

[Following is the entire text of Je Tsongkapa's *Epistle to Ngawang Drakpa on the Occasion of the Ordination of the First Monks of Gyalrong*. Master Ngawang Drakpa, also known as Tsako Wonpo ("the friar of the lineage of the Kings of Tsako"), was one of Je Tsongkapa's closest disciples. After he had trained him in the Dharma, Je Tsongkapa sent Ngawang Drakpa to a distant region in east Tibet, entrusted with the mission of establishing a number of monasteries and training Buddhist monks.]

[The ensuing correspondence between the teacher and his faraway disciple has provided us with several true classics of Buddhist thought, including the following demonstration of the role of an ethical life in developing one's ability to meditate and perceive emptiness. Another letter from Je Tsongkapa to Ngawang Drakpa during this period contains the famous *Three Principal Paths*, which along with the commentary of Pabongka Rinpoche has been translated in the book *The Principal Teachings of Buddhism*. The introduction to this book also contains more detail on Master Ngawang Drakpa's life, and his close relationship to Je Tsongkapa.]

[Please note that the version of the letter available for translation contained a number of printing errors that have been corrected to the best of our ability; we hope to obtain another edition later for comparison.]

`, , NA MO GU RU MNYDZU GUO sh'A YA,

I bow down to my Lama, Gentle Voice.

,KUN GYI MA 'DRIS MDZA' BSHES TE, ,BLA NA MED PA'I GROGS KYI
PHUL, ,PHONGS PA RNAMS KYI GNYEN GCIG PU, ,ZLA MED STON PA
DER PHYAG 'TSAL,

I bow down to the matchless Teacher,
Unknown to us our most loving friend,
An ultimate and a peerless companion,
The one brother we the needy possess.

,DE YI BSTAN PA GCIG PU NYID, ,GRO BA'I NYER 'TSOR MTHONG GYUR
PA, ,DE YIS RANG GI SLOB MA LA, ,BRTZE BA'I BSAM PAS 'DI SKAD
GLENQ ,

I have seen that the only sustenance

For living kind is his teachings alone;
And so in love I impart these words
To the one who is my disciple.

,SKYE DGU RNAMS KYI PHAN BDE'I GTER, ,RGYAL BA RNAMS KYI DAM
PA'I CHOS, ,YONGS SU 'DZIN LA MA ZHUM PA, ,BU KHYOD RING DU
RGYAL GYUR CIG,

The high Dharma of the Victorious Ones
Is a goldmine of happiness for all beings;
And you, my son, are its fearless keeper—
I pray you may reign for a thousand years.

,BLO LDAN KHYOD KYIS THUB BSTAN NYI MA'I 'OD, ,GANG DANG BRAL
BA'I MTHA' 'KHOB MUN GLING DU, ,THUB PA'I BRTUL ZHUGS DRI MED
'DZIN PA YI, ,SH'AKYA'I SRAS KYIS GANG BAR BYAS ZHES GRAGS,

Wise one the news is that you have brought
The sunlight of the Able One's word
To that dark far land, and filled it with princes
Of Buddha kings practicing hard and pure.

,TSUL DE GSAL BAR BYED PA'I 'PHRIN YIG NI, ,DON BZANG TSOGS 'BRU
BZANG PO SKYES DANG BCAS, ,NYID KYI DRIN GYIS KHYIM NAS
MNGON BYUNG BA, ,GA' YIS BDAG GI GAM DU PHYIN PAR BYAS,

A letter informing me of these tidings,
Lovely thoughts in lovely stars of words,
Has due to your kindness reached me here,
Borne by several freed from the family life.

,DE TSE BDAG YID SHING BAL NI, ,NYID KYI KUN SPYOD SKYON MED
PA'I, ,DRI YI BZHON PAS DBANG BYAS PAS, ,PHYOGS DER KUN TU SONG
BAR GYUR,

When the note touched my hand
The wind of your immaculate deeds
Swept up the cotton wisp of my mind
And carried my thoughts to you there.

,RGYAL BA'I GSUNG RAB MA LUS SDE SNOD GSUM, ,DE PHYIR BSTAN
PA'I SNYING PO BSLAB PA GSUM, ,DE DAG THOG MA TSUL KHRIMS
BSLAB PA STE, ,DE YI GNAS NI 'DUL BA YIN PAR GSUNGS,

The entire teachings of the Victors reside
in the three collections of scripture;
Thus the essence of what they have taught
can be found within the three trainings.
The very first one of all these three
is training in an ethical life,
And its home the Buddhas have spoken to be
the teachings on discipline.

