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Essential Advice of the Kadampa Masters

From

The Door of Liberation

*Translated from the Tibetan by
Geshe Wangyal*



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Essential Advice of the Kadampa Masters

Introduction

The Kadampa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism arose during the highly active and creative eleventh century. The school was founded by the Indian master Atisha (982–1054) who came to Tibet in 1042. Although this school did not survive for very long as an independent tradition, it was absorbed into the other schools and thereby left a lasting influence.

The short text presented here is a compilation of dialogues, words of advice, and reflections of several of the major figures in the Kadampa tradition, including Atisha and his foremost Tibetan disciple, Geshe Drom. These sayings are typical of the Kadampa school in emphasising the basic insights of Buddhism as a foundation for the entire Buddhist path to enlightenment.

The teachings of the Kadampa masters are noted for

their straight-forwardness, their almost uncompromising simplicity. These masters continually confront us with the basic facts of our existence and challenge us to adopt a meaningful and practical response to them. They repeatedly point out that the spiritual path is fraught with as many possibilities of self-deception as is our life in the world. To avoid such pitfalls we must be constantly mindful of our innermost motives, our aims, our commitments, and most significantly, our death.

This text was first translated into English under the guidance of the Mongolian lama, Geshe Wangyal, by some of his American students. It was published as part of a collection of Tibetan Buddhist writings entitled *The Door of Liberation* in 1975. The text presented here contains about half of the original.

—Stephen Batchelor

Advice from Atisha

One time Atisha was asked by his disciples, “What is the highest teaching of the path?” Atisha replied:

“The highest skill is in the realisation of egolessness.

The highest nobility is in subduing your own mind.

The highest excellence is in having a mind which seeks to help others.

The highest precept is continual mindfulness.

The highest remedy is in understanding the naturelessness of everything.

The highest activity is not to conform with worldly concerns.

The highest accomplishment is the lessening and transmutation of the passions.

The highest giving is found in non-attachment.

The highest moral practice is a peaceful mind.

The highest patience is humility.

The highest effort is to abandon attachment to activities.

The highest meditation is the mind without pretension.

The highest wisdom is not to grasp anything as it appears.”

Upon leaving the Western province of Narī, Atisha gave the following parting advice to his assembled disciples:

“Friends, until you have obtained enlightenment, the spiritual teacher is needed; therefore depend upon the holy spiritual teacher. Until you fully realise the nature of voidness, you must listen to the Teaching; therefore listen closely to the precept of the teacher. Merely understanding the Dharma is not enough to become enlightened, you must practise constantly.

“Go far away from any place that is harmful to your practice; always stay in a place that is conducive to virtue. Clamour is harmful until you obtain a firm mind; therefore, stay in an isolated place. Abandon friends who increase your fettering passions; depend on friends who cause you to increase virtue. Bear this in mind. There is never an end of things to do, so limit your activities. Dedicate your virtue day and night, and always be mindful.

“Once you have obtained the precept of the teacher, you should always meditate on it and act in harmony with his speech. When you do this with great humility, the effects will

manifest without delay. If you act according to the Dharma from the depths of your heart, both food and necessities will come naturally.

“Friends, there is no satisfaction in the things you desire. It is like drinking seawater to satisfy thirst. Therefore be content. Annihilate all forms of pretentiousness, pride and conceit; be subdued and peaceful. Abandon all that which some call virtue, but which is really an obstacle to the practice of Dharma. As if they were stones on a narrow slippery path, you should clear away all ideas of gain and respect, for they are the rope of the devil. Like snot in your nose, blow out all thoughts of fame and praise, for they serve only to beguile and delude.

“As the happiness, pleasure and friends you have accumulated are of but a moments duration, turn your back on them. Future life is longer than this life, so carefully secure your treasure of virtue to provide for the future. You leave everything behind when you die; do not be attached to anything.

“Leave off despising and deprecating others and generate a compassionate mind to those who are your inferiors. Do not have deep attachment to your friends and do not

discriminate against your enemies. Without being jealous or envious of others' good qualities, with humility take up those good qualities yourself. Do not bother examining the faults of others, but examine your own faults. Purge yourself of them like bad blood. Nor should you concentrate on your own virtues; rather, respect those as a servant would. Extend loving kindness to all beings as though they were your own children.

“Always have a smiling face and a loving mind. Speak honestly and without anger. If you go about saying many senseless things, you will make mistakes; thus speak in moderation. If you do many senseless things, your virtuous work will cease; give up actions that are not religious. It is useless to make effort in unessential work. Because whatever happens to you comes as a result of your karma from long ago, results never match your present desires. Therefore, be calm.

