

BCA Ch. 1, Verse 4, Text Sections 200-210

***These freedoms and advantages are extremely difficult to obtain.
Since I have gained the opportunity to accomplish that which is
meaningful for a person,
If I do not practice what is beneficial in this lifetime,
How will a perfect opportunity like this come about later?***

BCA 1-4, Text section 200:

First, Shantideva explains the support for bodhicitta, the basis upon which bodhicitta can arise. This basis is the precious human body, which itself is the support for the mind. The mind is the support for the precious bodhicitta. A human existence endowed with the eight freedoms and ten advantages is very difficult to attain, and, therefore, Shantideva says in stanza 4: *These freedoms and advantages are extremely difficult to obtain.*"

BCA 1-4, Text section 201:

Looking at the human body and considering what it is free from, one can enumerate *eight freedoms*. In general, *freedom* means having the opportunity to practice Dharma. *Lack of freedom* refers to eight unfortunate conditions that lack such an opportunity. *The eight freedoms* are not being born in any of the eight states without freedom, which are:

(1) Being born in a hell realm, (2) as a hungry ghost, (3) As an animal, (4) as a long-living god, or (5) as a barbarian, (6) Having wrong views, (7) being born (at a time) when there is no Buddha, Or (8) being born as a retarded person; these are the eight states without freedom.

These eight unfortunate conditions include four unfortunate conditions of nonhumans and four unfortunate conditions of humans. The four unfortunate conditions of non-humans are (1) being born in a hell realm, (2) as a hungry ghost, (3) as an animal, and (4) as a long-living god.

The four unfortunate conditions of humans are being born (5) as a barbarian, (6) in a land of those with wrong views, (7) in a land when a Buddha has not come, and (8) as a retarded person.

1. Being born in a *hell realm*, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma because one is constantly tormented by intense suffering in one of the eighteen hell realms. These are the eight hot hells, the eight cold hells, the temporary hells, and the neighboring hells, which are also called the sixteen additional neighboring hells.

2. Being born as a *hungry ghost*, a *preta*, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma because of the suffering one experiences from hunger and thirst. There are two types of pretas: those who live collectively and those who move through space. Pretas who live collectively suffer from external obscurations, internal obscurations, and specific obscurations.

3. Being born as *an animal*, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma because one is enslaved and suffers from harming each other. Animals are classified into two categories: those living in the depths and those scattered in different places.

4. Being born as a *long-living god*, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma because one spends one's time in a stupor. The environment of a long-living god is experienced as one of the four dhyana states. Their bodies manifest as a samadhi-body. They lack the ability to distinguish between happiness and suffering, virtue and negative deeds, and live in a state similar to deep sleep. They have neither physical nor mental sensation and are in a state of cessation. As they are free of concepts, they may live for eight great aeons, but they are totally separated from the sublime Dharma, so they never have the chance to practice the Dharma. Imagine that you have taken rebirth in such a state and consider whether or not you have the opportunity to practice the Dharma.

5. Being born as a *barbarian*, in a border country, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma because the Buddhist doctrine is unknown in such places. Barbarians are primitive or savage human beings who have no knowledge of how to distinguish between virtue and negative deeds. Such people make offerings to spirits and demons with the blood of animals, and they believe that taking life is something good.

6. Being born among *tirthikas* or among those with similar *wrong views*, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma since one's mind is influenced by those mistaken views. This refers to human beings born in a land where the general world view is either eternalism or nihilism. Eternalists believe that the entire

universe is created by an almighty god. Nihilists do not believe in the law of karma, in past and future lives, in enlightenment, and so forth. Such views prevent beings from meeting the genuine Dharma.

7. Being in a dark aeon, at a time *when there is no Buddha*, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma because one has never even heard of the three jewels and cannot distinguish between virtuous and non-virtuous actions.

8. Being born as a *retarded person*, one has no opportunity to practice the Dharma since one's faculties are impaired. A retarded person is someone with a speech dysfunction, someone who is not able to talk. A retarded person is also someone with a mental disability, an imbecile. A person who is born in such a condition is someone whose mind is not functioning properly and, therefore, cannot properly listen, contemplate or teach the Dharma. A person born with a mental disability cannot properly comprehend the Dharma.

