if you start practising the Dharma, unless you have been accepted by a spiritual friend it will be of no use. The *Condensed Transcendental Wisdom* says:

The Buddha and the teachings depend upon the spiritual friend.
Thus said the Conqueror, supreme embodiment of all good qualities.

The Buddha’s teaching is immense, its transmissions are numerous, and it covers an inexhaustible range of

topics. Without relying on the pith instructions of a teacher we would never know how to condense the essential points of all those teachings and put them into practice.

Once, when Jowo Atisa was in Tibet, Khu, Ngok and Drom* asked him: “For someone to achieve liberation and complete omniscience, which is more important—the canonical scriptures and their commentaries, or the oral instructions of the teacher?”

“The teacher’s instructions,” Atisa replied.

“Why?”

“Because when it comes to doing the practice—even if you can explain the whole *Tripitaka* from memory and are very skilled in metaphysics—without the teacher’s practical guidance you and the Dharma will part company.”

“So,” they continued, “is the main point of the teacher’s instructions to keep the three vows and to strive to do good with body, speech and mind?”

“That is not the slightest bit of use,” Atisa replied.

“How can that be?” they exclaimed.

“You may be able to keep the three vows perfectly, but unless you are determined to free yourself from the three worlds of samsara it just creates further causes of samsara. You may be able to strive day and night to do good with body, speech, and mind, but unless you know how to dedicate the merit to perfect enlightenment, two or three wrong thoughts are enough to destroy it entirely. You may be teachers and meditators, full of piety and learning, but unless your minds are turned away from the eight ordinary concerns, whatever you do will only be for this present life, and you will not encounter the path that helps for future lives.”

This illustrates how important it is to be taken under the care of a teacher, a spiritual friend.

* *Atisa’s three main disciples (see glossary).*

Checking your own life and circumstances for each of the eight freedoms and ten advantages, if you find that all these favourable conditions are present, you have what is known as “human life endowed with the eighteen freedoms and advantages.” However, the Omniscient Dharma King Longchenpa, in his *Wish-granting Treasury*, specifies sixteen additional conditions which preclude any opportunity to practise the Dharma—eight intrusive circumstances³² and eight incompatible propensities³³—under whose sway it is important not to fall. In his words:

Turmoil from the five emotions, stupidity, being dominated by evil influences,
Laziness, being inundated by the effect of past evil actions,
Enslavement to others, seeking protection from dangers, and hypocritical practice:
These are the eight intrusive circumstances that leave no freedom.

Being bound by one’s ties, flagrant depravity,
Lack of dissatisfaction with samsara, complete absence of faith,
Taking pleasure in bad actions, lack of interest in the Dharma,
Heedlessness of the vows and of the samayas:
These are the eight incompatible propensities that leave no freedom.

2.3 The eight intrusive circumstances that leave no freedom to practise the Dharma

People in whom the five poisons—that is, negative emotions such as hatred for enemies, infatuation with friends and relatives, and so forth—are extremely strong, may wish from time to time that they could practise some kind of true Dharma. But the five poisons are too strong, dominating their minds most of the time and preventing them from ever accomplishing the Dharma properly.

Very stupid beings, lacking even the slightest glimmer of intelligence, might enter the Dharma but, being unable to understand a single word of the teaching or its meaning, they will never be able to study it or reflect and meditate upon it.

Once people have been taken as disciples by a false spiritual friend who teaches the view and action in a per-

verted manner, their minds will be led on to wrong paths and will not be in accord with the true Dharma.

People who want to learn the Dharma but are too lazy, without even a trace of diligence, will never accomplish it because they are so ensnared in their own indolence and procrastination.

Some people's obscurations and negative actions are such that, in spite of the effort they put into the Dharma, they fail to develop any of the right qualities in their minds. Their backlog of bad actions has overwhelmed them, and they will lose confidence in the teachings without perceiving that it is all due to their own past actions.

Those who are in servitude to someone else, and have lost their autonomy, may want to take up Dharma; but the person who dominates them does not allow them to practise.