“Alas, it is far better to die than to cause a holy person shame; you should therefore always be straightforward and without deceit. All the misery and happiness of this life arise from the karma of this and previous lives; do not blame others for your circumstances.

“Until you subdue yourself, you cannot subdue others; therefore, first subdue yourself. As you are unable to ripen others without clairvoyance, make a great effort to achieve clairvoyance.

“You will surely die, leaving behind whatever wealth you have accumulated, so be careful not to gather defilement due to wealth. As distracting enjoyments are without substance, adorn yourself with the virtue of giving. Always keep pure moral practice, for it is beautiful in this life and ensures happiness in future lives. In this world age of the Kaliyuga, where hatred is rampant, don the armour of patience, which nullifies anger. We remain in the world by the power of sloth; thus we must ignite like a great fire the effort of achievement. Moment after moment your life is wasted by the lure of worldly activities; it is time to meditate. Because you are under the influence of wrong views, you do not realise the nature of voidness. Zealously seek the meaning of reality.

“Friends, saṃsāra is a vast swamp in which there is no real happiness; hurry to the place of liberation. Meditate according to the precept of the teacher and dry up the river of saṃsāric misery.

“Always keep this in mind. Listen well to this advice, which is not mere words but comes straight from my heart. If you follow these precepts you will make not only me happy, but yourselves and all others as well. Though I am ignorant, I urge you to remember these words.”

When the venerable Atisha was staying in Yerpadrak near Lhasa, he gave the following precept:

“Noble sons, reflect deeply on these words. In the Kaliyuga, lives are short and there is much to be understood. The duration of life is uncertain; you do not know how long you will live. Thus you must make great effort now to fulfil your right desires.

“Do not proclaim yourself a monk if you obtain the necessities of life in the manner of a layman. Though you live in a monastery and have given up worldly activities, if you fret about what you have given up, you have no right to proclaim, ‘I am a monk living in a monastery.’ If your mind still persists in desire for pretty things and still produces harmful thoughts do not proclaim, ‘I am a monk living in a monastery.’ If you still go about with worldly people and waste time in worldly, senseless talk with those with whom you live,

even though you are living in a monastery, do not proclaim 'I am a monk living in a monastery.' If you are impatient and go about feeling slighted, if you cannot be even the least bit helpful to others, do not proclaim 'I am a Bodhisattva-monk.' If you speak thus to worldly people, you are a great liar. You may get away with saying such things. However you cannot deceive those who have the boundless sight of clairvoyance, nor can you deceive those who have the Dharma eye of great omniscience. Neither can you deceive yourself, for the effects of karma follow after you.

“To stay in a monastery it is necessary to give up worldly ways and attachment to friends and relatives. By renouncing these, you are getting rid of all the cooperating causes of attachment and longing. From then on, you must seek the precious mind of enlightenment. Not even for an instant should you allow your past obsession with worldly concerns to arise. Formerly you did not properly practise the Dharma, and under the influence of past habits that sapped your strength, you continually produced the concepts of a worldly person. Because such concepts are predominant, unless

you make use of strong antidotes to them, it is useless to remain in a monastery. You would be like the birds and the wild animals that live there.

“In short, staying in a monastery will not be helpful if you do not reverse your obsession for fine things and do not renounce the activities of this life; for if you do not cut off these inclinations, thinking that you can work for the aims of both this and future lives, you will perform nothing but incidental religious practice. This type of practice is nothing but hypocritical and pretentious practice done for selfish gain.

“Therefore you should always seek spiritual friends and shun bad company. Do not become settled in one place or accumulate many things. Whatever you do, do in harmony with the Dharma. Let whatever you do be a remedy for the fettering passions. This is *actual* religious practice; make great effort to do this. As your knowledge increases, do not be possessed by the demon of pride.

“Staying in an isolated place, subdue yourself. Have few desires and be contented. Neither delight in your own knowledge nor

seek out the faults in others. Do not be fearful or anxious. Be of good will and without prejudice. Concentrate on the Dharma when distracted by wrong things.

“Be humble, and if you are defeated, accept it gracefully. Give up boastfulness; renounce desire. Always generate the compassionate mind. Whatever you do, do in moderation. Be easily pleased and easily sustained. Run like a wild animal from whatever would entrap you.