,DE PHYIR LEGS PAR GSUNGS PA'I DAM PA'I CHOS, ,DUL BA'I TSUL LA
MANG PO BKOD PA LA, ,BSTAN PA'I GO RIM SHES PA'I MKHAS PA
RNAMS, ,CI YI PHYIR NA DGA' BA SKYE MI 'GYUR,

This too is why so much of the Dharma,
so high and spoken so pure,
Has by the Buddhas been devoted
to the way of discipline.
It explains as well why all those masters
who understand the order
Of subjects to learn all take delight
in the teachings on discipline.

,LHAG MTHONG SHES RAB BSLAB PA SKYE BA LA, ,ZHI GNAS TING 'DZIN
DGOS PA'I MING TZAM SNANG , ,DI NA RNAM DAG TING 'DZIN SKYE BA
LA, ,TSUL KHRIMS BSLAB PA DGOS PA'I GTAM YANG NUB,

The training on perfect concentration,
quietude, must come
Before one can ever the develop the one
on wisdom, the ultimate vision.
Only a trace of this truth can be heard
anymore, and not a peep
On the fact that good concentration can't come
without first training in ethics.

,KHAS LEN TZAM LA RAB TU DPA' BA YIS, ,DAM BCAS RAB TU 'DOR BA

PHAL BA'I PHAL, ,RANG GIS CI TZAM KHAS LEN BYAS PA YI, ,TSUL
KHRIMS BSRUNG LA BRTZON PA DAM PA'I TSUL,

Some people find only the courage to pledge
themselves in word to this training,
Then later discard their commitments like trash;
they are lowest in a world of low.
The way of the holy is different; they make
every conceivable effort
In keeping whatever ethical rules
they may have committed to.

,DE LTAR MTHONG NAS NYES PA'I SGO GSUM LA, ,YANG DANG YANG
DU RTOG PA'I SHES BZHIN DANG , ,DRAN DANG BAG YOD NGO TSA
KHREL YOD KYIS, ,LOG PA'I LAM DU ZHUGS PA'I DBANG PO'I RTA, ,'BAD
PAS 'DUL BAR BYED PA DE YI YID, ,DGE BA'I DMIGS PA GANG GANG
'DOD DE LA, ,DE LTA DE LTAR RAB TU GNAS PAR GYUR, ,DE PHYIR TSUL
KHRIMS TING 'DZIN RGYU RU BSNGAGS,

Once you have realized this fact
you must rely on watchfulness
And awareness; constantly checking all three
of the gateways for any wrong deeds,
Depending as well on a sense of care
and propriety to control
With all your strength the wild horse
of the senses, seeking to keep

This steed from taking you to a path
that leads you all astray.
With this state of mind you'll be able to hold
your concentration perfectly
Fixed on any virtuous object
at your heart's content.
Thus is the ethical life commended
for perfect concentration.

, 'CHAL KHRIMS DRI MA'I RNYOG PA DANG BRAL ZHING , ,DGE BA'I
DMIGS PA RNAMS LAS MI G-YO NA, ,DE LA BDAG MED DE NYID RAB TU
GSAL, ,DVANGS SHING MI G-YO'I CHU LA ZLA GZUGS BZHIN,

This state of mind is totally free
of the dirt of broken morality,
And is never disturbed or distracted from
the object of goodness you choose;
Therefore suchness, the lack of a self,
is perfectly clear to it,
Just like the moon's reflection on water
undisturbed and crystal clear.

,DE LTAR BSLAB PA GSUM GYI LAM GYI GNAD, ,YONGS SU RDZOGS PAR
SHES PA SDE SNOD GSUM, ,SHES PA NYID LA RAG LAS DE YI PHYIR,
,MKHAS PA BSTEN NAS SDE SNOD GSUM LA BSLAB,

A perfect understanding of all of the
essential points like these
Within the path of the three trainings
depends precisely upon
An understanding of all the three
collections of Buddhist scripture;
Thus you should take yourself to a master
and train in the three collections.

,BSLABS PA'I DGOS PA SGRUB PA NYID YIN ZHES, ,SMRA BA'I DAM PAS
LAN CIG MIN PAR GSUNG , ,DE PHYIR JI TZAM SHES PA DE TZAM NAS,
,PHYI BSHOL MI BYA 'PHRAL LA LAG TU BLANG ,

The greatest teachers of all time
have said, no single time,
That the whole point of the trainings is reaching
actual attainments.
Take then whatever amount of the teachings
you understand so far,
And without procrastination, with speed,
put them to work in your life.