Some people take up Dharma out of fear for this present life—that they might lack food or clothing, or experience other afflictions. But since they have no deep conviction in the Dharma, they give themselves up to their old habits and get involved in things that are not Dharma.

Others are impostors who, through a pretence of Dharma, try to win possessions, services and prestige. In front of others they assume the guise of practitioners, but in their minds they are only interested in this life, so they are far removed from the path of liberation.

These are eight circumstances that render it impossible to continue practising the Dharma.

2.4 The eight incompatible propensities that leave no freedom to practise the Dharma

People who are tightly bound to their worldly commitments, wealth, pleasures, children, relatives and so forth, are so preoccupied with the strenuous efforts entailed by these things that they have no time to practise the Dharma.

Some people lack any scrap of humanity, and their nature is so depraved that they are unable to improve their behaviour. Even a genuine spiritual teacher would find it very difficult to set them on the noble path. As the sublime beings of the past said, "The abilities of a disciple can be shaped, but not his basic character."

A person who feels not the slightest consternation either on hearing of lower rebirths and the ills of samsara, or in the face of this present life's sufferings, has no determination whatsoever to liberate himself from samsara, and therefore no reason to engage in Dharma practice.

To have no faith at all, either in the true Dharma or in the teacher, shuts off any access to the teachings and bars entry to the path of liberation.

People who take pleasure in harmful or negative actions, and who fail to control their thoughts, words and deeds, are devoid of any noble qualities and have turned away from the Dharma.

Some people are no more interested in spiritual values and Dharma than a dog in eating grass. Since they feel no enthusiasm for the Dharma, its qualities will never develop in their minds.

Anyone who, having entered the Basic Vehicle, breaks his vows and commitment to bodhicitta, has nowhere else to go but the lower realms. He will not escape from states where there is no opportunity to practise the Dharma.

Anyone who, having entered the Secret Mantra Vehicle, breaks his samaya commitments to his teacher and spiritual brothers and sisters, will bring about his own ruin and theirs, destroying any prospect of accomplishments.

These are eight propensities that lead one away from the Dharma and snuff out the lamp of liberation.

Before these sixteen factors that leave no opportunity for the practice have been carefully ruled out, people in these decadent times may look as if they have all the freedoms and advantages and are true practitioners of the Dharma. However, the chieftain upon his throne and the lama beneath his parasol,³⁴ the hermit in his mountain solitude, the man who has renounced the affairs of state, and anyone who might have a high opinion of his own worth—each may think he is practising Dharma, but as long as he is under the sway of these additional limiting conditions, he is not on the true path.

So, before blindly assuming the forms of Dharma, check your own state carefully first to see whether or not you have all thirty-four aspects of the freedoms and advantages. If you do have them all, rejoice and reflect deeply on them over and over again. Remind yourself how, now that you have finally gained these freedoms and advantages that are so difficult to find, you are not going to squander them; whatever happens, you are going to practise the true Dharma. Should you find, however, that some aspects are missing, try to acquire them by whatever means may be possible.

At all times, you should take pains to examine carefully whether or not you have all elements of the freedoms and advantages. If you fail to check, and any one of those elements should be lacking, you will be missing the chance to practise the Dharma truly. After all, even the execution of a single minor everyday task requires many mutually dependent materials and conditions to be brought together. Is it any wonder that the realization of our ultimate goal—the Dharma—is impossible without the conjunction of many interconnected factors?

Imagine a traveller who wants to brew himself some tea. The making of tea involves many different elements—the pot, the water, the wood, the fire, and so on. Of these, just to light the fire alone is impossible without a flint, steel, some tinder, the traveller’s hands and so forth. If just one thing is missing, the tinder for instance, then the fact that the traveller has everything else he needs is of no use whatsoever. He simply does not have what it takes to make tea. In the same way, if even one element of the freedoms and advantages is missing, there is no chance at all of practising the true Dharma.

If you check your own mind carefully, you will see that even the basic eight freedoms and ten advantages are very difficult to attain, and that to have all ten advantages is even rarer than to have all eight freedoms.

