

Advice

Atisha · Atisha & al.

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Advice from Atisha

(Compilation of dialogues, words of advice, and reflections of Palden Atisha.)

Translated under Geshe Wangyal

One time Atisha was asked by his disciples,

"What is the highest teaching of the path?"

Atisha replied:

"The highest skill is in the realization 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 Nari, 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 realize 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 practice 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 sea water

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 moment's 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 led by the lure of worldly activities; it is time to meditate. Because you are under the influence of wrong views, you do not realize the nature of voidness. Zealously seek the meaning of reality!

"Friends, samsara 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 samsaric 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."

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."

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 fulfill 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 co-operating 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 practice 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 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 of 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 that 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."

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