

# The Long Soliloquy

by Geshe Potowa (1027–1105)

I prostrate to the gurus of the three times.

Since beginningless time, we have wandered in the great ocean of suffering, the three realms of samsara. This is because we have not realized our own mind. We have not realized our own mind because of the obscurations. The obscurations come from not knowing that we should gather the accumulations. Not knowing to gather the accumulations is from lacking faith. We lack faith because of not recalling death. Now that, because we fear the suffering of samsara, we want to achieve liberation and omniscience, we must realize the mind. To realize the mind, we must purify the obscurations. To purify the obscurations, we must gather the accumulations. To gather the accumulations, we must have faith. But true faith will not arise if we do not recall death.

When you truly remember death and think that nothing other than Dharma will help, you will pay no heed to any of the bounties of world. At that point, you will have no greed even in the depths of your heart for material things or necessities. Having genuinely lost all attachment to friends and associates, you will curry favor with no one.

Have no ambitions for old age. I think that, without any thought of living until you are old, you should have no concern at all for whether you will be happy or sad in old age, whether people will respect you, whether you will have enough food and clothing, or whether people will criticize you. You should think, “Let people do as they will” and have no thought for the ways and means of this life. You should think, “Whatever will be in this life will be,” and leave it to karma. One arrow cannot kill two deer. One dog cannot bite both your ankles. You cannot sew with a two-pointed needle. If you step forward with one foot and back with the other, you will never get where you are going. Likewise you cannot accomplish both this life and the next, and the next and following lives are more important. Thus you must practice Dharma genuinely.

When you truly remember death, all things will be like hay heaped before a carnivore. When the suffering of samsara truly nauseates you, the thought will frequently occur to you that you need nothing at all. At that time, your mind will genuinely turn away from ambitions for this life, and your attitude will be completely incompatible with anyone else’s. When I see people only doing things to become great and get good things in this life, I wonder, “What are all these people thinking in their hearts?”

Many people have been concerned for me and given me advice—“Don’t be like that. You’ll have trouble when you are old. Keep a few things; it will aid your spiritual practice. You need to nock and shoot your own arrow.” To them I say thank you; your advice to me may be true. But I have never

thought they were concerned for me. Instead, I have felt even more depressed and disgusted—none of them think about the Dharma. It might be so if we were not to die, but death is certain. We do not know when we will die. What will you do if you die while still accumulating things? After you die, you could practice Dharma if you are reborn human, but you don't know where you will be reborn or go after death.

Death is certain, so resolve to practice the Dharma. You do not know when you will die, so resolve not to procrastinate about the Dharma. Nothing else will help at the time of death, so resolve to not be attached to anything. Furthermore, it is said you should be like a traveler returning to his homeland. Sensory pleasures should be like jewelry is to a man being led to his execution. You should be as if mortally wounded. It is said:

If I am to go elsewhere alone,  
What good are all those I like or dislike? ...

I wonder whether they understand this and get depressed. I think about what they will do if they die tomorrow, and feel compassion for them.

Being Dharma practitioners, we should advise nondharmic people, “Don't do that; practice Dharma,” and so forth. We should advise those who are dharmic that sentient beings should train in the higher qualities. It is better to keep discipline than to practice generosity, meditation is better than studying, and so forth. It is necessary to train in these higher qualities.

When I say this, some people say, “While we are ordinary beings, we cannot develop what is taught in the Dharma in our beings. Now we are so-called aspiring practitioners.” If it won't arise in your beings now, it will be even less likely to arise if you are born a dog in your next life. It is less likely still if you are reborn as an ox, donkey, or animal or in another of the eight states that lack leisure. Even now, you cannot get your mind to do anything if your body is even slightly indisposed. So I think there is no better time than now to practice the Dharma. It is always difficult to be an accomplished master or perfect. Now we must go on our aspirations.

