

Advice given to a prisoner, a new Buddhist, who had just been given his date for execution in 3 months' time.

My very dear Ted,

Venerable Wongmo mentioned to me about your situation, so here are some things for you to think about, some suggestions about how to use this situation and what are the best things you can do, the most practical thing left for you to practice.

Even if someone has only one day left to live, even only one hour left, they still have an incredible opportunity to make the human body – which they have received just this one time – most beneficial. Even if they have only one hour left, still, in that time, they can take the five lay vows or eight lay precepts.

It is said in the teaching on the commentary of the eight precepts by Geshe Lam Rimpa from Drepung Monastery in Tibet: “Even if one has only one hour left to live it is so beneficial, so meaningful, to take the eight precepts.”

It is also said in the teachings: “In the past to keep all the vows for eons, but in this degenerate time to keep even just one vow for one day has great advantage.”

In *The Sutra of the King of Concentration* it says:

Someone who with a devotional mind offers food, drink, umbrellas, flags and garlands of lights equal to the number of sand grains in the Pacific Ocean to Buddhas equaling a million times a thousand million, if compared to someone who keeps one vow for one day and night in a time like now, of degeneration of the teachings of the One Gone to Bliss (Buddha), the merit of keeping this one vow day and night is far greater than the merit created by the previous person (who made those very, very, very expensive offerings to such a large number of Buddhas with devotional thought).

Best practices for you

Lay vows: It would be best for you to take the lay vows as soon as possible from Ven. Robina, however many that you can keep. Until then you can also take the eight Mahayana 24-hour vows. Robina can explain this more to you.

Chenrezig meditation: According to my observation it comes out best for you to practice Chenrezig, the Compassion Buddha: meditate and recite *Om mani padme hum*.

Here is one photo of my personal *thangka* that I carry around with me everywhere of Chenrezig.

Visualize Chenrezig (the same as Chenrezig looks in the photo) in front of you. As you recite the Chenrezig mantra (*Om mani padme hum*) visualize that nectar is coming from Chenrezig and enters you and purifies all your sickness, negative karma, spirit harm and defilements. For half the mala (54 mantras) visualize being purified, and during the other

half of the mala visualize that you receive all qualities of Chenrezig. Chenrezig completely embraces all sentient beings and knows directly all sentient beings' minds, all the methods to guide them perfectly, perfect power, perfect wisdom and perfect compassion.

Thought Transformation: Also the practice of *The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*, this is one very important practice to do. Meditate on the verses and recite *Om mani padme hum* after each verse. At the end feel extremely happy because you are practicing, generating the thought to benefit others, bodhichitta.

Meditate on absolute bodhichitta, emptiness, as well, to realize how the I, aggregates, phenomena are empty, as they are empty of existence, free from their own side; the way they exist is in mere name, merely imputed by the mind.

Lam-rim prayer: It is very good if you can read a complete lam-rim prayer each day, such as *The Foundation of all Good Qualities*. Each time that you read this it plants a seed for the whole path to enlightenment in your mind and makes your life extremely worthwhile.

Maritza mantra: Also, it comes out very good for you to recite three malas [108 mantras for each mala] a day of the Maritza mantra: *Om maritze mam soha*

Practices on the day of your execution: Thought Transformation and Bodhichitta
On the day that you will be killed, the last thing before you actually get killed you should take complete refuge in Chenrezig, think of Chenrezig, visualize the same as the picture I have sent you, and totally rely on Chenrezig.

Think: “May I experience all the suffering on myself of all beings who have the karma to be executed and those who actually do the killing, and may I let everyone else be free from this suffering.” Put your palms together in the mudra of prostration to Chenrezig and request to be guided by Chenrezig in all future lifetimes from now and in all lifetimes until enlightenment.

Think: “May I receive all sentient beings' karma to be executed, may I experience this by myself alone, and because of that may all others be free from all the sufferings and receive all the peerless happiness up to enlightenment.” Continuously think this way, over and over again.

If you die with this thought of giving up yourself to experience all other beings' suffering of being executed and giving all the happiness to others, it is unbelievable. This becomes your main refuge. In particular feel this for those who have the job to execute you, as well as the people who have given this order, the judge, etc. Because by their creating this negative karma, then having acted on it – which comes from impure mind, attachment, anger, ignorance, particularly self-cherishing thought – they will have to experience the karma of being killed by others, executed for 500 lifetimes, just from this one action of killing, which is the cause.

If you die with non-virtuous thought, self-cherishing thought, ignorance, anger, attachment, then your rebirth will be in the hell realms, hungry ghosts or animal realms. And while you are in the lower realms you continually create more negative karma, which will result in again being reborn in the lower realms. Even spending one day in the lower realms you collect so much negative karmas, ten non-virtues, etc., as well as from numberless past lives.