“If you do not renounce worldly existence, do not say you are holy. If you have not renounced land and agriculture, do not say you have entered the Sangha. If you do not renounce desire, do not say you are a monk. If you are without love and compassion, do not say you are a bodhisattva. If you do not renounce activity, do not say you are a great meditator. Do not cherish your desires.

“In short, when you stay at a monastery, engage in few activities and just meditate on the Dharma. Do not have cause for repentance at the time of death.”

At another time, Atisha stated:

“This Kaliyuga is not the time to display your

ability; it is the time to persevere through hardship. It is not the time to take a high position, but the time to be humble. It is not the time to rely on many attendants, but the time to rely on isolation. Nor is it the time to subdue disciples; it is the time to subdue yourself. It is not the time to merely listen to words, but the time to contemplate their meaning. Nor is it the time to go visiting here and there; it is the time to stay alone.”

Advice from Other Masters

On one occasion Geshe Drom was asked: “Which is more important, to help living beings by means of the teaching, or to practise in an isolated place?”

The teacher answered:

“Beginners who have no internal realisation cannot help living beings with the teaching. Their blessing is like pouring from an empty jar—nothing will come out. Their advice is like unfermented beer—it has no essence.

“Those of admirable deeds who have not yet obtained the firmness of wisdom do not have

the ability to act for the benefit of living beings. Their blessing is like pouring from a full vessel — when it has filled another, it itself is empty. Their advice is like a butter lamp held in the hand: it may illuminate others, but the holder remains in the shadows.

“However, when they have entered the stages of the noble ones, whatever they do brings benefit to living beings. Their blessing is like a magic vessel—though it fills countless vessels, it does not empty itself. Their advice is like a butter lamp held by the base—it illuminates others and the one who holds it as well.

“Therefore this Kaliyuga is not the time for individuals to be of help to living beings unless they have cultivated love, compassion and the aspiration for enlightenment in isolation. It is the time to guard against fettering passions. It is not time to cut down the seedling of the magical medicine tree, but the time to cultivate it.”

One day an old gentleman was walking round the monastery. Geshe Drom said to him, “Sir, I am happy to see you walking round, but wouldn’t you rather be practising the Dharma?”

Thinking this over, the old gentleman felt it might be better to recite the holy sutras. While he was reading in the temple courtyard, Geshe Drom said, "I am happy to see you reciting sutras, but wouldn't you rather be practising the Dharma?"

At this, the old gentleman thought that perhaps he should meditate. He sat cross-legged on a cushion, with his eyes half-closed. Drom said again, "I am so happy to see you meditating, but wouldn't it be better to practise the Dharma?"

Now totally confused, the old gentleman asked, "Geshela, please tell me what I should do to practise the Dharma."

Drom replied, "Renounce attraction to this life. Renounce it now. For if you do not renounce attraction to this life, whatever you do will not be the practise of the Dharma, as you have not passed beyond worldly concerns. Once you have renounced this life's habitual thoughts and are no longer distracted by worldly concerns, whatever you do will advance you on the path of liberation."

The teacher Drom was asked by Potowa, "What is the difference between Dharma and non-Dharma?"

"If something is in opposition to fettering passions, it is Dharma. If it is not, it is not Dharma. If it does not accord with worldly people, it is Dharma. If it does

accord, it is not Dharma. If it accords with the teachings of Buddha, it is Dharma. If it does not accord, it is not Dharma. If good follows, it is Dharma. If bad follows, it is not Dharma.”

Yerbay Shangtsun said:

“When we desire liberation from the depths of our hearts, we should, through continuous contemplation of the imminence of death, always abide in thoughts and deeds in the four qualities of the noble ones.

“These four qualities of the noble ones are: to be satisfied with simple religious dress, to be satisfied with meagre food, to be satisfied with a poor cushion, and to be satisfied with the minimum of medicine.

“Put another way, these four are: to be desireless, to be content, to be easily sustained, and to be easily satisfied. To be desireless is to be unattached to all possessions and not to desire many or good things to maintain oneself. Contentment is to be happy with simple things. To be easily sustained means to subsist with meagre and poor food, a poor cushion, and simple dress. To be easily satisfied means to be content with scant alms and recognition.

“A person who lives in this way is said to be

abiding in the four qualities of the noble ones, as all his practice of Dharma is directed towards enlightenment. A person who is completely taken up with worldly desires is not abiding in the four qualities of the noble ones. Instead, he is said to be abiding in the qualities of the devil, for abiding in non-virtuous activities is the cause of rebirth in saṃsāra's lower states.

