



A Gift of Liberation

Course Four—Learning to Be Quiet

Homework Master, Class Six: A Hell on Earth

1) What are four examples of negative deeds towards the Community (or Sangha) which Pabongka Rinpoche mentions, in his discussion of the rain of purity?

[The Rinpoche gives the following examples of negative deeds towards the Community, or Sangha (of course there are many more besides these):

- (1) Causing a split in the Community
- (2) Stealing what belongs to the Community
- (3) Belittling the Community and its members
- (4) Failing to present regular tormas cake offerings to the guardians of the Dharma.]

2) Why, according to the Rinpoche, is it actually “risky” to be part of a spiritual community?

[Pabongka Rinpoche points out that it is actually quite risky to be a part of a spiritual community. This is because people who are attempting to follow a spiritual path to a higher goal—whether they are noticeably succeeding in this journey or not—are extremely rare and precious in this world: they are doing, perhaps, the only important thing in the entire world. And this makes them karmically very powerful objects.

The problem is that we are around such people all the time: the Dharma friends that we take for granted, for years, as we work and study together towards higher goals. If we for example criticize them or fail to

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be with them in sweet harmony, then we collect powerful bad karma which is frankly impossible to collect with other, normal people in our life.]

3) In the context of defining the Community, or Sangha, as one of the Three Jewels, Pabongka Rinpoche clarifies whether it consists only of the ordained. Explain.

[Pabongka Rinpoche's classic work on the step of the path is one source which states very clearly what the actual Sangha Jewel consists of: all of those people in the world who have experienced the direct perception of emptiness. The nominal Sangha consists of the Community of ordained people, whether men or women.

Given this higher definition of the Sangha though, we have to be even more careful not to create any division of the community, since it is almost impossible to know with certainty who around us has seen emptiness directly—there is no definite outer sign, as there is with the ordained, in their robes.]

4) What is one of the most powerful bad karmas we can ever commit, and what does Pabongka Rinpoche say he thinks would be a typical root of this terrible deed?

[One of the most powerful bad karmas we can ever commit is to cause a division within a spiritual community; this is even described in Buddhist scripture as a direct attack upon the body of the Buddha himself.

Pabongka Rinpoche says that this kind of division can even extend to criticizing other religions or spiritual paths; as well as criticizing different groups or sects within our own religion—such as the four traditional groups within Tibetan Buddhism: the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelukpa (the last being the lineage of the Dalai Lamas).

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The Rinpoche points out that the kind of thinking which can trigger this tremendous bad karma is to have thoughts such as, “That’s not the way we do it in our lineage!”—even with something so minor as how we ring a bell, etc. We need to be very careful that we don’t even allow these kinds of thoughts in our own mind, given the extreme seriousness of the karma of dividing religious practitioners.]

5) In this section, on the need to respect the Community, we get a glimpse of the creatures who live in a special realm called “Hell on Earth.” Explain how they are described; and then comment on whether you believe that such life forms could actually exist. How could such bodies be sustained, physically?

[In describing the possible karmic results of criticizing or dividing spiritual communities, Pabongka Rinpoche mentions the account of the monk named Sangha Rakshita, who lived in the time of the Buddha. This monk was returning from a visit to the realm of the nagas, or serpent beings, and had reached the shore of the ocean.

Here he found what is called in Buddhism a “Hell on Earth,” meaning a particular spot here in the realm of the humans which is inhabited by individuals who are close to being hell-beings (although their suffering is infinitely less than the actual beings of hell). This particular area, the beach at the side of the ocean, was just such a partial hell, and Sangha Rakshita had an opportunity to see how these pitiful beings lived.

He saw one being who was shaped like a piece of rope; another who looked like a pot; one like a broom; one like a pestle (of a mortar & pestle); one like a pillar; one like a wall; and one like interwoven tendons.

They were weeping and moaning in constant pain, and Lord Buddha explained to Sangha Rakshita that their suffering was the result of negative deeds committed against the Community.

This particular section in this particular scripture is an especially disturbing one for us. It shakes our idea of how far a human being can

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descend: that there are karmas so powerful that we could take a form of life that looks more like an inanimate object than like a living person. We think to ourselves, “How is it possible that a being shaped just like a broom could even be alive?”

The answer of course is that it is not life which sustains the body—not vitamins, or food, or even air—but rather it is karma. As long as a powerful bad karmic seed is present there within our mind, we will continue to live, and continue to suffer, even in circumstances and forms that would seem impossible to support life. If the seeds are there, we will suffer, and death will be denied us.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn’t know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, continuing to practice in meditation having the rainbow lights of purification and attainment pour into our body. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations.