

Old man experiences

Advice from an Old Experienced Man

By Je Gungthang Könchok Tenpe Drönme

Homage to the untainted Buddha who has abandoned the seeds of rebirth uncontrollably recurring from the force of karma and disturbing emotions and who, consequently, does not experience the sufferings of old age, sickness, and death.

In the middle of the vast, lonely, wild plain of samsara lives an old man visited by a young lad, proud of his youth and health. They have this discussion.

“Hey old man, why do you act, look, and speak differently from others?”

To that, the old man replies, “If you say I act, walk, move, and speak differently, do not feel you are flying in the sky above. Land back down on the same earth as me and listen to my words.”

The old man continues, “A few years ago, I was much stronger, more handsome, and more vigorous than you. I was not born the way I am now. If I ran, I could even catch up with flying horses.”

“If I caught something, I could even catch bare-handedly yaks of the nomad lands. My body was so flexible, I could move like a bird in the sky. My body was so fit, I looked like a youthful god. I wore the brightest colored clothes and loads of ornaments of gold and silver, ate tons of delicious food and sweets, and rode mighty steeds. I hardly ever sat alone without playing, laughing, and enjoying myself. Hardly any happiness exists that I have not experienced.

“At that time, I never thought of the impermanence of my life or about my death. Nor did I expect to go through the suffering of old age as I am now.”

“Living with the distraction of involvement with friends, parties, and having a good time, old age sneaks up and overcomes you in the midst of the sound of your laughter.”

“When we become very old, we dislike our own selves when we look in a mirror. At that time, our bodies and minds become weak. Our bodies begin to degenerate from head to toe. Our heads are bent as if always receiving a vase initiation.

“The white hair on my head, with no black left, it is not a sign of purification. It is the arrow of frost from the mouth of the Lord of Death, which has landed on my head. The lines on my forehead are not the creases on a pudgy infant drinking milk from his mother. It is the count by messengers of the Lord of Death of how many years I have already lived. When I squint, it is not because smoke is in my eyes. It is a sign of being helpless with the degeneration of my sensory powers. When I try to make a big effort to hear with my hand by my ear, it is not because I am making a secret communication. It is a sign of the degeneration of my hearing.

“When I dribble and snot comes from my nose, it is not a pearl adornment on my face. It is a sign of the thawing of the ice of youthful vigor by the sunshine of old age. Loosing my teeth is not a sign of cutting a new set like a young child. It is a sign of the wearing out of the tools of eating which the Lord of Death is putting away. When much saliva comes out and I spit when I talk, it is not like sprinkling water on the earth to clean it. It is a sign of an end of all the words I shall say. When I speak incoherently and stumble over words, it is not that I am speaking a strange foreign language. It is a sign of my tongue being tired with a lifetime of idle chatter.

“When my appearance becomes ugly, it is not that I am trying to hide behind the mask of a monkey. It is a sign of the total degeneration of the body that I have borrowed. When my head shakes a lot, it is not that I am disagreeing with you. It is a sign of the overwhelming power of the stick of the Lord of Death that has hit my head. When I walk bent over, it is not that I am trying to find a needle I have lost. It is a clear indication of the degeneration of the element of earth in my body.

“When I get up rising on my hands and knees, I am not imitating a four- legged animal. It is because the support of my feet is no longer sufficient. When I sit down, it is like dropping a bag of something. It is not that I am angry with my friends. It is the loss of control of my body.

“When I walk slowly, I am not trying to walk like a great statesman. It is because I have lost the complete sense of balance in my body. When my hands shake, it is not that I am waving my hands out of greed to get something. It is a sign of the fear of everything being taken away from me by the Lord of Death. When I can eat and drink only a little, it is not because I am miserly or stingy. It is a sign of the degeneration of the digestive heat at my navel. When I wear light clothes, it is not an attempt to imitate athletes. It is because the weakness of my body makes any clothes a burden to wear.