“If we do not give up the desires of this life now, we will come under the influence of attachment again in future lifetimes. To give up the desires of this life, the most potent countermeasure is continual meditation on impermanence. If you do not meditate on impermanence in the early morning, by midday you will have many desires.”

Geshe Potowa was asked by a lay disciple: “To actually practise the Dharma, what is most important?”

“The most important thing is the meditation on impermanence. Meditate on impermanence, the imminence of death; it will cause you to begin practising the Dharma. This will create conditions impelling you to do virtuous work, which will then assist you in realising the

equality of all things in their nature of existence.

“Meditation on impermanence will also cause you to decide to renounce the enjoyments of this life, which will create the conditions for ridding yourself of all worldly desires, and thus assist you to enter the path of Nirvana.

“When you have meditated on impermanence and have gained some understanding, you will seek the Dharma. This will create the conditions for the achievement of Dharma and thus assist in its final accomplishment.

“Meditating on impermanence and finding some understanding of it will also cause you to begin to arm yourself, which will create the conditions for beginning religious practice. This will assist you in initiating the stage of non-returning.”

Geshe Chennawa, while speaking to a gathering of his disciples said: “In brief, the Dharma can be divided into abandoning harmful activities and taking up helpful ones. All the teachings are included within this precept.

“To apply this precept, patience is most

important. If you are without patience and someone harms you, you will feel vengeful. Should you act on that feeling, you will not cease from harmful activities, much less be helpful to others. Therefore, patience is necessary to begin religious practise.

“To meditate on patience, there are four methods: setting up the target for the arrow; love and compassion; teacher and disciple; and on the nature of existence.

“First comes meditation on the setting up of the target for the arrow: if you have not set up a target, it cannot be hit by an arrow. The arrow of harm strikes in this life because we have set up a target by the bad karma we accumulated in previous lives. If you set up a target of bad activities and hateful speech, it will be struck by arrows of retribution. We set up targets ourselves: understand that the arrows come from our own harmful acts and do not be angry with others.

“Next comes the meditation on love and compassion. When a lunatic harms a sane person, the sane person should not return the harm by fighting him, but should say, ‘How sad!’ The person who harms you is also insane,

possessed by the madness of the powerful fettering passions. Think, ‘How sad!’ and meditate on compassion for him.

“The third meditation on patience is on teacher and disciple. If there is no teacher to impart instruction, there can be no realisation. Similarly, if there is no enemy who harms you, there can be no practice of patience: therefore you should feel that those who abuse you are the teachers of patience. Be happy at this opportunity and concentrate on repaying their kindness. Meditating that you are a disciple being taught patience, do not be angry.

“To meditate on the nature of existence as voidness, contemplate that all three aspects of harmfulness—the agent of harm, the recipient of harm, and the act of harming—are all void of self-nature. As your actual enemy is without self-nature, do not be angry with him, and meditate on patience.”

Geshe Puchungwa said:

“Though we have obtained the indispensable human body with its leisure and opportunity, we do not have the power to stay in it—we have to die. At the time of death, we cannot

take with us any of the enjoyments or the concepts of this life, just as a tree sheds all its leaves. At that time the measure of our knowledge, our strength, and the wisdom of our goals will be clear. When we face death happily and with joyful anticipation, we are wise and strong: our goals are noble, and we will enter death clear-headed. But if at that time the form of Yama and the distinct sign of lower states of birth appear, our goals were foolish and we are without self-mastery.

“We, for the most part, follow the wrong path, seeking to fulfil the desires of this life. The perfect Buddha never spoke falsely. The authors of the commentaries never spoke falsely. The holy spiritual friends do not speak falsely. Then how do we enter the wrong path? By the desires of this life. Thus we should always contemplate death, for remembering the imminence of death we understand the need for non-attachment to this life. We should contemplate the perniciousness of all saṃsāra, for then we understand the need to be unattached to the whole of it. By remembering living beings in the meditation on love, compassion and the aspiration for enlightenment, we understand the need to be

unattached to our selfish goals. By remembering egolessness in the meditation on the voidness of all things, we understand the need to be unattached to objects and attributes.”

Geshe Nyugrumpa said:

“You who wish to obtain rebirth as a human being or god, and also wish to obtain perfect enlightenment, must think of saṃsāra as a prison. You should see this life and body as a bubble of water, bad company as an enemy, the spiritual teacher as a wish-fulfilling jewel, the fettering passions as a poisonous snake, sinful activities as strong poison, the aspects of desire as the embers of a fire, sweet words and fame as an echo, respect and gain as an entangling snare, bad friends as a contagious disease, good friends as beautiful and fortified palace, all sentient beings as your mother and father. You should feel that giving is the wish-fulfilling cow, that moral practice is a precious jewelled ornament, that patience is strong armour, that effort is the wish-fulfilling wisdom-horse, that meditation is a great treasure, and that the wisdom of hearing, thinking and meditation is a bright lamp.”