“Mara” does not mean some external dark-skinned and grotesque being. It means the inability to develop the higher qualities despite your own good intentions and good companions. I have understood that remembering death alone is the critical point for practicing Dharma from your heart. If you do not recall death, all your listening, contemplating, and meditating and all the difficult austerities such as mountain retreats, sealed retreats, alms, solitude, eating only once per day, and so forth that you do, will go toward how much merit you can generate for this life, how much people will respect you, how much gain and fame will come, and your ambitions for *this* life. They will not become the Dharma. If water does not enter the top of the channel, it will not come out the bottom. If the arrow

has no nock, you can load the bow and shoot it anyway, but it will not go where you want it to. Similarly, Dharma cannot become the path if you do not remember death.

I have had some experience in the meantime. When you truly remember from your heart that you will die, you will be able to give up on this life. For the first time, you will have laid the genuine foundation for the Dharma. You have reached the beginning of the path. The water has entered the top of the channel. You will not have difficulty developing qualities. You have a good internal cause for it, so you will practice the Dharma properly and adversity will be unable to impede you. You will be able to practice as taught in the Dharma. If you do not turn your mind away from this life, you may be able to explain everything found in Dharma texts or enter the gate of the Mahayana Secret Mantra and practice unified nonduality, but you will not be any different from an ordinary layperson.

For this reason, Lord Atisha, summing up the essential meaning of all the scriptures, taught the three types of persons, the lesser, middling, and greater. Among those, the lesser type of person turns their mind away from this life and practices the Dharma from fear of the lower realms in the next life. But there is no way to bring people to develop within themselves even the qualities of a lesser person. This is because people make a Dharma connection such as refuge or bodhichitta with a spiritual friend, but later they will not call him their master out of respect. They think that if they call him their master, others will criticize them, so they keep it secret. If someone asks them, "Isn't that your master?" they reply, "I only took refuge and bodhichitta with him." That is failing to understand that refuge and bodhichitta are the root of the entire Dharma, so it is an extremely grave fault. I have found qualities in every word spoken by those from whom I have received Dharma. The only thought that has occurred to me is that I could never buy it for money.

Thus there are few who have turned their minds away from this life. Many say they are bodhisattvas, but I wonder whether really they are focused on this life. I think about what I would do if I were to die tonight and have never considered any ambitions for tomorrow and thereafter. Because of that, I have understood the critical points of Dharma. That alone is also the greatest sustenance for meditation. I have thought it would be so for others, too, but when I tell them, their attitudes have never been compatible with mine. They worry about me, and I get discouraged about them.

Generally, if you do not have some conviction, even knowing a lot of Dharma will not help. They worry that I won't perfect the accumulations and say, "Aren't you being a bit extreme?" to make me regret it. Isn't that one of the black dharmas, making someone regret something they should not regret? The sutras say that if you rejoice in the virtue another has done, you gain half of the virtue. Do they not understand that?

When I say that, some say, "We are not saying you are wrong; we are giving you advice from concern." It depresses me that concerned people give such advice. It is evidence that they have no other thought than that. I find it astounding. In actuality, they are saying, "Do whatever you can to not be liberated from samsara." Even if they are concerned, I will not listen.

I have made Dharma connections with some who are said to be great meditators or venerable scholars with great knowledge of the Dharma. With some of them, when we tell each other our stories, our attitudes have not been at all compatible. I felt no desire to converse freely with them and let them prattle on as they wish. Even those said to be good practitioners gather enough food and clothing so that they will not depend on anyone else, saying, “I don’t want to depend on anyone for food in this life.” They think they will go stay in a monastery in some fine valley where there is no need to accumulate misdeeds and do as much spiritual practice as they can. There are no more than just one or two practitioners who think, “Let this life turn out as it will.”

In my opinion, we must flee the suffering of samsara that is to be eliminated. We must accumulate incalculable accumulations to achieve the result, perfect buddhahood. I think we must practice whatever is said to be the greatest merit. If even when selling something such as woolen cloth, we let the other win by four or five pounds without them knowing, I think it will bring great merit.

When I say this, others say it is taking a loss without any return. It would be better to give, they say. Dharma practitioners should not actually want any return and should take delight when other beings, who are like their father and mother, win instead of themselves. If they are not like that, there is no way they will awaken to buddhahood. It is also the opposite of meditating on the four immeasurables. In order to achieve buddhahood, you should be able to give even your body and life if it will benefit sentient beings, not to mention giving away possessions. How could a practitioner who loses a couple of nights’ sleep when they suffer a small loss on their merchandise help anyone else? They are causing themselves great harm.