“When breathing is difficult and I get out of breath, it is not that I am healing someone by blowing a mantra. It is a sign of weakness and exhaustion of the energies in my body. When I do very little and have few activities, it is not from intentionally controlling my activities. It is because of the limit of what an old man can do. When I am very forgetful, it is not because I think others unimportant and look down on them. It is a sign of the degeneration of the consciousness of my memory.

“O young man, do not tease and make fun of me. What I experience now is not exclusive to me. Everyone experiences this. You wait and see; in three years, the first few messengers of old age will come to you. You will not believe or like what I say, but you will learn from experience. In this time of the five degenerations, you will be lucky to live to be as old as I am. Even if you live as long as I have, you will not be able to speak as much as I can.”

The young man replies, “Instead of being able to live as long as you and become as ugly and ignored as you are and put in the ranks of dogs, it is better to die.”

The old man laughs. “Young man, you are very ignorant and stupid to wish to live long and be happy, but not to have old age. Death may sound simple, but it is not that easy. To be able to die peacefully and happily, you need to be someone who has not accepted wrongly obtained offerings or broken the morality of the ten positive actions, and who has

accumulated much listening to the Dharma, contemplation, and meditation. Then death is simple.

“I do not feel this way, however. I have no confidence of my having done anything constructive. I am afraid of death and am grateful for each day I can stay alive. My strong wish is to stay alive each day.”

The young man changes his mind and says, “Old man, everything you say is true. What others have told me about the suffering of old age agrees with what I have seen in you. Your demonstration of old age to me has been very beneficial to my mind. I am amazed at the suffering of old age. O wise old man, if you have heard of any methods to escape old age, do not keep them a secret; share them with me and tell me the truth.”

The old man pleasingly says, “There definitely is a method. If you know it, it is easy to follow. With little effort, we can quickly be liberated from this suffering. Although everyone who is born dies, very few die after growing old. Many die young without having the opportunity to reach old age. The methods are in Buddha's teachings. They contain many methods to gain liberation and enlightenment, in other words not to be reborn, get old, sicken, or die; but we have not practiced them.”

“Everyone wants immortality and the methods to attain it. But to be born and not to die is impossible. Even thousands of Fully Enlightened Beings, including Sakyamuni Buddha, have passed away. And as for the bodhisattvas and great gurus of the past, only their names remain. The same is evident in the history of the world. All great historical figures have died and only ruins are left. Thus, we must not forget the reality of our impending deaths. Even the great gurus of the present will pass away. Babies born today will all be dead in a hundred years. So how can you, young man, expect that you alone will live forever? Therefore, it is advisable to prepare yourself spiritually for death.

“A long lifespan cannot be bought with money or gained through physical comfort. If you have spiritual confidence and know what you want out of life, then the older you grow physically, the more happiness and youth of mind you will have. If you enjoy great physical comfort but have led an empty life, then the older you grow, the unhappier you become. You have to travel as a tourist to distract your mind from worrying about death. On the other hand, even if you have just a little spiritual confidence, the closer you approach death, the more you feel like a son returning to a happy home. You are not repelled by death, but look forward to continuing lives of happiness.”

“Since the suffering of death is inevitable, we must do something about it. We cannot just sit and be depressed. As humans we have the wisdom to try many methods. Even Buddha cannot give you more explicit teachings, young man. I have spoken from my heart. Although this is my true heartfelt advice, do not rely only on my words alone; analyze them for yourself. Do practices concerning impermanence on your own. There is a proverb, 'Ask for the opinions of others, but make the decision yourself.' If you let many make decisions for you, many will give you different advice.”

The young man says, “All you say is very true and beneficial. But, for the next few years I cannot do these things. I have other work to do. I have a large estate, wealth, and so on. I

must do much business and tend to my property. After a few years I must meet you again, and then I shall do the practices.”