If you die with the thought of benefiting other sentient beings it is very beneficial, the best way to die, the best quality death. You are dying for others, dying for all those other living beings, which means you are not dying for yourself. This is similar to Jesus who took on the suffering of other sentient beings, or like Shakyamuni Buddha who in previous lives offered his body as charity to the starving tigress and her five cubs; he gave up his life because he could not bear their suffering.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says if you die with bodhichitta, the thought of benefiting others, then this is a self-supporting action and definitely nobody needs to pray for you, you will be guided by yourself. If you die with this thought, you will never get reborn in the hell realms, hungry ghosts or animal realms.

If you put together all the suffering in the human realm and compare it to the suffering in the eight hot hells and eight cold hell realms – even just the suffering in the first cold hell realm – there is no comparison. The suffering in the human realm is actually great pleasure compared to the suffering in even the first hell realm, which is the lightest one in the hell realms.

Dying with the thought of benefiting others, the bodhichitta motivation, is the best method to save oneself from reincarnating in the lower realms and experiencing the suffering for such an incredible length of time. And not only that: because you are continually creating negative karma while you are in the lower realms, you don't know when you will again be reborn in the human realm. Even if you complete the first result of the negative karma to be born in the hell realms, still you are creating so many other negative karmas, which create the result to again and again stay in the lower realms for an incredible length of time, either in the eight hot hells, the eight cold hells or the six neighboring hells.

One great holy being, Kadampa Geshe Chekawa, a Tibetan meditator, always made prayers to be reborn in the hell realms for the benefit of sentient beings. But when he passed away, even though he had made those prayers, instead of being reborn in the hell realms he had the appearance of the Pure Land of Buddha, where there is no suffering, no old age, no sickness, no death, no negative emotions, no thoughts such as anger, jealous mind and so forth, and where there is the greatest sense enjoyments, the most pure perfect enjoyments: everything is most beautiful, all the sights, smells, etc., because there is not even the name suffering in the Pure Land, which is why it is called pure.

He was reborn there because of his great compassion and his prayers to be reborn in the hell realms for the sake of other sentient beings, who are experiencing so much suffering.

Ordinary people who don't know Dharma, who don't practice Dharma, especially don't know the special Mahayana teachings called Thought Transformation, which is practicing transforming any undesirable circumstance into happiness, not just ordinary samsaric pleasure, but real happiness and inner peace.

By using this punishment of being executed, being killed by someone else, as a means for yourself to achieve enlightenment for sentient beings, this experience of being executed becomes the cause of happiness for all sentient beings, not just temporal happiness but liberation from samsara. and ultimate happiness, full enlightenment. Therefore there is no greater enjoyment than this. This experience of being executed is a most exciting opportunity to bring ultimate joy and happiness for oneself and all others sentient beings.

Happiness and problems all depend on how your mind interprets it, whichever label you put on it, whether it is happiness or problem, and then believing it: then it actually becomes suffering or happiness.

Training in this way of thinking – actually being able to transform being killed by somebody by seeing it as beneficial and a cause of happiness for all sentient beings – becomes the best Olympic sport. All these Olympic champions are nothing compared to someone who trains in this meditation practice. This means that what is suffering for most ordinary people can be transformed into great skies of happiness for oneself and for others. By doing this you become the best Olympic champion, the best mental champion. This is such an incredible psychology, an incredible way of thinking.

Being in prison is an incredible opportunity

Another way is to rejoice: if you were not in prison your mind would be so distracted with the objects of attachment, anger and so forth, so disturbed, so preoccupied. You would have no time to meditate, or no interest in spiritual practice, no time to do any practice, because your life would be so busy and fully occupied with the objects of desire.

Therefore by being in prison you have an incredible opportunity. It has helped you to awaken the mind, to analyze yourself and to think about your own life, to use reason and to awaken. This makes being in prison very deep. Because of being in this situation, you feel very deeply the wish to actualize the spiritual path, actualize meditation and actualize the path. Therefore your life in prison is actually much happier than the life out of prison, ordinary people's life in the outside world, especially now that you know about karma, how suffering comes from the mind, how the mind is the main cause.

By knowing this you can have a happy death and happy rebirth, even the rest of this life, by purifying negative karma and creating good karma (virtuous action). Not only that: you discover there is much deeper achievement in life, the ultimate happiness, liberation from samsara (continually circling again and again from one life to another life, the continuity of the aggregates caused by karma and delusion, contaminated by the seed of delusion, all the suffering and causes) by realizing the four noble truths: the true cause of suffering, true suffering, true cessation of suffering and the true path; that there is an opportunity to learn the true path and to achieve this by listening, reflecting and meditating on that.

As long we do not cease the causes of suffering – which is the mind, delusion; and its action, the karma – we will have to reincarnate and die and experience all the sufferings in between over and over again without end.