BCA 1-4, Text section 202:

Considering the positive aspects of a human existence, the *ten advantages* are enumerated. These include the five individual advantages and the five circumstantial advantages. Nagarjuna enumerates the individual advantages:

(1) To be born as a human being, (2) in a central land, (3) with all one's sense faculties intact, (4) Not in an extreme karmic predicament, and (5) with faith in the Dharma.

1. *To be born as a human being*: Without a human life, one cannot even encounter the Dharma. It is only the human realm that is truly conducive to Dharma practice. Thus, the human body is the advantage of the support.

2. *To be born in a central land*: If one is born in a remote place where Dharma is unheard of, there is no opportunity to come across it. You, however, were born in a region that is central as far as Dharma is concerned and thus have the advantage of the place.

As to what is meant by a Central Land, one should distinguish between a geographically central land and a central land in terms of the Dharma. Geographically speaking, the central land is said to be the Vajra Seat of Bodhgaya, India, at the center of Jambudvīpa, the Southern Continent, where the thousand Buddhas of this Fortunate Aeon all attained enlightenment. In terms of Dharma, a central land is any land where the Dharma has spread. All other

countries and regions are considered to be peripheral countries and border regions.

3. *To be born with all one's sense faculties intact*: Not to have all sense faculties intact is a hindrance to the practice of Dharma. For instance, if you have no eyesight, you cannot see the representations of the body, speech, and mind, such as statues, scriptures, and stupas. If your mental faculties are impaired, you may be in a state of confusion that does not allow you to understand and practice the Dharma. Being free of such disabilities, you have the advantage of possessing the sense faculties.

4. *To not be born in an extreme karmic predicament*: Perverted lifestyle refers to a lifestyle of people born in communities of hunters, butchers, mercenaries and so forth, who are immersed in non-virtuous actions from their early youth onward. This also includes anyone who's every thought, word and deed is contrary to the Dharma. Since you now wish to engage in positive actions, this is the advantage of an exalted particular intention.

5. *To be born having faith in the Dharma*: Lacking faith in the Buddha's teachings you would not feel any inclination toward the Dharma. Being able to turn your mind to the Dharma, as you are doing right now, constitutes the advantage of faith.

Because these five advantages depend on the individual, they are called the five individual advantages, or the five advantages of the individual. According to Nagarjuna, the five circumstantial advantages are:

(1) A Buddha has appeared and (2) has taught the Dharma;
(3) His teachings still exist and (4) are practiced; And (5) there are those who are kind-hearted toward others.

1. *A Buddha has appeared*: Those not born in a bright aeon, one in which a Buddha has appeared, have never even heard of the Dharma. We are now in an aeon in which a Buddha has appeared, however, so we possess the advantage of the presence of the exalted teacher.

2. *He has taught the Dharma*: Although a Buddha has come, had he not taught, no one would have benefited. Since the Buddha did turn the wheel of Dharma in three successive stages, however, we have the advantage of the teaching of the sublime Dharma.

3. *His teachings still exist:* Although the Buddha has taught, had his doctrine died out, it would no longer be there to help us. However, the period during which the doctrine will remain in existence has not yet ended, and so we have the advantage of the time.

4. *The teachings are practiced:* Although the teachings still exist, unless we follow them they can be of no benefit to us. Since we have taken up the Dharma, however, we possess the advantage of our own good fortune.

5. *There are those who are kind-hearted toward others:* Although we have taken up the Dharma, without the favorable circumstance of being accepted by a spiritual friend we could never learn what the Dharma is really about. Since a spiritual friend has accepted us, we possess the advantage of his extraordinary compassion.

Because these five factors depend on circumstances other than one's own and need to be complete, they are called the five circumstantial advantages, or the five advantages of the circumstances.

There are two kinds of benefit for people: temporary benefit and ultimate benefit. With this human rebirth we have now attained the opportunity to accomplish this twofold benefit. Not taking advantage of this present opportunity would be very foolish, as we will have great difficulty attaining such a perfect situation again in future lifetimes.

BCA 1-4, Text section 203:

What is known as the *precious human body* requires that the eight freedoms and all ten advantages be complete. If any of these eighteen components are missing, your existence is not considered to be a precious human body. We should reflect on the difficulty of attaining such a perfect situation again by contemplating the causes, considering the difficulty through metaphor and through numerical comparison.