For example, when people offer tea to the monks of one valley on one morning, someone else might say they have gained merit, and they will think they have done something virtuous. But then they stay in a valley or monastery where many people have gathered. They buy when goods are plentiful and sell when they are scarce. They do not sell at the going rates, or use quarts, ounces, and accepted measures; they keep on pushing until they achieve their wishes, not giving up until others are left powerless and unhappy and their own hopes are fulfilled. This is not just one or two people. It is all beings in the ten directions. It is not just for one day, one month, or one year. They do it their whole lives. In brief, they feel good if they do something virtuous for one morning but do not feel even a moment’s discomfort for spending their entire lives accumulating misdeeds. I wonder what kind of a mind they have? What assurance could they have?

The way that they have come under the control of ego-clinging and desire, there’s no need to speak of them being liberated in the misdeeds’ lack of inherent existence. First of all, they haven’t even heard that the misdeeds ripen as rebirth in the three lower realms in the next life. Even if they have heard, they do not think of it. Instead, without shrinking from ill-repute in this life and suffering in the next, they are able to sacrifice everything—their body, life, and Dharma—if it seems they might gain

some riches. They deserve our compassion. That is the epitome of wallowing in the causes of suffering.

I have been to some present-day monasteries and asked them how many fine individuals they have there. They say there are a few. When I ask what they are like, they do not say they are learned, venerable, good, endowed with qualities, or realized, or that they benefit others greatly. I ask who they are, and they tell me about individuals who have gold and turquoise, horses and cattle, and farms and property, who have this many retainers and servants, or that many possessions. They are the life blood of the monastery; the one named this and the one named that are good people, they say. What they call being good is being wealthy, so they must be desirous and interested only in this life. Being very wealthy is usually a sign of not shying away from misdeeds, suffering, or ill-repute. Such a monastery could never be a setting for true Dharma practice. You should leave that place just as a bird leaves a lake when it freezes.

Generally this attachment and greed for the five sensory pleasures leads to lasting suffering in the end. Thus even if you were to help others a little, you would need the result to come to you in this life, and there would be no difference between you and all those who have not even turned their attention toward philosophy. Therefore, anyone who wants to practice Dharma should not expect any favors or reciprocation in return for helping others, who would then think that they needed to repay the favor. If they failed to reciprocate, it is possible that you would get angry, and they would feel ashamed or inadequate, and go astray. Anyone who wants to practice should not give even their fellow practitioners food with the strings of this life attached. If others give it to you, do not eat it. In the end, it will become a back and forth of food that will eventually cause you to lose the Dharma.

Furthermore, instead of bringing their minds to the Dharma, all practitioners gather wealth for fear of being badly off in old age. They make people feel good and look for some insurance. This comes from not developing certainty in the Dharma. If you believe in the Dharma, there is no better insurance than Dharma. If you practice Dharma properly, you will have no fear of being badly off when you are old.

Generally, if we consider those who seem to have confidence that they will live to an old age and have the ambition to do something that might help themselves at that time, in the next lifetime they definitely will experience only the sufferings of samsara. They should make ready some provisions, insurance, or anything that will help with their ambitions for the next life. Instead, they simply act as if old age in this life will happen only to them and the suffering of the next solely to their hostile enemies. Not even Dharma practitioners have thought this through. Not having contemplated the Dharma, they only bring pointless suffering upon everyone, themselves and others. Who could bear to think about them still being like that?

Some say they lack the provisions for Dharma practice and don't practice, but they find the provisions for committing misdeeds and automatically do them. This is because rich monks in monasteries

have never contemplated death and the suffering of samsara, and you important people seem to be responsible. I say they are giving up a small household and taking up a big one. What they do is Dharma, but their ego-clinging is even tighter than a householder's. This is a sign of wandering in samsara, but they do not understand that. Not finding the provisions to practice Dharma is due to not believing in the Dharma. They are afraid that practicing Dharma will make them suffer and hope that committing misdeeds will make them happy. Hoping to get their hands on some small something, they do whatever they think of in their hearts.