Geshe Tolungpa said:

“If you desire liberation from the depths of your heart, you must follow the holy, rather than the clever teacher. You must follow those who devote themselves to the teaching rather than those who explain it, those who are humble rather than those who have great position, those of faith rather than those famous for their intelligence. There is no harm if you do not know the teaching, but misfortune will come if you follow those whose actions are contrary to the Dharma.”

Geshe Shabogaypa said:

“As the desires of this life cause all the misery of this and future lives, we must not seek the fulfilment of our desires. When we try to fulfil our desires, we are not happy. We become unsure of the direction of our life, and wrong speech, wrong mind and wrong actions all surface at once.

“Therefore we must turn away from our many desires. When we are able to do this, we establish the beginnings of happiness and pleasure. The best sign of happiness in this and all future lives is not desiring or accumulating

anything at all. When we do not desire gain, we have the greatest gain. When we do not desire reputation, we have the best reputation. When we do not desire fame, we have the greatest fame. When we do not desire companions, we have the best companions.

“If we are to sincerely practise the Dharma, we must entrust ourselves wholeheartedly to the life of a mendicant, for mendicants are those who entrust themselves to death. When we can produce this feeling, neither gods nor devils can conquer us. But when we indulge in the desires of this life, we lower ourselves and make ourselves completely miserable. We bring censure on ourselves in this life and rebirth in lower states in future lives.

“Therefore, when not wishing our own happiness, we limit our criticism of others, humble ourselves, limit our desires, and avoid all activities that are not religious, we will then obtain enlightenment in the future.

“In short, we are always beginning what is not necessary to begin, realising what is not necessary to realise, doing what is not necessary to do. Though we say all this, if we do not actually turn away from the desires of

this life, there is no way of seeking happiness now or in future lives. If we turn away from all desires, we do not need to seek happiness at all.”

Finally, Geshe Shabogaypa chastised himself:

“You old fool—you wish for high teachings, though your nature is low.

You charlatan—you desire to improve others, but do not improve yourself.

You sham—you act as if Dharma were meant only for others to follow, and not for yourself.

You blunderer—you have charged others to act correctly, but act incorrectly yourself.

You shiftless bum—each rise precedes a greater fall.

You politician—you make extensive promises but abbreviated application.

You rascal—you seek fettering passions and at the same time pretend to apply their counter-measures.

You coward—you are fearful of others seeing your faults and hope that they will see only your good qualities.

You involve yourself with your relatives instead of cultivating spiritual friends.

You involve yourself with fettering passions instead of cultivating their antidotes.

You leave practice for future lives instead of cultivating it in this life.

You involve yourself with those who help you rather than cultivating those who harm you.

You idiot—you harm others, not knowing you harm yourself. You do not know that to help others is to help yourself.

You do not see that misery and harm which come to you are conducive to practising Dharma.

You do not see that desire and happiness are not conducive to the practice of Dharma.

You say to others that practising Dharma is very important, yet do not follow the teaching yourself.

You despise others who are sinful, yet do not stop your own wrongdoing.

You see the slightest faults in others, yet do not perceive great faults in yourself.

You soon stop helping others when you get nothing in return.

You cannot bear to see other teachers receive respect.

You are subservient to those in high positions while contemptuous of those beneath you.

Talk of future lives is not pleasing to your ears.

You act holy and disdainful when corrected by others.

You want others to see your virtues and are content when they do not see your faults.

You are satisfied with a good facade while what is inside is not so good.

You like to be given things. Not seeking happiness within yourself, you seek it externally.

Having vowed to learn Buddha's teaching, you learn worldly affairs instead.

Though you agree with the advice of the bodhisattvas, your actions are preparing you for hell.

Though you have dedicated your body, enjoyment, and virtuous activities of the past

present and future for the benefit of all living beings, you refuse to give up your ego.

You like sinful friends, forgetting that they lead to ruin.

You do not know that a scolding from a spiritual friend is helpful.

Do not waste time in pointless debate.

Do not build castles in the air, increasing your cravings.

Do not delight in dangerous activities.

Do not do those many things which senselessly hinder virtuous work.”

Feeling self-reproach, he scolded himself in this way.

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