,DE DAG NI TSUL KHRIMS LAM GYI RTZA BAR 'GYUR BA'I RGYU MTSAN
MDO TZAM BKOD PA YIN PAS DE DAG LA GCES PAR BZUNG NAS YANG
DANG YANG DU CHOD MDZOD, , KHYOD KYIS MTHA' 'KHOB MI BZAD
PA DER, , RAB TU BYUNG BA MANG PO'I SDE GTZUGS SHING 'DUL BA'I

BSHAD PA YANG BYED PAR YOD GDA' BA SHIN DU LEGS PA YIN,

I have written the above lines as just a very brief presentation of the reasons why an ethical way of life is the very basis of the Buddhist path. As such I hope that you will cherish them, and review them again and again. I am extremely pleased by the fact that you have been able to ordain so many individuals, and give so many teachings on discipline, there in what from a Buddhist point of view is a wild and barbarian land.

,SDOM PA LEN PA LA GTZO BOR BYAS NAS BSRUNG BA DANG , PHYIR 'CHOS PA'I LAG LEN MA TSUGS NA, , TSUL KHRIMS DAG PO 'ONG THABS MED PAS, DA DER NYES PA RNAMS NGO SHES PAR BYAS NAS LEGS PAR BSRUNG BA CIG DANG , MI SHES PA LA SOGS PA'I RGYU BZHIS BCAS PA'I MTSAMS LAS 'DAS NA, BSHAGS BSDAMS BYED PA'I PHYIR BCOS KYI LAG LEN CIG CI NAS KYANG TSUGS PA GYIS LA LTUNG BA BYUNG BA LA JI MI SNYAM PAR 'JOG PAR MA BYED PAS NAM BYUNG RES KYIS PHYIR BCOS GYIS DANG , NGO TSA KHREL YOD DRAN SHES BZHIN SOGS SKYES NAS TSUL KHRIMS YONGS SU DAG PAR 'GYUR BA YIN,

If one focusses primarily on the taking of vows, and then fails in the practical aspects of keeping them seriously and restoring them when they are damaged, then there is absolutely no way that one's practice of the ethical way of life can be pure. As such it is essential that you now go on to help your new monks keep their vows well by learning to identify what constitutes breaking them.

So too you must institute a regular practice of purification and restoration, whereby the monks learn to confess past errors and restrain themselves from future error, in the event that--because of one of the four factors, such as not understanding the vows properly--they should ever transgress them. They must learn never to take it lightly when they break a vow; they must be taught the proper methods of restoring vows in every instance where they are broken. In this way, and through developing a sense of shame and propriety, as well as watchfulness, awareness, and similar tools, they will come to lead a perfectly ethical way of life.

DE LA YANG SPYIR DGE BA DANG MI DGE BA LAS PHAN YON 'BYUNG BAR GSUNGS PA RNAMS GRONG KHA 'DINGS PA LTA BU DANG , NYES DMIGS 'BYUNG BAR GSUNGS PA RNAMS BSDIGS BSKUR BA LTA BUR MI 'DZIN PAR GTING THAG PA NAS NGES PA 'DRONGS PA ZHIG DANG , KHYAD PAR DU TSUL KHRIMS BSRUNGS PA DANG MA BSRUNGS PA'I

PHAN YON DANG NYES DMIGS MANG DU BSGOMS NAS NGES PA
RNYED PA ZHIG DGOS PA YIN, DE LTAR MA BYAS NA GZHAN NGO 'AM
RNYED BKUR GYI PHYIR DU BSRUNG BA ZHIG 'ONG BAS GNAD DU MI
'GRO,

From an overall point of view, the Buddhas have described certain benefits that derive from virtuous deeds, and serious problems that derive from non-virtuous deeds. We tend to think of the benefits as something that has no relevance until we are lying on our deathbed. And we view the descriptions of the problems as though they were some kind of veiled threat. We should rather try to develop, in the very depths of our hearts, the recognition that they are absolutely true.

In a more specific sense, we must meditate extensively upon the benefits of maintaining an ethical way of life, and upon the serious problems of failing to maintain such a code. This will bring us to a full recognition of their truth. Should we fail to do so, and if keeping up this ethical way of life becomes for us something motivated only by a concern about how we look to others, or about the honor and gifts we might obtain thereby, then the real point of ethics is lost.

