

The Preciousness of Our Human Life

by Kamala Masters

As a human being, we have the greatest potential of all creatures on earth to realize the Dhamma, the true nature of reality; to experience an ineffable, unconditional peace; and to discover a way of living that is in harmony with the profound truths of life. But, according to the Buddha, our human birth is very rare. There is a classic story about this rarity in the Pali Canon, the ancient text recording his teachings:

The Buddha was speaking to a group of monks. He said, *“Monks, suppose that this great earth were totally covered with water and a man were to toss a yoke with a single hole into the water. A wind from the West would push it East; a wind from the East would push it West; a wind from the North would push it South; a wind from the South would push it North. And suppose a blind sea turtle were there. It would come to the surface only once every 100 years. Now what do you suppose the chances would be that a blind turtle, coming once to the surface every 100 years, would stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole?”*

And the monks answered, *“It would be very unusual, Sir, that a blind turtle coming to the surface once every hundred years would stick his neck into the yoke.”*

And the Buddha replied, *“And just so, it is very, very rare that one attains the human state.”*

That is the example the Buddha gave of how rare the chances are and how precious it is to be born as a human being. If this is so—and even if it isn’t—I ask myself this question: Am I taking care to live my life in a way that honors this precious human birth and makes the best use of it?

Now that I am getting older and hearing of so many friends with health issues, and also remembering the many who have passed away, this question comes to mind frequently. In the past few years, it has stimulated greater renunciation and resolve in my own heart and mind. For this reason, each year I take some time for personal retreat. In January of 2011, I went to Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha, to a retreat center that is an extension of Sayadaw U Pandita’s monastery in Burma. As many of you know, being on retreat is not always a pleasant and serene experience. A lot of it is experiencing the dross of one’s life—the boring and sometimes painful thought patterns that repeatedly appear, the painful physical sensations of the body, the mental and emotional realms that can be hard to bear—along with all the valleys and plateaus of retreat. It’s just how it is. Of course, there are all the serene experiences and deepening understanding as well.

Generally, when I’m on retreat, I don’t read anything, not even Dhamma material. But because I wanted to frequently remind myself of the preciousness of this human life so that I wouldn’t practice casually, I brought along some written encouragement that I want to share with you.

One was by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and it added tremendous value to my daily practice:

“Ask yourself how many of the billions of the inhabitants of the planet have any idea of how rare it is to have been born as a human being. How many of those who understand the rarity of human birth ever think of even using that chance to practice the Dharma? How many of those who think of practice actually do practice? How many of those who start really continue? How many of those who practice continue and attain ultimate realization? Indeed those who attain ultimate realization compared to those who do not are as few as the stars you can see at daybreak. As long as you fail to recognize the true value of human existence, you will just fritter your life away in futile activity and distraction. When life comes all too soon to its inevitable end, you will not

have achieved anything worthwhile at all. But once you really see the unique opportunity that human life can bring, you will definitely direct all your energy into reaping its true worth.”

In addition, the following words of the Buddha have often inspired me to continue expanding the heart in compassion, and developing the mind to open more deeply to liberating wisdom: *“Neither mother nor father, nor any other relative can do as much good as your own well-directed mind.”*

To develop a well-directed mind requires the commitment of repeated intention and steadfast resolve to incline the mind towards what is wholesome and beneficial for oneself and others. It also requires the wisdom of renunciation to relinquish what is unwholesome and unbeneficial. Of course, this requires the clarity and honesty of awareness and an investment in gentle, persevering effort. With practice, we develop these invaluable inner qualities. When we do this, we see how mindful awareness of unwholesome habit patterns actually weakens them. We also see how mindful awareness of wholesome patterns of the mind strengthens them. With these resources, we will be inspired to continue our practice, even in the face of challenging conditions.

By developing the determination to continue in spite of seemingly overwhelming obstacles, we strengthen our faith in our ability to navigate the terrain of our lives with greater ease. And in time, we experience how our well-directed mind towards what is beneficial and wise arises spontaneously.

Life comes to its inevitable end all too soon. The activities of a lifetime are just like raindrops falling on a pool of water: they make a few ripples and then disappear. At the end of our lives, are we going to wonder: “Did I have the courage to do more than just what came easily? Have I truly taken advantage of this precious human birth to cultivate wisdom and compassion, and to live in a way that is increasingly more free of greed, hatred and delusion? Did I have the courage to use this precious human birth to fully realize the Dhamma?”

Once we realize the unique opportunity that being born human offers, we will surely want to direct all our energy toward fulfilling our highest potential as a human being.