What common people in the world believe is suffering is very limited, only the extremely gross suffering: what they know and what they want to be free from. What they want to be liberated from is just the extremely gross sufferings. But there is so much suffering, oceans of sufferings that they are not aware of. Ignorance blocks them from achieving total liberation and blocks them from seeking the true path. Ignorance also blocks the happiness that they are looking for – which is actually only suffering, not real happiness – and even the method to achieve the happiness that they want. They are only looking for the happiness outside, that's why their life is continually being led into suffering, one after another, from life to life.

Therefore being in prison is a great, extremely positive, great advantage and joy. You can see that you have an incredible opportunity: to have happiness now, a happy death, happy future lives, happy liberation from samsara and happy great liberation, full enlightenment.

Reincarnation and remembering past lives

As you have just taken interest in Buddhism, maybe you have heard of reincarnation.

Even though this body disintegrates, it doesn't mean that the mind stops. We have body and mind and we relate to them as self, I, which is merely imputed. Even though the body disintegrates, stops, the mind doesn't cease; it continues. Today's mind began at dawn time, but today's consciousness is the continuation of yesterday's consciousness, just before dawn. So like that, this year's mind is the continuity of last year's mind. Same thing: today's mind is the continuity from the childhood mind. That is why we are able to remember what we did yesterday, the place where we went, the food that we had, the people that we met, and so forth.

Also, today's mind will remember what we did last year as it is the same continuity, not a separate being but a continuity of the year before. The childhood person and today's person are not separate, they are the same. You can see this by remembering what you did as a child, where you went, etc.

Like this, it's similar with past lives: even though most people don't remember, one's mind is the same continuity before one was born. Your mind did not start only after the body came out of the mother's womb, nor when the consciousness took place on the fertilized egg, when the association of body mind started.

Some people can remember being in the mother's womb and coming out. I know one student who has clear memory of that. Even though most people don't remember, there are so many who can remember. Also there are so many children who can remember their past lives and explain about it very clearly. This is not only the experience of Tibetan Lamas, they are not the only people who remember their past lives, they are not the only people who have this capacity of mind to tell about their past lives; there are even people

in the West and in many different countries who are born with clear memory. This shows that the person has a clear mind, less polluted and less obscured mind. And some have clarity of mind and are able to also see the future.

Through developing meditation, especially the meditation of calm abiding (which has nine stages), by cutting off the attraction and scattering thoughts and the sinking thoughts, the mind becomes more clear. Then there is no question one can develop higher powers. The great saints, *arya* bodhisattvas – such as the bodhisattvas who achieve the first *bhumi*, who achieved the exalted path of wisdom directly seeing emptiness, the ultimate nature – can remember hundreds of past lives and also can see the future. So there is no question that as they reach higher bhumis (there are ten bhumis to achieve full enlightenment), they discover and see past and future lives a thousand, hundred, million times more, as well as achieve the highest tantric path, the Six Yogas of Naropa.

One can also achieve clairvoyance through meditation on the deity and so forth, being able to see the past and future. And one can also see present things happening that common people cannot see, as well as being able to see things in distant countries.

This shows that there is a past life; this proves it. If there are past lives then also there have to be future lives. As I mentioned, many people can see past lives and many people can see future lives as well. The whole thing is a question of how clear the mind is. The less polluted or defiled the mind is, the more capacity one has to see the past, present and future, which ordinary people cannot see, don't have the clarity or capacity to see.

This is the potential of the mind that can be developed, the capacity of the mind, the clarity of mind that can remember past lives, family members, one's possessions, very clearly being able to recognize family members and friends etc. One can achieve this just by reciting mantras such as *Om mani padme hum*.

For example, my mother: after she passed away she was reincarnated and she was able to remember many things from her past life. My mother was reincarnated to another family that lived close to where she had lived after she was a nun for some years, in Lawudo, Solu Khumbu, in Nepal. In Lawudo there is a cave of the great enlightenment yogi Padmasambhava, where he put his holy feet for a short time, where the Lama Kunzang Yeshe lived in retreat and who was predicted by many Lamas.

When my mother's incarnation was 3 or 4 years old he could recognize clearly all the previous life's family members; he had no feeling of shyness with them, as he had with other outside people; he immediately bonded to them. Also, he was able to recognize the animals that my mother used to care for. My mother's incarnation could remember many things that my mother used, he would even look for them where my mother had left them.

When I was a child in Solu Khumbu, which is near Mount Everest, before I left for Tibet, Solu Khumbu was very, very primitive. The people regarded plastic buttons as very precious, and when they got shirts, even torn ones, they keep the plastic buttons as something very, very precious. Also the same with spoons, because in this area there were no spoons, so when they got them they regarded them as very precious, even wearing the spoon on string around their necks, like people in the West wear necklaces.