The old man becomes very unhappy and says, “Everything you have told me now turns out to be empty words and meaningless. I have had the same thing, the wish to do something meaningful after a few years; but I never did anything and now have grown old. I know how vain what you say is. Things to do in a few years time will never end. You will always put them off. Things to do in a few years time are like an old man's beard; if you shave today, you will grow more tomorrow. After procrastinating until tomorrow and tomorrow, soon you will find your life is over. This procrastination of Dharma practice has fooled everyone. I have no confidence in you that you will ever practice Dharma. Therefore, it is a total waste for us to talk. Go back to your home and do whatever you want, and let me say some manis (mantras).”

The young man becomes very surprised and feels a bit hurt. He says, “How can you even think of saying such things to me? Tell me, how quickly can material things be accomplished in this life?”

The old man laughs, “You ask me these questions, so I guess I have to answer how long it takes to accomplish anything. In the southern direction lives the Lord of Death who cares not at all whether you have finished your work or not. He does whatever he wants. If you can have friendly relations with him and get his permission to accomplish something in life, then you can relax. Otherwise, you can never relax. People die in the middle of a cup of tea, while food is on the table, while walking, before they can finish taking a whiff of snuff.

“This happens to everyone, even great masters. Many of their teachings are incomplete, because they died before they finished writing them. So when the Lord of Death comes, you cannot say, 'I have a big estate and much work to do.' You cannot boast of anything to him; you have to leave everything. In this respect we are completely powerless. We cannot determine our lifespan. Therefore, if you are able to do anything, start practicing now. That will be meaningful; otherwise, your estates alone are meaningless. But nowadays there are few people who tell the truth about what will benefit you. What is even more rare is someone who will listen to sincere advice.”

The youth is deeply moved and, having built up great respect for the old man, takes a few steps back and prostrates to him. He says, “No other lamas surrounded by golden banners, Geshes, or yogis have more profound teachings than what you have said. You have the appearance of an ordinary old man, but you are actually a great spiritual friend. I give my word of honor to practice all you have said, to the best of my ability, and in the future, please give me more teachings.”

The old man agrees and accepts. He says, “I do not know much, but I have experienced a great deal. I can teach you from that. The most difficult thing is to make a beginning and establish yourself in the Dharma. To begin practicing Dharma after you are already old is more difficult. Therefore, it is important to start at a young age.”

“When young, your memory is fresh; you have dynamic intelligence and the physical strength to build up positive force by prostrations. In terms of tantra, the strength and vigor of your energy channels are very good when young. If at a young age, you can break through

the barrier of greed and attachment to material possessions and involve yourself in spiritual activities, it is very valuable. Once you have accepted the Dharma, understood its essential points, and gotten into its spirit, then everything you do, say, and think will be Dharma.”

“There are no rigid rules in Dharma. So, try not to have too many thoughts or a fickle mind. Start now and keep up your interest in Dharma. Do not change your mind every minute. From this moment on, dedicate your life – body, speech, and mind – to Dharma practice.”

Now the old man tells the youth what Dharma entails, “First, find a well-qualified spiritual mentor and devote yourself properly to him with your thoughts and actions. How much you can benefit others depends on finding a proper spiritual mentor and on your wholehearted committed relationship with him.”

“Then, you need to observe your words of honor and vows to practice the ten constructive actions. Safeguard them as you would your eyes. Cut off your attachment to this life, like a wild elephant breaking a chain. Then accumulate listening, contemplation, and meditation, and do the three together. Support this all with the seven- limbed practice. This is way to build up positive force, to accumulate merit. Having done this, Buddhahood is at your fingertips.”

“This is happiness; this is joy. O dear son, if you practice in this way all your wishes will be fulfilled.”

From that day on, the young man practiced pure Dharma unmixed with the eight worldly, childish feelings.

The old man says, “I have heard these teachings from my spiritual mentors and they are also based on my own experience. May this benefit limitless sentient beings for the sake of their happiness.

Impermanence teachings

Verses of Advice for Meditating on Impermanence

by Könchok Tenpe Drönme

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!