When geshes teach others the benefits of generosity, they all say that possessions have no meaning, saying things that seem quite true. But their innermost thoughts are focused on wealth, and that is depressing. When the Dharma and their actual practice become incompatible, how will anybody want to come listen to them? It is a sign that they seek material offerings when they say to others, "Give alms. Do business. Amass things. If you don't have a few things, the lama will not pay attention to you and all your friends will get angry." Their words contradict the Dharma, and that dissipates their warmth.

It is certain that actions and intentions always go together. The sign that their intentions are for this life is that their actions are to work on ambitions for this life. Those whose intention is a wish for emancipation do whatever will liberate themselves from samsara, and bodhisattvas do whatever benefit others. That is what they put into practice. We should act as is taught in the Dharma and teach it as we have practiced it ourselves. If we teach others without practicing it properly ourselves, we are like a leper practicing a garuda sadhana, and no one will come to listen.

Geshes give their attention to those who are of good birth, rich, assertive, ambitious, able to get things done, good at whatever they do, and highly regarded by their friends and relatives. But they say that those with faith who seek Dharma from a fear of death are greedy and unreliable. "He's ineffective, shallow, and unreliable," they say. In addition to not helping them, their relatives, families, geshes, khenpos, masters, gurus, and companions despise them and try to get rid of them. Assertiveness, wealth, ambitiousness, and being well-connected are antithetical to achieving enlightenment. Those who practice Dharma and are humble see profit, fame, possessions and sensory pleasures as enemies and faults. Geshes who consider those who have given up on this life to be incapable and will not help them, while paying attention to the wealthy, outspoken, and connected, are not true spiritual friends. An authentic spiritual friend, as described, "Teaches beings the Dharma without material offerings." Thus they should pay attention to those who practice Dharma properly.

A good monk is someone who is fearful of death, diligent, uninterested in this life, and intelligent, and who trusts the Dharma fully. This is because we are fleeing samsara and accomplishing perfect buddhahood. We have faith in the Buddha and seek the Dharma. Those who are very assertive, competent, and ambitious are going further and further away from buddhahood. Thus becoming skillful from today onward in the methods of progressing to buddhahood itself is what we should call ambition. That is what we should call assertiveness. That is what we should call being good at what you

do. In terms of a practitioner, that is also being learned. That is being venerable. That is also what is called being a good master. That alone is the method for achieving buddhahood swiftly. That is the abhidharma. That is the sutras. That is the vinaya. That is listening, contemplating, and meditating. That is also bringing together all the arduous austerities and all your capabilities to accomplish buddhahood.

All the sutras, scriptures, and classes of tantra from *The Verses on the Vinaya* up to Guhyasamaja are Dharma for a single individual. They were taught with specific times and stages in mind; there are none that were said to be unnecessary. All the Dharma is the same. If we say “our Dharma” and “their Dharma” and then criticize someone else’s, we will be reborn in hell, it is said in *The Noble Eight-Thousand Verses*.

It is not right to talk about any individual. All Dharma is practiced through intention, and we do not know what their intentions are. When we look at people who are focused on this life, it might seem as if they only accomplish things for this life, but there are some who have no thought at all of their own desires and do all they can for the sake of other sentient beings. There are also those who say they are benefitting others but are accomplishing their own aims. Accomplishing one’s own aims can also be of benefit to others.

Some say it is impossible to have no wishes, but the fault is in their own mind.

Some say you need wealth only in order to truly practice Dharma. If you lack resources, you need to curry favor with others, but you will not need to if you have your own wealth. Therefore having a few things is an aid to the Dharma, they say. But none of them have thought about death. That is what someone who has not gained certainty in the Dharma says. If you do not truly think of and recall death from your heart, the Dharma will never happen. If you do genuinely recall death, there is no way you could bear it mentally. At that point how could you have any desire to amass things?

Some reply that they will use their wealth until they die, and then whoever wants it can take it. These are exactly what I call people who are focused on this life. They may have their own wealth and may not need to curry favor with others, but it is certain none of those practitioners will ever practice better than they do now. One needs to put up with a few hardships to achieve perfect buddhahood. When you buy a large gemstone, you need to put up your own money, collateral, and an additional amount. There is no point in them knowing much Dharma. There is no point to profound oral instructions, either.