Also there was no coffee, no kerosene, etc. But now Solu Khumbu has changed very much and become modern, there are so many new things from the West that happened.

When I was a child, rice was very rare; it was a very special food, because it doesn't grow there and people has to bring it for many days from faraway places. I remember that I would eat rice only once a year, only on very rare occasions, like when a Geshe came or when people come for the Nyung-nā retreats. Sometimes they would bring the rice from faraway places. (Nyung-nā retreat is a two-day retreat on Compassionate Buddha, Chenrezig, during which you eat one meal on one day and then the second day you fast completely and do not even have one drop of water.) One year, on the first day during the Nyung-nā retreat, my alphabet teacher and attendant, whom I was doing the retreat with, brought lunch that was leftover food of rice and curd. This was something so special, a very happy occasion that happened once a year.

Now rice has become a very common food, as well as coffee. When I was a child, there were no candles, kerosene or gas, so after dark the only light you had was the fire you cooked on and a piece of wood that had sap or dried bamboo on it that you could light up and put in the wall so that you could see your food or when you went outside. Now there is electricity in many parts of Solu Khumbu, in the villages, as well as gas lights, etc.

My mother used to collect all the plastic buttons and keep them in a bottle. After my mother passed away, my sister, who is a nun, had used my mother's buttons and sewn them on her shirt. When my mother's incarnation first came to Lawudo and my sister held him in her arms, the boy immediately pointed at the buttons on her shirt and said, "These are my buttons!" He remembered this from his past life.

Also, his behavior was exactly the same as my mother's. Whenever she came into the Lawudo Gompa, my mother used to first circumambulate the *gompa* seven times, and then when she entered the gompa the first thing she did was take blessing from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's throne, prostrate and put her head to the throne to take blessing. Then she would take blessing from the small place where I sat. Then she would take blessing from the altar where there are Buddha statues. When my mother's incarnation first came to the gompa, he did exactly the same thing as my mother.

When my brother Sangye (who lives in Kathmandu) first came to see the incarnation, so many people came – monks, nuns, lay people – and they all offered scarves (*khata*) to the incarnation. This is a traditional gesture of respect and thanks as well as offering good wishes, which one offers to Lamas, statues, scriptures and *thangkas* as a practice of collecting merit. After you offer the *khata* to the Lama, it is given back to you as a blessing.

When all the people offered the scarves to my mother's incarnation, he gave each scarf back to each person, except two people. One was his father and the other was a monk who lived in Lawudo called Tsultrim Norbu. The reason he didn't offer the scarf back to them was because he remembered these two people from his past life.

In his past life when my mother lived in Lawudo, the only water supply was a mile away by walking. One time we got some pipes that the Japanese had left; the leader of the

Sherpas who was working with the Japanese said that we could have the pipes. So we used the pipes to connect to the water source that was a mile away so that it brought the water closer to Lawudo.

The water source was close to one hermitage and the family that lived there were not so happy when we put the pipes in, so they blocked the pipes with earth so that no water came out of the pipes. My mother got very upset with them.

The father of my mother's incarnation was from that family that blocked the pipes. The past life imprint of being so upset was still there, which is why he didn't give back the scarf.

Another story is that my mother had one very close friend called Ang Phurpa, who lived in Kathmandu. One day he and my brother Sangye went up to Lawudo to meet my mother's incarnation for the first time. The incarnation did not have any idea that they were coming. As soon as Ang Phurpa sat down, the parents of my mother's incarnation served *chang*, wine and tea, so my mother's incarnation immediately expressed, "Ang Phurpa please have some, please have some." Ang Phurpa immediately grasped the child's legs and cried because he could not believe the incarnation recollected his name and remembered him; he was speechless.

Everything comes from the mind

In the Western countries they don't talk about imprints being the cause of why some children are angry and other children have a more compassionate nature. Even from birth some children are like this: this is due to past imprints, past habits. In Western culture this is not part of the education, there is not much knowledge of the mind; this education is not fully developed and not really understood in Western society. But knowledge of the mind in the East is very developed, profound and vast.

The Omniscient One, Buddha – who is totally liberated from ignorance, from all the mistakes of the mind, the defilements, negative imprints, hallucinations, who is totally free from impure views, who is beyond all this, totally liberated – explained very clearly and extensively in his teachings about the mind, especially the nature of the mind, the function of the mind, all the different thoughts and mental factors, all the subjects of mind, psychology.

Especially in the Highest Yoga Tantra he explained what the mind can be, the more advanced details, the subtle mind. In Tantra it is explained how all the impure places, impure beings, all the impure animate and inanimate objects, the impure sense enjoyments, the impure body that has suffering, how all this comes from the impure wind and mind. So the enlightened being deity's mandala, the place of Buddha, the enlightened being deity's holy body, your own body, enlightened deity's body, and one's enjoyments when you become enlightened – all this comes from the pure wind and mind.

