

Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, gives the following message on the occasion of Vesak, 2022.

Dear Dharma friends,

Next Monday, May 16th, marks the day of Vesak (also known as Buddha Jayanti or Buddha Purnima) – the Buddhist festival that commemorates the birth, the enlightenment and the Parinirvana of our historical Buddha Shakyamuni.

Of course, **Samantabhadra's King of Aspiration Prayers** (which is extracted from the **Gaṇḍavyūha**

chapter of the

Avataṃsaka Sutra

, and sums up its essence) tells us that atop every particle in our world there are as many pure realms as there are atoms in the universe, and that in each of these pure realms reside myriads of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

This is not just an analogy – it describes the way things actually are. However, due to the limitations of our human condition we are only able to witness things one at a time, in a linear manner, and accordingly we talk about a series of historical Buddhas, appearing one after the other.

And of course, in our current era we have the good fortune of being able to call ourselves the disciples of one of these countless Buddhas: the one who started life as Prince Siddharta, attained perfect awakening under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, and thereafter became known as Buddha Shakyamuni.

As Buddhists we consider Vesak to be the most sacred day of the lunar year, and we do our best to celebrate it with as much sincerity as possible.

We recall the Buddha's teaching, and we try to use this day to implement however much of it we are able to.

And I think that one of the most practical and relatable ways of observing this day is by focusing on the practice of refuge. I believe that most of you must have received the Buddhist refuge vows from one of your teachers.

The taking of refuge marks the first step on the Buddhist path, and it's also the foundation for the whole journey. An individual entering this path by taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha promises to give up non-virtuous actions, which is the very basis for journeying towards liberation and perfect awakening, Buddhahood.

So therefore, I would like to encourage all of you to observe the day of Vesak by focusing on the refuge practice, and along with this, please also recite Samantabhadra's King of Aspiration

Prayers.

This is what I would like to ask of all my fellow practitioners.

Besides that, for those of you who are familiar with the practice of Sojong, who have taken the Sojong vows in the past and have received explanations on them, I would encourage you to devote the Vesak day to this practice.

As always, please don't mistake this suggestion of mine for a command, an order that you are obligated to follow. I'm well aware of the fact that many of you have very busy schedules, with countless obligations and responsibilities.

But should you feel inspired and have the time and opportunity, then – for a period of 24 hours, from one sunrise to the next – I would encourage you to devote yourselves to this practice.

I believe that it has great benefit, because it gives us an opportunity to observe some sort of silence, at least for one day in a year. I am not just talking about verbal silence here, but, more than that, also silence from thoughts.

Dedicating just 24 hours to this practice will allow our body, speech and mind to relax from their usual busyness. I don't mean to imply that our social duties and the various responsibilities we have in our lives are unimportant or meaningless. Not at all – they are related to people, to individuals, to communities, to society, so of course they are important.

It's just that if we could gain greater clarity of view and deeper insight through these practices, then our social duties will become less and less heavy and burdensome.

Social duties and responsibilities are part and parcel of being human, but it is possible to go about them in the most relaxed and natural way, without anxiety or hang-ups. Maybe what I'm trying to convey here will be easier to understand if I use the analogy of the sun and its 'duties and responsibilities'. Figuratively speaking, it's part and parcel of the sun's duties to rise every morning, to set every evening, and to give warmth and life to plants, animals and human beings alike. And without fail, the sun goes about fulfilling these 'duties' day in, day out, without ever getting stuck or stressed, without any hang-ups.

This, I feel, is one of the benefits of this practice – it allows us to become more like the sun: it helps us to function, to rise and to set, to live and to die, without being stuck, without anxiety, without hang-ups.

And of course, if you can't practice Sojong on the day of Vesak itself, there's always the next day, and if not, then the day after that. So, there'll always be another opportunity.

For those of you who are not yet familiar with the practice of Sojong, I would suggest that it might be a good experience to try it one day, should the occasion arise. Everybody likes to try new things, after all, and the practice of Sojong doesn't require any great exertion or effort – it's

simple, peaceful, and enjoyable.