BCA 1-4, Text section 204:

What is the cause for this human body endowed with the eight freedoms and ten

advantages? Our present body results from our good karma. Karma refers to positive or negative actions that create positive or negative results; it is created by our mind. To attain a human body one must carry through three kinds of virtuous karma: 1) keeping discipline, 2) gathering merit, and 3) making aspirations.

Many people find these three positive activities difficult to develop and very difficult to practice. Therefore, beings have a hard time attaining a human body. Their negative tendencies are so strong that they have no capacity to accumulate positive thoughts and feelings.

If we create the karma of perfect discipline, we gather the karma for attaining a human body. The minimum discipline required to attain a human body in the next life is the 'discipline of giving up harming others'. Thus, one should not harm others but should practice patience. If you lead a peaceful life without anger, you will gain a beautiful body in your next life. Moreover, if your mind is truly at ease and peaceful, in this life as well people will see the goodness in your face, even though you are not a particularly handsome person.

Discipline must be aided by the practice of the six transcendental perfections. Among these, the practice of generosity is indispensable for attaining a favorable human condition. People who have practiced sufficient discipline to attain a human body but who have not practiced any generosity will be reborn in very miserable human conditions without the opportunity to practice the Dharma. The other five transcendental perfections must also be practiced to some extent.

The second condition for attaining a human body is gathering merit. The Bodhisattvacharyavatara teaches the perfect methods for gathering merit in the second and third chapters. The gathering of merit through the practices of the 'seven branches' is explained in great detail in those chapters.

The third condition for attaining a human body is aspiration. Only through aspirations will one meet the Dharma in one's next life. Aspirations are of utmost importance. Even if you have attained rebirth as a very rich and healthy person, you will not be able to practice the Dharma unless you have made many aspirations in former lifetimes. Many people have gathered merit in former lifetimes but have failed to make aspirations. Therefore, you should repeat this famous aspiration by Longchenpa everyday at the end of your practice session:

*Throughout all lifetimes, wherever I may be born,
May I obtain the seven qualities of the higher realms.
May I meet the Dharma immediately after taking birth
And have the freedom to practice it properly.*

*May I please my sublime masters
And practice the Dharma day and night.
Having received the Dharma, may I accomplish its innermost essence And traverse the ocean of
worldly existence in that very life.*

*Within the world may I perfectly teach the sublime doctrine And never become weary and tired of
accomplishing the welfare of others.
May all beings simultaneously attain Buddhahood
Through my vast and impartial service to others.*

Even if you do not know how to practice the Dharma, at least you should know how to make aspirations. Through an aspiration such as this, you guarantee that you will meet the Dharma again in your next life and that you will be endowed with the seven qualities of the higher realms. According to Mipham Rinpoche these are: longevity, absence of disease, a beautiful body, good fortune, high caste, great wealth, and great intelligence.

The higher realms refer to the three higher realms of humans, gods and asuras. If you abstain from taking life, you will have a long life. Abstaining from beating and abusing beings, you will be free from illness. Always maintaining patience, you will have a beautiful body.

Having good fortune means that you will succeed at whatever you plan to do. You will not encounter obstacles or unfavorable conditions in your life and will be able to easily accomplish your wishes. In particular, you will be successful in your Dharma practice. All this covers the meaning of 'having good fortune'. If you have intensely practiced meditation in past lifetimes and have always paid respect to your teachers, you will experience good fortune in this life.

'High caste' means that you come from a well-educated family, who imparted to you proper values. A high caste does not refer to royalty or celebrity. It means that your family is of noble mind and does not follow a perverted occupation such as being a mercenary, a butcher, a thief, and so on. If one happens to be born into a family that practices improper livelihood, one will naturally be affected by the negative environment. Diligence in former lifetimes leads to rebirth in a high caste. Great generosity in former lifetimes leads to great wealth in this life. If you have practiced the Dharma in former lifetimes, you will be endowed with great intelligence.

Make aspirations to meet the Dharma immediately on taking rebirth. Once you have met the Dharma, please your master. At best make the offering of practice; second best, serve your master with your body and speech; at the very least, you should please your master with material offerings. Dedicate yourself to Dharma practice day and night.

Having received the Dharma, strive to practice the quintessential teachings and transcend the ocean of samsara in this very lifetime. Pray that once you have gone beyond samsara you will be able to teach the Dharma and work tirelessly for the welfare of others. Pray that through your impartial service to others, all beings may be simultaneously established on the level of perfect Buddhahood. You should recite this perfect aspiration again and again. Aspiration is a very powerful volitional action and has great karmic force.