The Buddha has limitless skies of qualities, holy body, holy speech and holy mind, is able to do perfect works for all the sentient beings equaling the limitless sky – all this comes from the pure subtle wind and mind, manifests from that.

Things such as this subject – for example, how the world came from the mind, is created by the mind – are not at all developed in Western culture. In Buddha’s teachings and philosophy it is clearly explained how everything comes from karma, which is mind. Any undesirable thing, suffering, came from negative imprints, which comes from the mind; and anything that is desirable, happiness, came from positive virtues, which come from the mind.

According to my view, even in one family different children have different characteristics, even different perceptions on one object. One child is born with more compassion and patience, and one child is born very impatient; one child naturally engages in harmful actions, another child naturally does not. So the reason, the very clear logic, is the past habits and past negative and positive imprints. That which is good comes from past positive imprints, and whatever is bad comes from past negative habits, imprints left on the mind.

This is not only a philosophy but is a reality that you can see. Somebody who has clairvoyance can see this; someone who has high capacity of mind can see what kind of past life one had, what kind practice one did. Even in this life one can see that the actions one did in the earlier part of the life, the habits one developed, affect the later part of one’s life. For example, if you engage uncontrollably in negative actions such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slander, harsh speech, gossiping, covetousness, ill will and heresy (the ten non-virtuous actions), this is due to habits and past imprints.

Also you can see this clearly in one lifetime with drug addicts and alcoholics, who cannot stop the habits from previous years. This result comes from the negative imprints left from past actions. This way of reasoning makes it very clear, and those people who have the capacity of the mind can see this.

The conclusion is you can see clearly one’s past lives even just from reciting the Compassion Buddha mantra *Om mani padme hum*. Compassion Buddha, Chenrezig, is the embodiment of all Buddhas’ compassion as the deity. In human form this is His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the manifestation of all Buddhas’ compassion. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the spiritual teacher and temporal leader of Tibet, but actually His Holiness is now becoming the spiritual leader of the world, who gives practical education on how to develop compassion and universal responsibility, loving kindness, emphasizing to be kind to everyone, including your enemy; who gives wisdom on what is right and brings happiness to oneself and brings happiness to others – that which is to be practiced; and on what is wrong and brings suffering to oneself and suffering to others – that which is to be abandoned.

His Holiness is not only fully capable of leading all the entire Buddhists, but also all people in all religions, believers and non-believers, by giving universal advice that is urgently needed for individual beings, to bring peace and happiness globally.

The mantra of Compassionate Buddha has skies of benefit, one being to develop a clear mind, to be able to remember past lives, etc.

My mother used to recite 50,000 Compassionate Buddha mantras every day, except when she was close to passing away when she couldn't recite as many. Because of this she had a clear memory and stable mind; this was also because she was living in the vows (she was ordained by His Holiness Ling Rinpoche in Bodh Gaya, where 1000 Buddhas put their holy feet, including Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, who is the fourth). Therefore after her death she was able to clearly remember her past life.

Continuity of mind

Death, which means separation of body and mind, does not stop the continuity of life. The association of body and mind is not stopped. The mind and body are separated because of being under the control of delusion and karma, then again the mind takes a body. However there is always the continuity of mind: sometimes it takes a human body, but it also can take another body according to past negative or positive actions that one has done. Sometimes it can be a suffering body such as that of a hell being, hungry ghost or animal. Sometimes it can be the body of a happy transmigratory such as a *deva* (worldly god); or a human body; or in a pure land, such as the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. Or it could be a spirit body. One can also be reborn in the formless realm, where there is no physical body, no substantial body. Even after you are fully enlightened, still there is continuity of the enlightened mind, always continuity of the enlightened mind.

The big question is: After death, which rebirth will our consciousness take? Either a miserable rebirth such as suffering transmigratory being – hell realm, hungry ghost or animal; or the body of a happy transmigratory being. What causes one to take rebirth as a suffering transmigratory being is non-virtuous actions done with self-cherishing thought, delusion, ignorance, anger and attachment. We are creating these negative karmas numberless times every day, so we can see very clearly if we look at even one day's actions, almost all are done with self-cherishing thought, ignorance, anger and attachment; almost all the actions come from non-virtue and the result is only suffering.

In this life, from birth we commit so many unimaginable negative karmas. Also, from beginningless rebirths we create so many negative karmas that we have yet to experience and have to purify. Therefore we should prepare immediately to have a good rebirth right after the death, to again have the opportunity to meditate, practice Dharma, develop the mind, practice the path, not only to be liberated but enlightened, to be able to offer extensive benefit, to bring numberless sentient beings to happiness, especially the ultimate happiness, enlightenment. The main objective of our life is to accomplish this; that is the purpose of living.