,DE JI LTA BA BZHIN DU SGRUB PA'I GEGS NI TSE 'DI'I BYA BA LHUR LEN
PA YIN LA, DE YANG TSE 'DIR RING DU SDOD PAR MTHONG BA LAS YIN
ZHING , DE'I GNYEN POR GANG LAS KYANG 'CHI BA DRAN PA ZAB PA
YIN PAS 'CHI BA YANG YANG DU BSGOM DGOS PA LAGS,

The obstacle that prevents us from leading an ethical way of life for the right reasons is our enthusiasm for the activities of our present rebirth. And this in turn comes from viewing our present life as though it were a place where we are going to be spending some substantial amount of time. The most profound cure for this way of thinking is to maintain, on many levels, an awareness of our coming death. As such it is absolutely essential that you meditate, again and again, on the fact that you will die.

MDOR NA LAS 'BRAS MI SLU BA THAMS CAD MKHYEN PA'I KHYAD
CHOS YIN PAS, DRAN PA NYER GZHAG,LAS BRGYA PA, RTOGS BRJOD
BRGYA PA, MDZANGS BLUN, LUNG GI RGYUD GLENG RNAMS DANG ,
GZHAN YANG MDO DANG BSTAN BCOS MANG DU BLTAS NAS LAS
'BRAS LA NGES PA CI BRTAN BYAS TE, NGAN PA'I LAS SNGAR BSAGS PA
RNAMS STOBS BZHIS 'DAG NGES SU SBYONG BA DANG , GSAR DU 'JUG
PA'I SGO RNAMS 'PHRO CHOD NGES SU SDOM PA DANG , BZANG PO'I
LAS SNGAR BYAS RNAMS SMON LAM RLABS PO CHES RGYA CHER SPEL

BA DANG , SNGAR MA SKYES PA RNAMS PHYOGS RE TZAM GYIS CHOG
SHES MI BYAS PAR SGO SNA TSOGS NAS BSKYED DGOS PA YIN,

In a nutshell, the ability to perceive in detail the infallible workings of the deeds we do and the consequences we reap is a quality which is unique to beings who are omniscient. As such we must refer constantly to such scriptures as the Sutra on Awareness, the Hundred Deeds, the Hundred Stories of Past Lives, the Sutra on the Wise and Foolish, the Accounts of Scripture, and a wide variety of other sutras and classical commentaries.

By doing so we can make our recognition of the laws of karma and its consequences ever more firm. We must purify the bad karma we have collected in the past, until we reach the point where we are sure it has been erased. We must restrain ourselves from engaging in any new bad karma, until we reach the point where we are sure we have discontinued this behavior completely.

We must take the good karma we have been able to accomplish so far, and multiply its power through highly effective kinds of prayer. We must look at the good karma we have not yet been able to accomplish, and make it happen, not through any limited kinds of activity, but rather through a whole variety of different means.

DE DAG CI 'DRA ZHIG BYED KYANG DNGOS SAM CHA MTHUN TZAM
YIN KYANG BLA'I, BYANG CHUB KYI SEMS SHIG GIS ZIN PAR BYAS NAS
BYED PA GNAD DU CHE BA LAGS, RGYAL BAS MDO RGYUD DU MAR
BSNGAGS PA'I STONG PA NYID KYI LTA BA NI MTSAN MAR 'DZIN PA'I
DMIGS GTAD THAMS CAD 'JIG PAS, YOD PA DANG MED PA'I MTHA'
SPONG LA, LAS DANG 'BRAS BU LA NGES PA GTING NAS RNYED PA'I
GROGS BYAS NAS, DGE MI DGE PHRA MO NAS 'DOR LEN BYED PAS YOD
PA DANG CHAD PA'I MTHA' SPONG BA ZHIG YIN NA,

Whatever of the above we may be able to carry out, it will all be infinitely more effective if we can learn to do it while keeping our minds soaked in the wish for enlightenment, whether in its full form, or even just in some partial form.

Remember too that the victorious Buddhas have recommended in countless open and secret scriptures that we seek the correct view of emptiness, the one that absolutely destroys every tendency to grasp to indications as objects themselves. This then allows us to avoid the two extremes of thinking either that things exist independently, or that--if they don't exist independently--they cannot exist at all.

A well-founded grasp of the laws of karma and its consequences complements correct view; the very activity of being extremely careful to do the right thing in the arena of good and bad deeds, down to the smallest detail of our lives, gives us the ability to eliminate in ourselves entirely the two extremes of thinking "everything exists" and "nothing can exist."