BCA 1-4, Text section 205:

The famous *example* or *metaphor* of the unlikeliness of attaining a human rebirth is that of a blind turtle dwelling at the bottom of the ocean and swimming up to the surface only once every hundred years. The likelihood of this turtle ever accidentally sticking its neck through a single yoke floating on the vast ocean's surface is very slim.

Concerning this example of the turtle, understand the ocean to be a metaphor for the endless suffering of the three lower realms, which are as vast and deep as the ocean. The blind turtle is a metaphor for the beings of the three lower realms who lack the vision to distinguish between what must be accepted and rejected. Also, while the turtle's rising to the ocean's surface only once every 100 years is very rare, liberation is even rarer than this. Just as the hole in the yoke is very small, so is the chance to achieve rebirth in the body of a god or a human being. That the yoke is tossed hither and thither by the wind is analogous to our karmic dependency on virtuous and negative deeds.

Reflect on the difficulty of attaining a human body through this example as well as through numerical comparisons. If you compare the number of insects in the world to the number of human beings, you realize how many more beings are reborn as insects than as humans. Furthermore, the number of beings living in the ocean far exceeds the number of humans. Among all human beings in the world, moreover, only a few follow the Dharma, and among those who do follow the Buddhist teachings, only a small number are actually practitioners.

BCA 1-4, Text section 206:

Considering the relative numbers of the different kinds of beings, you come to appreciate that being born a human is hardly possible at all. The largest number of beings dwell in the hell realms. It is said that as many beings dwell in hell *as there are specks of dust in the whole world*, that there are as many pretas *as particles of sand in the Ganges*, as many animals *as ferment particles in a beer barrel*, and as many asuras *as snowflakes in a blizzard*. The Buddha also said that gods and humans are as few *as the particles of dust you can heap on your fingernail*.

BCA 1-4, Text section 207:

Using a *metaphor*, the inhabitants of the hells are said to be as numerous as the stars in the night sky and the pretas no more numerous than the stars visible in the daytime. This means that there are very few pretas (hungry ghosts) compared to the number of inhabitants of the hell realms.

If there were as many pretas as stars at night, the number of animals would be like stars in the daytime, which means there are far more pretas than there are animals. And if there were as many animals as stars in the night sky, the number of gods and humans would be only as many as stars in the daytime, meaning there are far more animals than there are gods and humans.

The tradition of Jigme Lingpa's preliminary practices of the 'Longchen Nying Thig' holds that one should recite the lines about the difficulty of attaining a human rebirth at least three times every day. Most people take their human body for granted and do not consider it a privilege. You must be aware that you do have at this time an extraordinary opportunity and a very special physical support. You must realize the value of your human body. This human body is the perfect vehicle; it provides us with the best possible chance to develop the precious bodhicitta. Although all beings are equally endowed with the perfect Buddha nature, the human body alone constitutes the perfect condition for developing bodhicitta. Even an ant has Buddha nature, but no ant can develop bodhicitta and progress on the path to enlightenment.

In general, the Buddha's teachings are vast and profound. While our human mind is of very limited scope, the mind of the Buddha is unlimited, and his knowledge is equally boundless. The Buddha knows everything throughout space and time; his knowledge penetrates the past, present and future. His mind pervades the infinity of space, and he knows everything at once. He knows, sees, hears, smells, and so forth in an unlimited way.

There seems to be a vast difference between the unlimited perspective of the Buddha and our narrow perspective. His topic of teaching might be too vast and our minds too narrow. We could have great difficulty in truly understanding the Buddha's realization and what his teachings are talking about. This difficulty is only due to our own limitations and not because the Buddha's teaching is flawed. Really understanding a Buddhist text is not at all easy. The pith instruction, therefore, is: "Expand your mind!" Open your mind beyond its habitual limits; contemplate on infinite space and expand your scope as much as possible. Only with a vast mind can you understand the scriptures of the Buddha's teachings.

When you contemplate the difficulty of obtaining this human body, you are reflecting on the noble truth of suffering, the first of the four noble. This body is considered to be defiling and is subject to the truth of suffering. Meditate on the truth of suffering by

reflecting on the difficulty of obtaining a human body, and you will become a good practitioner.

