

Verses of Advice for Meditating on Impermanence

by Könchok Tenpe Drönme (1762–1823)

Within the sky-sphere of marvellous, great bliss,
Your cloud-like forms gather to train sentient beings,
Showering down rains of teachings, profound and vast—
To you, the holy gurus, I bow and prostrate.

This fortunate birth, which is obtained but once,
Is liable to slip from our grasp without bearing fruit.
So traverse the path to liberation while you can,
And for that, let this whip of advice spur you on!

Thoughts that we might finish this life's tasks,
Within just a single month or year,
Only then to practise Dharma well
Are like harmful spirits that deceive us.

The tasks of this life are like ripples on water:
Fresh ones arising just as others fade away.
Even as we finish them, they continue to increase.
Wouldn't it be better just to make them all cease?

Before tomorrow's Dharma practice can arrive,
There's a danger death will come to us today.
Thus, if we wish to practise the Dharma,
Let us, without self-deception, begin right away!

Although buddhas and bodhisattvas came in the past,
Their activities pervading throughout the three realms,
Now they are no more, and only their names remain,
Still, in this they are teachers of impermanence.

Though kings and ministers, proud of their power and wealth,
Wrought chains of history, so great and so wondrous,
Unexamined, it all seems so real and so concrete,
Yet, throughout the three realms, not a trace remains.

Friends from the past, similar to us in age and strength,
Have been taken, all of a sudden, by the Lord of Death,
So with what confidence can we possibly claim
That we shall not fear when death's time arrives?

Even sheep, among the most foolish of creatures,
Are alarmed when seeing their fellows butchered.
So, failing to apply their example to ourselves,
Are we not more insensible than such beasts?

That this body's nature is to die at a time uncertain
Can be understood without reference or citation.
But if with bare senses you still do not see it,
Then surely "idiot" must be your designation!

This gathering of dear ones, servants and dependants,
Is like a mound formed of leaves fallen from a tree—
A gust of wind will scatter them through hill and vale,
And, once dispersed, they'll never converge again.

People from different places crowded in a market
Are like the bees gathered at the end of autumn,
Dispersing no sooner than they've come together:
A teaching on transience for those of understanding.

Take the outer world of the elements as an example –
Don't be deceived by labels of 'summer' and 'winter' –
It too does not last, and with each ten days that pass,
The mountains and river valleys change their colours.

Blue spring water ripples like a dancer,
And makes pleasant music with its flow,
But when gripped by winter's icy chill,
Can only whisper, as if sobbing in sorrow.

How pleasant the meadow with its flowers,
As it dances to the singing of the bees,
But all turns to lament and desolation,
When autumn brings fierce frost and hail.

The cord of life is as fragile as a rope of straw,
On which two mice—day and night—do gnaw,
And with each and every moment that goes by,
Our meeting with Death, the enemy, draws nigh.

When a child, young and bright, can sicken unto death,
To be mourned by parents whose hair is white as conch,
And whose backs are hunched over, bent like a bow,
Who then dares to say it's the old who are first to go?

Struck by adversity, as when a crop is stung by hail,
The rich man may lament his loss and sorry situation,
But his cries for help will likely go unanswered,
Even by the poor servants he cared for in the past.

Today's ally can transform into tomorrow's foe,
As unguarded words are often misconstrued;
Yet this can provide a teaching that'll put an end
To false notions of distant enemy, intimate friend.

Samsaric riches are deemed fortune in abundance,
But, as a burning lamp is as if a palace to a moth,
Their alluring appearance serves only to deceive,
And to lead us from the real happiness that lasts.

In brief, the Lord of Death will soon arrive—
That is certain—even if the time's unknown.
And when he comes, there'll be no escape:
For as you're caught in his dreadful fangs,
Even the body you've known for so long
Must remain in its bed, as you go on alone,
Denied even so much as a backward glance
At your wealth, your friends or your servants.

All help towards allies, all bettering of foes,
Carried out so tirelessly throughout this life,
Must now be abandoned for the final journey,
The only baggage? Your virtues, your flaws.

Then, on the intermediate stage's unfamiliar path,
You'll face the army of the dreaded Lord of Death,
And, deceived by samsara's fortunes, you'll be lost,
For, even seeing your mistakes, regret is futile then.

The Dharma is your guide on a path unknown,
The Dharma is your food on a journey, arduous and long,
The Dharma is your protector in a dangerous realm,
So engage in Dharma—with body, speech and mind—from now on.

If, at this time, when you have the power
For ultimate happiness, you don't build a safe base,
What will you do as you draw your final breath,
And your hysterical mind finds no resting place?

This is a song of impermanence, a meditation,
“A Great Light for the Middle Way’s Illumination”,
It’s purpose is to strengthen the mind’s determination
For Dharma
From the start, in the middle, to Ultimate Liberation.

As one’s mind becomes well inclined towards Dharma
Many paths make claims to be profound,
But the authentic tradition of the Victor Lobzang Drakpa
Shows the essential intention of each puissant Buddha.

From oral explanation and deep meditation
Of the teachings of sūtra and tantra,
Know the path well, in all of its aspects,
Fully intact, without error,
And then every day, without interruption,
Create positive imprints with firm meditation.

Right from the preliminaries until the conclusion,
Perform well the words of Jé Lama—
Thereby you’ll take the very heart-essence
Of this life of fortunes and endowments.

By the strength of the merit accumulated thus,
May the thief of the view of self permanence
Lose all its power to grasp true existence,
And may all reach the realm of the deathless.

Thus, Zhabdrung Ngawang Drakpa, whose positive tendencies from the past continue to increase, sent a letter requesting advice in verse on how to meditate on impermanence. He accompanied this request with gifts such as shrine articles for the maṇḍala of eleven-faced noble Avalokiteśvara and an auspicious silken scarf. In response, the venerable Könchok Tenpe Drönme composed this in a straightforward manner which is easy for everyone, high or low, to understand, which is unconstrained by poetic convention, synonymy and the like, and which takes the advice of past saints as a basis. May this be a cause of everyone turning their minds towards the Dharma!

| Translated by Tenzin Jamchen (Sean Price) and edited for Lotsawa House by Adam Pearcey (based on an earlier version translated by Tenzin Jamchen and edited by Tenzin Russell).



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