Someone born as a human, with all his faculties intact and in a central region, but who becomes involved in a lifestyle conflicting with the Dharma and who has no faith in the Conqueror’s teaching, only has three of the advantages. Were he to obtain either of the two others, he would still only have four. Now, to have a lifestyle which does not conflict at all with the Dharma is extremely hard. If any of a person’s thoughts, words and deeds are negative and his motives are for this life, then in fact, even if he has the reputation of a good and learned man, his lifestyle is in conflict with the Dharma.

The same applies to the five circumstantial advantages. If a Buddha has come, has taught the Dharma and the teachings still exist, yet a person has not entered the Dharma, that person has only three of those advantages. Here again, “entering the Dharma” does not simply mean asking for some teaching and being given it. The starting point of the path of liberation is the conviction that the whole of samsara is meaningless and the genuine determination to be free from it. To travel the path of the Great Vehicle, the essential is to have genuinely aroused bodhicitta. The minimum is to have such unshakeable faith in the Three Precious Jewels that you would never renounce them, even to save your life. Without that, simply reciting prayers and wearing yellow robes is no proof that you have entered the Dharma.

Make sure that you know how to identify each of these freedoms and advantages, and to check whether you have them yourself. This is of crucial importance.

3. Reflecting on images that show how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages

The Buddha said that it is more difficult for a being to obtain human birth than it would be for a turtle coming up from the depths of the ocean to put its head by chance through the opening of a wooden yoke tossed around by huge waves on the surface.

Imagine the whole cosmos of a billion universes as a vast ocean. Floating upon it is a yoke, a piece of wood with a hole in it that can be fixed around the horns of draught oxen. This yoke, tossed hither and thither by the waves, sometimes eastward, sometimes westward, never stays in the same place even for an instant. Deep down in the depths of the ocean lives a blind turtle who rises up to the surface only once every hundred years.³⁵ That the yoke and the turtle might meet is extremely unlikely. The yoke itself is inanimate; the turtle is not intentionally seeking it out. The turtle, being blind, has no eyes with which to spot the yoke. If the yoke were to stay in one place, there might be a chance of their meeting; but it is continually on the move. If the turtle were to spend its entire time swimming around the surface, it might, perhaps, cross paths with the

yoke; but it surfaces only once every hundred years. The chances of the yoke and the turtle coming together are therefore extremely small. Nevertheless, by sheer chance the turtle might still just slip its neck into the yoke. But it is even more difficult than that, the sutras say, to obtain a human existence with the freedoms and advantages. Nagarjuna expresses this in his Advice to King Surabhibhadra:³⁶

It is highly unlikely that a turtle might, by chance, arise through a yoke tossed about on a mighty sea;
And yet, compared to animal birth there is far less chance than even that
Of obtaining a human life. Accordingly, O Lord of Men,
Practise the authentic Dharma to make your fortune fruitful!

And Santideva says:

The Buddha declared that like a turtle that perchance can place
Its head within a yoke adrift upon a shoreless sea,
This human birth is difficult to find.

The difficulty of obtaining human birth is also compared to that of getting dried peas thrown at a smooth wall to stick to it, or to that of balancing a pile of peas on the tip of an upright needle—which is hard enough with even one single pea! It is important to know these comparisons, which are from the *Nirvana Sutra*, and similar ones in other texts.

4. Reflecting on numerical comparisons

When you consider the relative numbers of different kinds of beings, you can appreciate that to be born a human is hardly possible at all. By way of illustration, it is said that if the inhabitants of the hells were as numerous as stars in the night sky, the pretas would be no more numerous than the stars visible in the daytime; that if there were as many pretas as stars at night, there would only be as many animals as stars in the daytime; and that if there were as many animals as stars at night, there would only be as many gods and humans as stars in the daytime.

It is also said that there are as many beings in hell as specks of dust in the whole world, as many pretas as particles of sand in the Ganges, as many animals as grains in a beer-barrel³⁷ and as many asuras as snowflakes in a blizzard—but that gods and humans are as few as the particles of dust on a fingernail.

To take form as any being of the higher realms is already rare enough, but rarer still is a human life complete with all the freedoms and advantages. We can see for ourselves at any time how few human beings there are compared to animals. Think how many bugs live in a clod of earth in summertime, or ants in a single anthill—there are hardly that many humans in the whole world. But even within mankind, we can see that, compared to all those people born in outlying regions where the teachings have never appeared, those born in places where the Dharma has spread are exceedingly rare. And even among these, there are only a very few who have all the freedoms and advantages.

With all these perspectives in mind, you should be filled with joy that you really have all the freedoms and advantages complete.

A human life can be called a “precious human life” only when it is complete with all aspects of the freedoms and advantages, and from then onwards it truly becomes precious. But as long as any of those aspects are incomplete, then, however extensive your knowledge, learning and talent in ordinary things may be, you do not have a precious human life. You have what is called an ordinary human life, merely human life, hapless human life, meaningless human life, or human life returning empty handed. It is like failing to use a wish-fulfilling gem despite holding it in your hands, or returning empty-handed from a land full of precious gold.

To come across a precious jewel
Is nothing compared to finding this precious human life.
Look how those who are not saddened by samsara
Fritter life away!

To win a whole kingdom

Is nothing compared to meeting a perfect teacher.
Look how those with no devotion
Treat the teacher as their equal!

To be given command of a province
Is nothing compared to receiving the Bodhisattva vows.
Look how those with no compassion
Hurl their vows away!

To rule over the universe
Is nothing compared to receiving a tantric empowerment.
Look how those who do not keep the samayas
Jettison their promises!

To catch sight of the Buddha
Is nothing compared to seeing the true nature of mind.
Look how those with no determination
Sink back into delusion!

These freedoms and advantages do not come by chance or coincidence. They are the result of an accumulation of merit and wisdom built up over many kalpas.

The great scholar Trakpa Gyaltzen says:

This free and favoured human existence
Is not the result of your resourcefulness.
It comes from the merit you have accumulated.

To have obtained human life only to be wholly involved in evil activities without the least notion of Dharma is to be lower than the lower realms. As Jetsun Mila said to the hunter Gönpo Dorje:

To have the freedoms and fortunes of human birth is usually said to be precious,
But when I see someone like you it doesn't seem precious at all.

Nothing has as much power to drag you down to the lower realms human life. What you do with it, right now, is up to you alone:

Used well, this body is our raft to freedom.
Used badly, this body anchors us to samsara.
This body does the bidding of both good and evil.

It is through the power of all the merit you have accumulated in the past that you have now obtained this human life complete with its eighteen freedoms and advantages. To neglect the one essential thing—the supreme Dharma—and instead just spend your life acquiring food and clothes and indulging the eight ordinary concerns would be a useless waste of those freedoms and advantages. How ineffectual to wait until death is upon you and then beat your breast with remorse! For you will have made the wrong choice, as it says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Thus, having found the freedoms of a human life,
If I now fail to train myself in virtue,
What greater folly could there ever be?
How more could I betray myself?

This present life, therefore, is the turning-point at which you can choose between lasting good or lasting evil. If you do not make use of it right now to seize the citadel of the absolute nature within this lifetime, in lives to come it will be very hard to obtain such freedom again. Once you take birth in any of the forms of life in the lower realms, no idea of Dharma will ever occur to you. Too bewildered to know what to do or what not to do, you will fall endlessly further and further to ever lower realms. So telling yourself that now is the time to make an effort, meditate over and over again, applying the three supreme methods: start with the thought of bodhicitta; do the practice itself without any conceptualization, and dedicate the merit at the end.

As a measure of how much this practice has truly convinced us, we should be like Geshe Chengawa, who

spent all his time practising and never even slept. Geshe Tonpa said to him: “You’d better rest, my son. You’ll make yourself ill.”

“Yes, I should rest,” Chengawa replied. “But when I think how difficult it is to find the freedoms and advantages that we have, I have no time to rest.” He recited nine hundred million mantras of Miyowa and did without sleep for the whole of his life. We should meditate until exactly that sort of conviction arises in our own minds.

Although I have won these freedoms, I am poor in Dharma, which is their essence.

Although I have entered the Dharma, I waste time doing other things.

Bless me and foolish beings like me

That we may attain the very essence of the freedoms and advantages.