In this context, I would like to share a few reflections on two topics that I feel can sometimes be a source of misunderstanding.

The first one is the term 'vow' and the connotations it transports. This English word – just like its Tibetan counterpart **sdom pa** – seems to carry a tone of restriction, of closing or binding; and I think this can give us the wrong idea. Not that there is anything wrong with the term

sdom pa

itself – what the 'binding' or 'closing' actually implies is shutting the doors of our body, speech and mind to non-virtues.

Still, the way in which certain notions are perceived is very much dependent on the spirit of the time we live in, the contemporary mentality, and the prevailing trends. Thus, for past generations it may have been perfectly valid and even inspiring to hear about 'shutting the door to non-virtues'. It's a clear-cut and down-to-earth way of describing the vows.

However, the present time, which is marked by modernity, environmental issues and globalisation, has its own advantages as well as its own drawbacks. On the one hand we have more freedom and opportunities than ever before, but on the other hand we are faced with so many choices, so much stress, and an unprecedented number of tasks and challenges. It seems to me that the contemporary human condition is such that we don't have any room to hear about problems or challenges. And so therefore, if we hear about 'shutting the door to non-virtues' and so on, we may not feel encouraged or inspired. As children of our current era, we always like to hear about the bright side of things, about their positive aspect, their sweet part.

Fortunately, the Tibetan term **sdom pa** – like so many Dharma terms – has a wide range of meanings, tones and connotations. And so we can simply focus on the flip side of the coin and tap into another nuance that may be more appropriate for our era, and that could very well be something like 'unbinding'. After all, whenever we close one door another one opens, and since we always prefer to hear about the positive side of things, we may feel more motivated and inspired when we approach the vows, or **sdom pa**, from the angle of opening, unbinding.

This can help us gain a sense that the purpose of practising vows, or doing any other Buddhist practice, is not to constrain us, close us, tie us up. In fact, it's quite the opposite: all the practices of the Buddha Dharma are meant to liberate us, unbind us, open our heart.

So who knows, maybe in time we'll come up with a new term – or maybe the next Buddha will invent a new word instead of 'vow'. But just temporarily, if it makes sense, I feel that we might think of them not as 'vows' but as 'unbinders'.

The second point I would like to talk about briefly is the sense of mission we often bring to our Dharma practice.

I have always felt inspired by the beginning of the Bodhicaryāvatāra, where Śāntideva says that he's not composing this work for the sake of others but for his own benefit. When saying this he doesn't mean that he doesn't have bodhicitta; nor is he just being modest. He is just being practical, down to earth, not exaggerating things. He's simply doing what he's doing, and he enjoys doing it. So there is no sense of a burden, a mission of why he is composing this text. He's not doing it for glory or fame, or to save the world.

Any one of us who has a clear mind will understand that the world just goes on, and that there's no need to worry too much about a personal or a collective mission, about saving all sentient beings, or saving the world. These are just ways to motivate ourselves, and if we find them helpful and inspiring, then of course we can dedicate our practice of refuge or Sojong in that way.

But I feel that there is no need for waving big banners, hanging gigantic posters, or having loudspeakers proclaim from the top of the roof that "I'm dedicating my practice to saving all sentient beings", or to saving the world.

To me all of this just comes down to creating another commotion. And if you create such a commotion, if you curse and promise and swear that "from this moment onwards until my last day I will devote myself to saving the world", it may feel liberating at that moment. But actually, the weight of that commotion doesn't have much relation to the world. It will not achieve anything, besides creating unnecessary stress, burden, and anxiety for yourself.

By contrast, Śāntideva just enjoying what he's doing is so simple and relatable. When you enjoy doing what you're doing, everything becomes easy; even if you do have to save the world it becomes easy.

In Chinese, the word for 'joyful' or 'happy' is **kāixīn** – which literally means 'open heart'.

And I think that's the real purpose of the practice of vows: unbinding us and helping us open our heart.

So therefore, dear Dharma friends, this is what I wish for all of you on this day of Vesak – may you be able to spare some time to use the practice of the Buddha Dharma to find joy and open your heart.

With prayers

Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa

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