When you meet a good guru, your mind will likely become the dharmakaya. Now is the time to look for a good guru, but some say, “What good will going to see a guru do? It would be better to fake meditating.” Many people talk like that. You need to gather incalculable accumulations to meet a good guru, so what good will it do to not look now and instead keep faking it? If you meet a good guru, you will develop samadhi through the guru’s blessings. Because of that, you will realize your mind and awaken to buddhahood. But some would rather not be criticized than awaken to buddhahood.

Generally Dharma does not come from ambitiousness and assertiveness. Dharma depends upon faith, diligence, and prajna. Those gathered around a spiritual friend should be there to see how much they can direct their minds toward the Dharma, not to see who is the most ambitious, who the most assertive, and who the biggest swindler.

There are those who, when a spiritual master compassionately gives a profound Dharma teaching, do not call that compassionate, but if he gives something material they do say he has been compassionate. These days they criticize those who go looking for a guru and pith instructions. When someone gets a loan of two bushels, those who care for him say, “Things are working out for you over there. You should go there. In the meantime, I’ll look after your house.” But that is a mistake.

That we will have to leave everything good behind and go off alone is not some tale we have heard, without knowing whether it is true or not. It is plain to see now that people, their eyes agape, leave absolutely everything behind and go. Yet those who are clever, assertive, and ambitious do not sense this. Even old folks who have reached the age of eighty have ambitions for this life. All those with shallow dispositions who act on short-term happiness have little character. You may say you won’t be happy when you are old, but if you only act on ambitions for this life, you will be even less happy in the next.

Some say that you cannot include death in discussions. If you do not include death in your discussions, then you will only think that you won’t die. Your thoughts will only be of this life, so you will think, “Today I’ll do this. Tomorrow I’ll do that. Next year I’ll do this. I’ll do that in my old age.” These are only thoughts of this life. Practitioners should do the opposite and not include immortality in their discussions. Then you can make preparations for death.

Our mind should be comfortable at the time of death. We must leave everything good from this life behind and go, so worldly abundance is incompatible with being a practitioner. Now we admire worldly people and they admire us back. But being incompatible with the worldly means that instead of admiring them, we should turn our backs on them. Merely not getting married does not help. You must turn your back on the eight worldly concerns.

Gathering merit means that your mind becomes the Dharma, not that you are well-respected or have good clothes. You might be sick with leprosy, blind with your hands and feet amputated, your clothes so badly tattered no one could take hold of them, but if your mind becomes Dharma, that is called accumulating merit.

Nowadays everyone seems to call those who are good at accruing wealth men and women of good character. But I have seen many amass wealth and then die. Even animals know very well how to gather wealth—marmots know very well how to gather caches of tubers, bees gather honey, pikas stack hay, and birds construct their nests. If you are generous instead, you will not be born as a hungry ghost, and when born in another realm, you will not be poor, as is said in the *Verses Summarizing Prajnaparamita*.

We praise having ambitions for old age, but it would be better to sow a long-lasting crop to that same degree by practicing the Dharma properly. To say you understand the Dharma is to say that you know the methods to achieve buddhahood. The words are not the point. Instead of saying you have knowledge of the path, it is better to embark on the path and go. If you do not start practicing right now, you may think that you will meditate after you have made all your preparations, but that time will never come. You will use up your whole life preparing.

Some say that tantra and the vinaya are exclusive of each other, but they have misunderstood. If something occurs that is an inappropriate basis for the mantra, it is not the vinaya. If something occurs that violates the vinaya, it is a sign of it not being the secret mantra. To reap harvests in the fall you must sometimes irrigate the field and sometimes you must till it and make furrows. In doing so, you concentrate all your efforts, and the furrows yield a crop.

Geshes who know Dharma well all love to talk. They do not initially practice Dharma out of a fear of death. They study and learn, thinking that they should at least avoid being criticized by people, be well-respected, and be called a teacher, elder, bhikshu, or geshe. Then the monastery's stewards and insiders will have to curry favor with them. They take full ordination and pretend to be especially venerable so that everyone will call them practitioners. They first study the scriptures a bit, get a few pith instructions, and then say they practice meditation. They make use of various methods to gain a higher position in the ranks than anyone else and have jostling crowds exclaim, "What an amazing geshe!" Such geshes and so forth are focused on the hubbub of fame and lack any of the causes and conditions for liberation from samsara.