The benefit of living in vows of morality

So the answer, the solution, is to stop taking suffering rebirth and to take happy rebirth. For this we must practice Dharma and purify past negative karma so that we don't experience the suffering result. Also we must not create negative karma again, which is the cause of suffering – this is by taking vows from spiritual masters, take vows according to one's own capacity. It can be the five lay vows (to not kill, steal, sexual misconduct, telling lies and no intoxicants). Also one can take the eight lay vows (ordination of abiding near to liberation (*nyen nyen*)); by living in these vows it brings us closer and closer to liberation. Also the Eight Mahayana Precepts, which you can take as a layperson or an ordained one. Taking vows is an extremely essential thing for

practicing morality, for achieving good rebirth after death, not only for your own happiness, but for the happiness all other living beings.

Therefore, as I said before, I suggest one most important thing is to take these vows, the five lay vows, whichever you can take, or the eight lay vows.

Living in morality, keeping the vows, is like if you want to travel to another country, to enjoy, you need an air ticket, otherwise you can't travel by plane. Or if you want to start a million dollar project, you need to receive a million dollars. Living in the vows, keeping the vows, is like that: it is an excellent preparation for death, as well as for all happiness for future lives, liberation, enlightenment. And not only for that, but for world peace as well. So take the vows for world peace, for happiness in the world: this is your contribution to world peace. This is what makes your life amazing, worthwhile and beneficial.

Negative karma such as killing has four suffering ripening aspects, such as reincarnation as a suffering transmigratory being, hell, hungry ghost or animal. Or you take rebirth in the human realm, which comes from good karma, but you experience in that life the three suffering results of the previous negative karma of killing, such as at the place where you live there is a lot of danger to your life, it's a very dusty place, the medicines and food, even though they are meant for health and long life they actually cause death or there are side-effects or they make you sick, even though the medicines are correct, but this is the result. Or the food you eat makes you sick, you don't receive protein from the food, so it doesn't help much: this is experiencing the result similar to the cause. Or you are harmed by others, killed by others, experience short life, harmed by other people, animals, germs or bacteria; you even die from bacteria or germs. Or you are harmed by the elements: fire, water, earthquakes, hurricanes, avalanches and so forth. Or the building you live in, which is meant to protect you, collapses and causes death. Then the food you eat for survival causes death. Or you die very young.

There is one story about one man who caught a fish on a hook. As he was holding this fish up, admiring it, the fish jumped off the hook and got stuck in his mouth, in his throat, and he died.

Or you reincarnate in the hell realms; this result is similar to the cause. When in the hell realms you again engage in creating negative karma, killing again, and then again you create negative karma and suffering result, create the result similar to the cause and the suffering goes on without end.

As long as one does not purify the negative karma of killing by not living in that one vow abstaining from killing, not living in morality to not kill, then one will have to continually suffer.

There is a huge difference between just not killing and living in the vow to not to kill. Just by not killing you are not creating merit, good karma. You are not creating the negative karma of killing, but that doesn't mean that you collect merit. Living in the vow to not kill, even when one is sleeping we are creating merit, good karma, every minute that we live in the vow. When you have taken the vow from a spiritual person, every day

that you live in the vows abstaining from killing, stealing and so forth, you collect merit day and night, just by living in the vows. This means that by living in the vows you are creating merit by living in the vows day and night, and even while you eat, sleep, talk and do all the actions, you are actually creating merit all the time by not harming others and living in the vows. If this is done with the motivation of renunciation of samsara, it will cause liberation from samsara. If it is done with bodhichitta, this will cause enlightenment; all the time you will be causing this by living in that vow.

Death can happen anytime

In reality, death can happen anytime, any day. Even though you may have a time limit given by a judge, actually death can happen any moment. Also in order to die it may not only happen by execution; there are so many other causes and conditions that can cause death before that, even when someone is a child. It can happen any time.

This is very useful to think about. Therefore we must prepare for death right now, and therefore must take the vows as soon as possible.

Experiencing the suffering of others causes happiness for oneself

If one gives up one's life for others, experiences their suffering and gives one's happiness to others, instead of causing suffering for oneself actually it causes the opposite of suffering, it causes happiness.

One of my Chinese students had AIDS; he wrote to his Guru in India and asked what to do. His Guru, Rongta Rinpoche, who is a senior Lama who lives in Dharamsala, dictated a practice for him to a Western lady who is a translator. The practice was a very special meditation practice on bodhichitta, taking other sentient beings' sufferings and the cause of suffering onto oneself, destroying the ego, and then giving one's happiness, cause of merits to others, in the form of white light. So this student practiced this meditation. When he went to the hospital for a check-up they could no longer find any of the AIDS virus.