For a practitioner of Vajrayana, reflecting on the difficulty of obtaining this human body is indispensable. A Vajrayana practitioner understands that this mind in this human body is endowed with Buddha nature, that this human body provides the best circumstances for developing the precious bodhicitta.

A Vajrayana practitioner also understands the reasons for visualizing this body as a deity and why pure perception must be practiced. The practitioner understands that all beings are primordially male and female deities, that visualization practices are a conceptual imitation of enlightened perspective. The practice of pure perception means to view yourself and the entire universe as a display of deity, mantra and awareness. Through this practice you conceptually imitate the Buddha's pure perfection, acknowledging primordial purity for what it is. Failing to understand that the perspective of the Buddha nature is infinite purity, you do not understand Vajrayana. Pure perception is the key to Vajrayāna.

Many practitioners visualize their body as a deity but feel in their hearts that they are doing something strange. They practice the visualization because they are told to do so, not understanding that such visualization is a skillful method to jump to the Buddha's enlightened perspective. They do not know how to mingle the practices of skillful means and wisdom. The visualizations of pure perception are practices of skillful means and must always be mingled with the recognition of Buddha nature, which is the practice of wisdom. Only when practicing the unity of skillful means and wisdom will one swiftly progress toward enlightenment. Truly appreciating the difficulty of obtaining a human body will gradually lead to pure perception.

Therefore, do not belittle this contemplation and regard it as unimportant. Contemplating the difficulty of obtaining the human body is part of the contemplation of the truth of suffering and has great implications. If you look at the life stories of the great masters of old, you realize that they had only very few disciples who became great masters themselves and reached high levels of attainment such as the rainbow body. This is because most Dharma students are not truly able to disconnect from worldly activities. Most spend their lives in a mixture of Dharma practice and worldly involvement.

BCA 1-4, Text section 208:

The term *person* literally means 'child born from the force of karma'. You can be a person born from bad karma or from good karma. The past karma is like the mother, and the person is like the child.

The term person refers to a 'person who has potential to practice the Dharma', someone who can understand what to accept and what to reject, someone who is ready to practice the Dharma. An insect is a sentient being, but not a person since it lacks the capacity to practice the Dharma.

The three kinds of persons are: the person of minor mental capacity, the person of average mental capacity, and the person of highest mental capacity. The person of minor mental capacity aspires only to practice 'virtue that concords with worldly merit'. This refers to an ordinary worldly person who practices virtue in order to attain rebirth in the three higher realms of samsara. The person of average capacity aspires to practice 'virtue that concords with liberation of the lesser vehicle'. Such a person follows the path of Hinayana and aspires to reach the level of a sravaka arhat or of a pratyekabuddha. The person of highest mental capacity aspires to accomplish 'perfect enlightenment for the welfare of others'. Such a person accumulates 'virtue that concords with the liberation of the greater vehicle'. It is the *virtue of directing the mind to supreme*. This refers to a person who follows the path of Mahāyāna, the path of the bodhisattvas, and who aspires to become a perfectly enlightened Buddha. The true purpose of human life is to accomplish one of these three levels according to one's mental capacities.

BCA 1-4, Text section 209:

A qualified master refers to a master who is endowed with genuine bodhicitta, who has received the empowerments and keeps the samayas; who has mastered view, meditation and conduct; who has gained the signs of recitation and freed his mind through realization. A qualified master is peaceful and compassionate. From such a qualified master one should receive the *profound instructions*, the teachings on how to realize profound emptiness, the essence of one's mind. The profound instructions on how to realize the view of emptiness are taught in sutra as well as in tantra.

This human body is difficult to gain but easy to lose through disease, famine and weapons. Therefore, one should give up all worldly activities. As practitioners we must give up the *major jobs* in life and drop the *minor duties*, simply leaving them unfinished.

BCA 1-4, Text section 210:

The phrase *spend your time with Dharma practice* means 'as long as the sun is shining on one's head, spend your time with the Dharma'. Atisa said that life is short and the fields of knowledge so many that one cannot possibly know them all. Therefore, as we do not know how much lifespan remains to us, we should not even try to study everything but rather should use our time well. Atisa advises that we should be like the swan, said to be able to separate milk from water. Just as swans extract milk from water, practitioners

should be able to extract the most essential points of practice from the vast teachings of the Dharma.