What good is a teacher learned in Dharma that is not an antidote for the five poisons? What can cure an illness that cannot be remedied by medicine? What will high regard, good management, and work do for you if you have not extinguished your own wishes and developed conviction in karmic results deep within? What will acting venerably do for you if you are not revolted by samsara and sensory pleasures? Who can fool the Lord of Death's mirror of karma? What good is a geshe who doesn't even have a smidgen of bodhichitta or altruism and really desires the eight concerns? Who will you appoint your helper and friend in sorrow when you experience the ripening of your wrong actions as suffering? You should have thought differently and avoided pursuing only sensory pleasures and greatness in this life, but you did not. You have not done whatever you could to develop the Dharma in your own or anyone else's being. You have not tried to focus your attitude on the immediate, and that is at fault. You should, like noble Sadaprarudita, want nothing but buddhahood.

Making this life most important and practicing Dharma on the side will not work, but no one will listen. If you do not recall death, you will do whatever is most profitable in this life. You will even be able to violate your guru's commands if they do not measure up to your ambitions. If it seems it will profit you in this life, you will pretend to be so faithful and so devoted to the guru. Deep down, this annoys me.

The verse “So hard to gain, these leisures and resources...” should be enough on its own, but no one realizes that. They don’t even seek the Dharma. They hope for the merit of the Dharma from their knowledge of the profane. That is profoundly mistaken, but they do not understand. They deserve sympathy.

If you do not turn your mind away from this life, your fear of being badly off in old age will prevent you from being generous. Even to keep discipline, you must have no desires, but fearing being badly off in old age breeds desire. Therefore without eliminating desires for this life, you will not perfect the accumulations, so it is important to give up on this life. It is important to give up on this life. It is important to give up on this life, I say three times. This contains all the crucial points of the Dharma. This is how you should distinguish samsara and nirvana. All lasting ambitions begin with this. This suppresses all faults. The foundations of all joy and goodness must be laid on this. It is crucially important to abandon all thoughts of this life. You have no chance if you do not. They are what get you into all suffering, so you must eliminate them in whatever way you can.

Before we start to practice Dharma, none of us practitioners have much attachment to wealth and things, and we seldom yearn for those close to us. We do not want to pay attention to work or tasks. But once someone enters the Dharma, they make profane ambitions the most important. They show up for the detailed work and when it’s time to be stingy. Even if they cannot do anything else, they spread the word, speak badly, and bear bad omens. At the very least, they act as the messenger. They go into excessive detail on their possessions, and when doing business, they will go to a degree too difficult for anyone else. When made to practice the Dharma, what they think of is riches. They only do what they are not made to. This, too, is because of not remembering death.

If you practice Dharma properly, your enemies will all be dear to you. It will make all those close to you feel good. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas grant their blessings to that. This satisfies the wishes of all the gurus and spiritual friends. The gods and Dharma protectors will fulfill all your ambitions, and all your intentions will be accomplished as you wish. Therefore understand that your mind becoming Dharma alone is the most critical point. You must know how to bring all the Buddha’s words and classes of scriptures to bear upon your mind alone.

Those who currently are the equals or superiors of their peers, who are eminent and well-known, may seem prominent now, but they too will definitely die. When they die, there will be a difference.

To bring it together and wrap it up, we must have no regrets at the time of death. When we are stricken with a fatal illness and know we will not escape, it is too late to say, “I am not destined to die like this. I have something better to do than this. If this old ghost doesn’t die, I really will genuinely practice the Dharma.” Therefore stoking the fires of desire now is no help. We are wandering in samsara but have the opportunity to awaken to buddhahood. This brief life will definitely run out. Therefore we must give up on this life and genuinely practice the Dharma.

Even though I do not think it will help anyone else, I could not help but say this to myself. If this was not from the heart, punish me.

*This was Guru Potowa's Long Soliloquy, the ultimate evidence of practicing the Dharma.*