I thought he might have practiced this meditation for a long time, many days, but when I asked him he said he only practiced for four minutes a day for four days. Even though his meditation was done for such a short time, it was very powerful: he felt unbelievable compassion for others, especially towards those who have AIDS. He felt such unbelievable, unsurpassable compassion that tears came out, and he had not the slightest concern for himself, only such strong compassion, unbearable concern for others. This meditation of giving up one's own life to others, giving up one's own happiness to others and taking others' sufferings on oneself generates unbelievable compassion.

So this is the main one, like fuel for a rocket, what makes vehicles function, like airplanes and rockets, the fuel that gives them the force. So what healed his AIDS so quickly was this meditation, such a powerful practice, bodhichitta, letting go of the I and cherishing others. This purified the negative karma, the negative action, the non-virtuous action, the result of which was AIDS. So this purified that. The practice purified the cause of AIDS, which is the non-virtuous actions, the negative karma; the result of which is AIDS. This is a very powerful purification practice.

It is said in the text *Guide to the Bodhisattvas Way of Life* by the great saint bodhisattva Shantideva:

The very heavy, powerful negative action that is extremely inexhaustible,
By relying upon a hero (a powerful person), the great fear can be stopped,
But by relying upon bodhichitta one can be liberated from this heavy negative
action in a short time.
So mindful people depend on this (bodhichitta).
Bodhichitta burns the great heavy evil deeds just in one instant,
Just like the end of the world, the conflagration (that burns rocky mountains;
even those hard things get burned instantly).

In recent times, in Seattle, one lady student had very heavy cancer that had spread all over her body. The doctors were afraid to even do an operation; they felt that it was very risky and dangerous. So she did this bodhichitta practice of taking on sentient beings' sufferings and the causes of suffering, and giving one's own merits and happiness to others, exchanging oneself for others.

After some time, when she went to the hospital for a check-up, they did not find any cancer. The doctors were completely amazed, they could not understand how this meditation could cure her cancer totally. This is one subject that they cannot explain. This is one of the benefits of bodhichitta, letting go of the I and cherishing others.

This is why I am saying you can use the situation of being in prison, being executed, as a means to develop bodhichitta, exchanging oneself for others. Instead of cherishing I, cherish others; instead of giving to oneself, give to others.

This is said in the teachings of Buddha, but also this is reality that you can see in your own life, from your own experiences. Global problems, problems in one country, family problems, individual problems – all these problems come from cherishing I. By cherishing the I one opens the door to all the sufferings. By cherishing others one opens the door to all the happiness, inner peace and joy, right now in your heart, satisfaction and fulfillment. You are able to overcome all the problems in your life, in your mind; you will have a very happy death, a self-supporting death, as well as happy future lives; and especially ultimate happiness, total liberation from the whole entire suffering and causes; and great liberation, peerless happiness and enlightenment. This is the cause of happiness for all sentient beings, temporal and ultimate happiness up to enlightenment.

Using prison to practice Dharma

If one uses this time and experience of being in prison to practice meditation, to practice Dharma – that is, to purify the defilements, negative karma, which is the cause of all suffering, and to collect merit, which is the cause of happiness: happiness now, happiness in future lives, liberation from the whole entire suffering in samsara, and the achievement of peerless happiness, full enlightenment; and to be able to meditate on the path to liberation and enlightenment, to transform the sufferings and problems into happiness through meditation, thought transformation, the Buddhist psychology – then being in prison, even though it is believed you are in prison by outside people, in reality it becomes a retreat for you.

When you do retreat you don't meet people, you are alone in your room, in your shelter you are alone. This is so that you cut your busy life, seeing people, talking to people, etc. Also, your mind is in retreat from all the distracted thoughts. So being in prison can be similar to living in a meditation cave. Normally one wouldn't go into retreat, so here the police have put you into retreat. This is something to thank them for; you can rejoice that you are in retreat. Think: "How fortunate I am!"

Worldly people, common people, believe that prison has a beginning and an end. But the real prison is being under the control of delusion and its action, karma; being caught, enveloped, trapped in this samsaric prison, enveloped in this samsara, trapped in the cage of this samsara, these aggregates, which continually cycle from one life to another, from life to life without one second's break. This prison is caused by karma and delusions, the contaminated seed of delusion. Because of that, these aggregates, which are in the nature of suffering, the pervasive, compounded suffering, become the cause to experience both the suffering of pain and the suffering of change. The suffering of change refers to the temporary samsaric pleasure, which is in the nature of suffering because it does not last. This pleasure is labeled in the base, that is, only suffering. So that is why these samsaric pleasures do not last, why you don't have the pleasure all the time. And not only that: even then, pleasure itself is in the nature of impermanence, is decaying minute by minute, second by second; it doesn't last even a minute or even a second.

