

Precious Human Life

By Jon Owen

Jon has been studying Geshe Jampa Tegchok's book Transforming Adversity into Joy and Courage and wrote some of his reflections on chapter 2, which was about our precious human life, its meaning and purpose, and how rare it is to have the conditions we now have.

This topic of the precious human life has been interesting for me. I've been trying to meditate on it for several months now, but I'm still getting caught up in grasping at sense pleasures, sleep, and food. Maybe I've been doing something a little off. But anyway, it sure is helpful to think about.

Thinking about this life as being a great ship that can ferry me across samsara is a very inspiring image. Maybe it could be like a rocket ship, because we have to propel it with such great exertion for it to go to liberation.

Thinking about the freedoms does indeed give me a sense of freedom, and also strong pity for the beings in those unfortunate states. I don't have much of a feel for what life's actually like in the lower realms, but can imagine enough that it is not pleasant and that most of the qualities of mind in dependence on which I label "me" are totally absent. It scares me to think of not having the ability to contemplate the Dharma, but even just ten years ago I don't think I did. When I look at our kitten, Karuna, this contemplation becomes more vivid. She's always looking out at sense objects, mind constantly abuzz without any space for rest. This is not a state I want to return to!

Now I do have this great freedom. I take it too much for granted, especially the freedom from border lands and times with no Buddha. For some reason it's easier for me to consider the possibility of being blind or having autism or being someone who favors capital punishment and loves hunting than of being in a place where there is no Dharma or a time where there is no Buddha... but of course, the great majority of places on this planet and of times since this planet developed are without Dharma or Buddha. Yikes! So now, with this freedom, there's also really some responsibility to use it wisely.

This also goes for the fortunes. Sometimes I see a little affliction in my mind, some kind of yearning for distraction and pleasure, and can envision my whole inclination to Dharma practice just being thrown out the window in favor of some ice cream or a kiss. So I have to

make very strong prayers that I will never turn away from this path in any life, and so I'm glad we get to do this in the food offering chant.

I also really marvel sometimes at how long the Buddha's teachings have been around! This is very inspiring, and being at the Abbey helps me to see how much effort is required for the Dharma to be sustained over time. I am encouraged to actualize the Dharma in myself to help with this. I am amazed that such great merit has been created by beings for all these appearances to arise of monasteries and training centers and publishers and institutions.... Even just the image of Buddha, known to people worldwide and is a unanimous symbol of peace (well, maybe not everywhere), has been carried down.

For me, being someone who used to try to always find the points of commonality and synthesis between spiritual traditions, it is interesting after practicing and learning the Dharma for a little while to really see its unique qualities. It is not easy for beings to become aware of our own minds, but Buddha showed how with such simplicity. To have some faith and connection to this is rare. I feel great joy to have this.

And thinking of the fact that I have all supporting conditions to be able to practice is the supreme of meditations on the kindness of others. I really don't get how this occurs. It's as if one makes the decision to practice Dharma, and then whammo, there it is. I guess they're not joking when they talk about how great the merit is that's created from the various practices and contemplations. But this is also something difficult not to take for granted. At Kalachakra, I met Ven. Tsunma-la from Kurukulla and she told me, "don't take Ven. Chodron for granted!" So I'm working towards that, little by little trying to improve my practice of the far-reaching practices to repay the kindness of beings and to make all the efforts of my teachers worthwhile.

Sometimes I also really marvel, "wow! A Buddha arose!" I look at all these people with reductionist views, and it seems like the concept of a Buddha wouldn't even make sense to someone who thinks the mind is just an "epiphenomenon" resulting from some electrical activity (the ghost in the machine, as they say). Then when I really contemplate this precious human birth, it's the most incredible thing in the whole universe. I'm still not totally clear on what a Buddha is and how the dharmakaya manifests as the rupakaya, but in the grossest sense to just think that a being actually understands reality and has great compassion... simple enough, just that gives me great faith. Even knowing that spiritual practice exists is a cause of inspiration, in this world with so much emphasis on worldly pleasure.

Thinking about those who lack the freedoms and fortunes makes me sad. When before I said that you just decide to practice Dharma and the conditions come, maybe it isn't really so simple? There are an awful lot of confused people who could really benefit from Dharma and many who want to, but still for countless reasons they are distracted by other activities or prevented from doing so.

Thinking of the value of this life is when this contemplation really starts to energize me. I kind of monotonously go through the freedoms and fortunes and check them off, but then when I think of what I can do with my life I slow down a bit. Here, I see that there is nothing else needed. I already possess all the necessary conditions to secure the welfare of at least myself and, indirectly, others.

When I think like this I have a strong urge to practice bodhicitta. I become frightened about how much time I waste in the eight worldly concerns. I like hearing what Shantideva said about cheating ourselves if we don't make the most of this life. I always know that if someone's bringing Shantideva into a discussion, it's time to listen up. I don't want to cheat myself.

I'm sometimes skeptical that I could have done such good in past lives to have all the great conditions that I have now, because my mind is such a mess! I guess we can experience the fruitional result of a virtuous karma simultaneously with the result that's action similar to the cause of a non-virtuous karma. But slowly, it seems to be getting a little better and that gives me more hope that I can really undergo transformation with this life.

I read in His Holiness the Dalai Lama's book that when he was in his 30's he started to focus more on bodhicitta and really thought that he could become a bodhisattva in this lifetime. I was inspired by that. It seems like oftentimes the things His Holiness says are tips for how we ourselves can think about things, so if I really try hard to become more familiar with bodhicitta I'll be able to make this life meaningful. Yet, still, I get distracted by craving for pleasure, food, and sleep. I need to do more meditation!

I also really enjoy thinking about the rarity of this life. It's really amazing - of all the millions of beings at the Abbey, not even a dozen have a precious human life! Ahhhh! I feel very lucky to have this opportunity. Even bodhisattvas yearn for this opportunity. And when I'm really honest about my mind's habits, I can see that it is not common for a mind to take a liking to virtue. Though good qualities are more in line with our true nature, in another sense it's almost unnatural for a samsaric mind to engage in virtue. We keep missing the yoke, and then when we finally get near it, we kick it away, as one of my teachers said.

What Khensur Jampa Tegchok says about our constructive actions not being as well thought out as our destructive ones really made me reflect. It's true, around here at the Abbey we have so many chances to do virtuous actions, all day long... but most of the time, I do so grudgingly or not even paying attention, or maybe remember to think of compassion for a moment and then within seconds I'm back to ragging on someone or thinking about the future. This is icky. I like when I get to work on one project for an extended period of time, because then I have more opportunities to remind myself to be mindful and cultivate a virtuous attitude. I think this is more difficult when on the computer than when doing manual work.

So I've contemplated how rare and precious this life is and I do feel some sense of loss when I waste it. I am very happy to be able to hold precepts, they help me to feel courage and faith in the practice. I also realize how fortunate I am to have such kind teachers and I wish to practice well and become a kinder, wiser human being. Now there's some missing link between the aspiration and the reality of my habits! But I think with continued reflection on the Dharma and a long-term view, I can overcome those poor habits.