,SEMS CAN PHAL CHER YANG NA NI STONG PA GSHIS LA GRUB PA'I RTAG PA DANG , YANG NA NI KUN RDZOB KYI RNAM GZHAG THAMS CAD 'JIG PA'I CHAD PAR 'DZIN PA ZHIG 'ONG BAS SHIN TU RTOGS PAR DKA' ZHING , RTOGS NA'ANG STON PA'I SNOD DU GYUR PA SHIN TU NYUNG , DE BAS NA GNAS 'DI LA MOS PA NI, DE RTOGS PA'I RGYU BSAG SBYANG DANG , SMON LAM MANG DU BYA ZHING DE LA MKHAS PA'I BSHES GNYEN BSTEN PA DANG , DE'I GZHUNG LA 'DRIS PAR BYA ZHING , CUNG ZAD TZAM LA CHOG TSOD MI GZUNG BAR SO SOR RTOG PA'I SHES RAB KYIS DPYAD PA ZHIB PAR BYA STE 'TSOL DGOS PA YIN,

The vast majority of beings fall into one of two traps. Some have a misconception about things that are in nature empty which would necessitate their being unchanging. Others have a misconception which would obviate the entire way in which deceptive reality exists; which would necessitate the end of these very objects.

The actual truth therefore is extremely difficult to perceive, and even among those who have the capacity to do so there are infinitely few who could ever become a vessel worthy to receive the teachings. Therefore anyone who has any hope of seeing these things must first address the causes that would bring it about; they must accumulate the power of good deeds and purify their bad deeds, and make a great many holy prayers. They must take themselves properly to a spiritual guide who is a master of these things, and acquaint themselves well with the scriptures that describe them. Finally they must seek the truth by using their intellect to examine closely every point, and never be satisfied with only a rough or incomplete understanding.

DE LTAR NA BSHAD MA THAG PA RNAMS KYI DON SGOM PA DANG 'CHAD NYAN SPEL MAR MDZAD NA GO PA'I NGES PA CHER 'GRO BA DANG , NYON MONGS KYI GNYEN POR 'GRO BA GNYIS KA 'ONG BA LAGS PAS DE BZHIN DU BGYID PAR ZHU,

Your understanding of, and conviction in, all the points I have just explained will continue to increase if you alternate your time between meditating upon them

and studying them formally. This same practice will simultaneously begin to work as a cure for all your mental afflictions. As such I entreat you to practice this way.

,GCIG TU BDE GSHEGS BSTAN LA GUS, ,RNAM DPYOD NUS PA MI DMAN
ZHING , ,SKYES BU CHEN PO'I RJES SU SLOB, ,BLO LDAN NGAG DBANG
GRAGS PA KHYOD, ,KHO BOS SMRAS PA'I RJES SU ZHUGS SHIG DANG ,
,TSE RABS KUN TU SPYOD DANG SMON LAM KUN, ,MTSUNGS PAR
SPYAD DE NAM ZHIG SANGS RGYAS TSE, ,BDUD RTZI'I BGO BSHA' THOG
MAR SBYIN PAR BYA,

Your respect for the word of Those Gone to Bliss
Is complete, and your intellect's power imposing;
You walk in the footsteps of mighty beings
With wisdom, my Ngawang Drakpa.

Come now, follow the things I've taught you,
Make in your lives your deeds and prayers
Match mine, and on our enlightenment day
I'll give you the first sip of deathlessness.

,ZHES PA 'DI NI YANG DAG PA'I DGE BA'I BSHES GNYEN TSA KHO BA
MKHAS CHEN NGAG DBANG GRAGS PAS, SHAR RGYAL MO RONG DU
SNGON MED PA'I RAB TU BYUNG BA'I SDE KHYAD PAR CAN BTZUGS
NAS PHRIN YIG SPRINGS BYUNG BA'I LAN DU MANG DU THOS PA'I DGE
SLONG BLO BZANG GRAGS PA'I DPAL GYIS, AE'I SA PHYOGS DBEN GNAS
TE'U RA NAS SPRINGS PA DGE LEGS SU GYUR CIG,

The above is an epistle written to that great master of Tsako, the pure spiritual guide known as Ngawang Drakpa. It constitutes a reply to a communication from him describing how he had founded a very special group of monks by ordaining a number of disciples in the eastern land of Gyalrong, something that had never been done before. The reply itself was composed by the glorious monk Lobsang Drakpa [Je Tsongkapa], and dispatched from his place of retreat named Teura, near the place called Eisa. May goodness ever increase!