

Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, shares the following reflections on human life:

“These leasures and endowments, which are so difficult to obtain, have been acquired, and they bring about the welfare of all. If one fails to take this favourable opportunity into consideration, how could this occasion occur again?”

Just as lightning illuminates the darkness of a cloudy night for an instant, in the same way, by the power of the Buddhas, occasionally people’s minds are momentarily inclined toward merit.”

– *From A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra) by Śāntideva.*

The imagery of Śāntideva is always captivating. His analogy of lightning in the second Śloka is something that we can all relate to from our own experience. He’s evoking the image of a pitch-black, stormy night, so dark that there is no way of finding your path, no way of even seeing your palm in front of your eyes. And then suddenly, a flash of lightning illuminates this dark night, and just for a fraction of a second you can see your surroundings as clearly as if it were bright day.

Śāntideva uses this analogy here to describe the tiny moments of virtuous, meritorious notions that come up in our mind, and he portrays them as being extremely rare and hard to come by. Why? Well, there are so many distractions in our lives; so many seemingly important things, occurring day after day, moment after moment, and, along with them, disturbing emotions constantly arise.

Due to this endless agitation, there is hardly any instant where there is space in our mind for even the tiniest glimpse of a virtuous thought to arise; the chances of such a moment occurring are one in a million! But if, against all odds, such a moment does occur, Śāntideva tells us that this is due to the aspirations, the kindness, and the blessings of the Buddhas.

So this is the obvious meaning here, but when reading and contemplating these two Ślokas this morning I thought, “What if we took Śāntideva’s analogy further, into another dimension, onto another scale? What if we applied it to our entire human existence?”

I don’t mean to imply that Śāntideva doesn’t talk about the preciousness of this human existence – in fact, the first of the two Ślokas in the introduction talks about the unique opportunity such a rebirth represents, and how important it is to make good use of it.

Nevertheless, I would like to share some of my own reflections on how we might relate the image of the flash of lightning to our human life, in the hope that it might be meaningful to some of you.

If we consider our human existence by comparing it to other timescales and dimensions, we can’t help being struck by just how short and temporary it is.

Let's take the example of a galaxy and its lifespan: how impressive, how amazing, how enormous it is!

By comparison, how insignificant are the lives of human beings, even if we look at all of humanity as a collective? And what need then to even talk about one individual's life, of his or her achievements? Seen on a cosmic scale they mean nothing at all; there is nothing significant about them. So short and insignificant are they that it's as if they never even happened. Whatever their achievements – whether they climbed Mount Everest, put an end to hunger, or became a universal monarch – none of them mean anything.

From that perspective, the entire lifespan of a human being is nothing but a fleeting moment; actually, not even a moment, not even a nanosecond – it's so brief that we can't even declare it to have occurred at all.

Having talked about that perspective of human existence, let's go back to Śāntideva's flash of lightning for a moment: it is true that due to our human condition – the limitations of the capacity of our eye faculty and the state of our consciousness that goes with it – the experience that we have of a flash of lightning is very momentary. But if our eye faculty were somewhat different, if we were able to slow down the flash, like a super slow-motion camera, we might be able to divide up that one split second into millions of frames. We could film that moment of lightning and play it back for a whole minute or even for a whole hour (in case we had the required super-gadgets for it), and still get the sense that what we are seeing is not a still photograph but a moving image.

And this, I feel, is the very luxury that we have with our human lifespan, and this luxury is due to two factors: the blessing of the Buddhas on the one hand, and our accumulation of merit on the other hand.

It is thanks to these two causes that even though in truth this human life lasts only for a moment – no longer than a flash of lightning – we do not actually perceive it as being momentary. We are able to slow it down, live it in slow motion, as it were, divide it into fractions: years, months, weeks, days, hours... We are able to feel that we are living and breathing, we are able to feel that we have this and that experience, this and that adventure. We take it for granted that we will have a certain number of years to live, that we will have an average lifespan of 80 or 90.

We experience our life as long and adventurous, and that's nothing short of a miracle. And that miracle is due to none other than these two causes of merit and blessing.

And I think that it might be really interesting if, from time to time, we could reflect on these two perspectives of the precious human existence that is ours.

How on the one hand it's so minute, so momentary, so insignificant that we cannot even say it actually happened, that it really took place.

But how, on the other hand, it's so impressive and miraculous – especially in view of its

minuteness – that we can experience it as long and adventurous, as significant and even 'larger than life'!

I feel that first of all it's very interesting to reflect on these aspects, and then furthermore, if you feel that we need a reason for this occurrence, then you can rely on what the Bodhisattvas of the past have said: that such an occurrence is only possible thanks to the double cause of the Buddhas' blessings and your own merit or effort.

And so, if you focus and reflect on these two points – the interesting nature of this human life, and the causes for its occurrence – then once you have spent enough time reflecting on it, you will be naturally motivated to try and make the most of it.

And the way to make the most of it is by furthering the accumulation of merit. You will become curious and want to explore for yourself: "If I continue to accumulate merit, what will happen? Where will it lead me?"

In other words, you will be motivated to improve the quality of how you live your life. You will be naturally inclined to practice, both formally and informally. Not necessarily in retreat, but in your everyday life, from the comfort of your home or your workplace.

In conclusion, please understand that having shared these reflections, I'm not asking you to do anything; I'm not giving you any homework to do, so don't feel under any obligation.

If I'm asking anything of you it's only this: be curious about your human life, and see for yourselves where your curiosity might lead you.

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