These aggregates are actually the real prison, which has no beginning; we have been involved in this from time without beginning. We have been experiencing oceans of hell realm sufferings, oceans of hungry ghost sufferings, oceans of animal sufferings, oceans of human sufferings, oceans of *suras* (*devas*; worldly gods) sufferings and oceans of *asuras* sufferings from time without beginning. And it doesn't end until from our side we actualize the path, by realizing that it is suffering, by realizing the true cause of suffering, and by achieving the cessation of all the sufferings and their causes. This is the most terrifying prison, this is the real prison that we should try to be free from, right away, without delay, for even a second.

We are caught in this, and continuously we suffer. But not only that: so many sentient beings have to suffer for us, numberless sentient beings suffer for us, for our comfort, so that we can survive. So many other beings have to die and harm others by killing or harming them so that we can enjoy shelter. Numberless sentient beings died when the shelter, the house, was being built; so many other beings bore so many hardships, harmed others, for this shelter to be built. So many beings had to suffer for our comfort, pleasure, for us to survive. So that we could have the pleasure of eating and drinking, numberless sentient beings had to die; others had to create negative karma by killing them; so many hardships. It's similar for our clothing: so many beings had to give their lives, or be killed, or create the cause of killing, harming others; so many had to suffer so that we could have clothing, such as animal skins, etc. Also when we travel: so many beings have to die when we drive the car, so many beings get crushed, etc. So you can see: being caught in samsara is the most frightening thing; one can't stand it even for one second.

Therefore one must do listening, reflecting, meditating on the path, practicing on the path that has been revealed by the wise, compassionate, kind, omniscient one, Guru

Shakyamuni Buddha. Only through this can one be liberated from samsara so that numberless other sentient beings don't have to suffer for you, don't have to create negative karma for you, don't have to harm others for you. You can see that one has the responsibility to not only liberate oneself but to liberate numberless sentient beings from this samsaric prison as well.

There are many stories about people who actualize the path in prison. In Tibet many Tibetan monks and lay people were put in prison for many years. So many of them actualized the path, used the time to meditate on the path, developed their mind on the path. So many of them made their life so rich in prison, rich with realizations; their life became a very meaningful life in prison. Actually, for them, being in prison was exactly the same as living in a hermitage and being in retreat.

There were many external signs that they had developed their mind on the path, such as their body glowing very magnificently; instead of becoming darker, their body becomes more and more white and shiny.

When one Lama passed away and his body was thrown in the river, it stayed in the meditation position and didn't sink; it stayed in the meditation position, floating on the top of the river, his back straight. Things like this happened.

There is one Tibetan reincarnated Lama who when he was in Tibet wasn't famous or learned as he is now. In Tibet he was put in prison, probably for more than twenty years. During that time he practiced, he took the opportunity to do retreat and meditation practice, to practice Dharma. He practiced Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga, reciting the 4/5 line verse, *Migtsema*. He saw Lama Tsong Khapa and his Guru as one: Lama Tsong Khapa who is embodiment of all Buddhas' compassion (Chenrezig), the embodiment of all the Buddhas' wisdom (Manjushri), and embodiment of all Buddhas' power (Vajrapani). His wisdom blossomed like a lotus fully developed, he became extremely learned in the teachings of Buddha, particularly in the Lama Tsong Khapa tradition. When he got out of prison he became very famous. When he was giving teachings in Sera Monastery in Tibet, other learned Geshes went to take teachings from him and they were very astonished, so impressed with his profound, extensive teachings. One particular quality he had was that he was able to read eight volumes of Buddha's scriptures (Buddhas teachings' text called *The Kangyur*, which is 100 volumes translated from the Sanskrit into Tibetan) in one day, to give the oral transmission of these eight volumes, reciting each word clearly, in one day. Each volume has many hundreds of pages and each page has many lines.

You can see how you can make your life in prison very meaningful, even achieving enlightenment. This is actually an incredible opportunity, a retreat away from the inner prison, being controlled by the self-cherishing thought, ignorance, anger, attachment, the negative emotional thoughts. You can achieve not only temporary happiness but create the cause to obtain ultimate happiness, liberation from samsara, full enlightenment, the peerless happiness. You can do this while you are in this external prison, that which is labeled by people as prison, your living space that is labeled by common people as prison.

So now you can have incredible joy at being in prison, you can see how you can make life so meaningful.

If you do these practices, all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will be with you, will be around you, supporting you; all the holy beings will be with you when you die.

Thank you very much and with much love and prayers,

Lama Zopa

Colophon: Advice given to one prisoner, a new Buddhist, who was just given his date for execution in 3 months' time. This advice from Rinpoche was given over 5 days.

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