
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We will first recite the *King of Prayers* for two people who both are very ill.

The first is David McQuire, who we have known for a number of years. He has been sick for a while, and unfortunately his condition is now very critical. Although he has not followed the Dharma throughout his entire life, David made a very strong connection with the Dharma in the last three years. He has been doing the White Tara practice a lot, which he has found very beneficial. For him to be able to meet with the Dharma and make that special connection with Tara towards the end of his life is really a wonderful thing. So, we recite this prayer as a cause for him to continuously maintain a virtuous state of mind through to the last breath of his life.

The other patient we are doing the prayer for is Mark Fernandes' father who is also very sick. I met him in the past and we had a cup of tea together. Years ago, along with a few others I spent a weekend at Mark's family's holiday home in Anglesea. So, we had some connection there. Please remember Mark's father in your prayer as well.

Just as I advise you to pray, I must also pray. It would not be right for me to sit on the throne simply advising others to do a prayer or practice while I don't do the same myself. I would say any teachers or lamas who don't practice what they teach others are fraudulent lamas, and I will end up like one of them if I don't do what I tell others to do. I'm not praising myself, but I do my best to pray for others and to practise the Dharma.

In our recitation of the *King of Prayers* we should also include all other sentient beings. Think of how they are all afflicted with suffering, generate compassion, wish them to be free from suffering; think of how they are deprived of happiness, generate love, and wish them to have happiness. Thus, we should think that we are praying for all sentient beings to be free from suffering and to accomplish everlasting happiness.

Although we engage in a practice such as reciting prayers to benefit others, the benefit really goes to ourselves first. For example, the moment we start reciting the prayer and direct our mind onto its meaning, we begin to experience a virtuous state of mind arising, and along with that peace and happiness. The Lord Buddha became a fully awakened being, even though his sole motivation for achieving complete enlightenment was to benefit all other sentient beings.

[Recitation of King of Prayers]

Now we do our usual meditation.

[Meditation]

Try to listen to this teaching with the motivation of bodhicitta, wishing to achieve complete enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. Not only do we generate this supreme wish to achieve enlightenment, but we should also vow to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all

sentient beings. Indeed, taking such a vow is very precious. We can say we have never taken the vow to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all other beings before. This could be the only time we have ever generated the bodhi mind and pledged to work for the sake of all beings and hence engage in the Mahayana Dharma.

We will now return to the text.

2B4B-2B3B-2C1C-1A3. Stating the trainings of having gone for refuge (cont.)

Third: Here too the master should mention the trainings that were explained before in the context of persons of small capacity.

What is the main instruction here? It is to cultivate the thought of refraining from causing harm to other beings, or the principle of non-violence and compassion. This, we can say, is the essence of Dharma practice and the Lord Buddha's teaching.

2B4B-2B3B-2C1C-1B. Accumulating the accumulations

Second: As before, the seven-limb practice should be done in the presence of the direct and lineage gurus and the merit field explained previously

Now, to engage in the practice to accumulate merit we first need to mentally visualise the merit field and engage in the practice of accumulating merit and so forth, in front of that merit field. Of course, this doesn't necessarily mean that we were not accumulating merit in the past, for example when we took refuge in the Three Jewels.

Here, we visualise the merit field according to the jewel tradition of all in one where, in essence, we visualise all the objects of refuge in one aspect. We will find this way of visualising the merit field is very simple while at the same time very powerful, because in it we envisage all the objects of refuge in one aspect, such as that of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, as being the embodiment of all the gurus, deities, buddhas, bodhisattvas and so forth. We focus on the guru as the source of all of our objects of refuge. Around Guru Shakyamuni Buddha are all the direct and lineage gurus, buddhas, bodhisattvas, dakas and dakinis, Dharma protectors and so forth.

When the text refers to *direct and lineage gurus*, the direct guru is the one from whom we directly receive the teaching of the Dharma. From that perspective, the historical Shakyamuni Buddha is our lineage guru.

2B4B-2B3B-2C1C-1C. Training in the attitude

Third: As explained previously, the observed objects and aspects of love and compassion should be visualized.

As mentioned earlier, we visualise the field of merit in front of us to gather the accumulation. We also need to incorporate this into our daily practice as well. As instructed here, we need to cultivate love and compassion by observing how all other sentient beings are afflicted with incredible suffering and lacking happiness. Compassion is a sense of empathy and intolerance of the suffering of other beings, and wishing them to be free of suffering; while love is a sense of not tolerating the lack of happiness of other beings and wishing them to have joy and happiness.

2B4B-2B3B-2C1C-2. The actual ritual

The ritual begins with this line:

A. The behaviour

Second: In front of the master, the student should kneel down on his right knee; alternatively sitting in a crouching

position is also appropriate. With palms joined, he should generate bodhicitta.

Here we find the posture we should adopt. There are two options: we can kneel on just our right knee or on both knees. Whichever one you choose, join your two hands together in the gesture of prayer and then try to develop bodhicitta, the sincere aspiration to achieve the state of buddhahood for the sake of all beings.

B. The distinction of mind generation

Mind generation here is not the mere mind generation that thinks “I will attain buddhahood for the welfare of others.” Rather, it is the promise that, observing the mind that has been generated, thinks, “I shall not give it up as long as I have not attained enlightenment.” This is why that attitude should be generated in reliance upon a ritual.

Here we must take note that when the text says *mind generation*, it is referring to aspiring bodhicitta. As the text says, there are two options. One is that we simply generate the bodhicitta that is called aspiring bodhicitta. For example, reflecting on the meaning of the lines that we say in the ritual, we generate bodhicitta and imagine an aspiring bodhicitta of seeking enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings arising within us.

The second option is that we not only generate bodhicitta, but also vow that we will not lose or give up on this aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment until we actually attain that state of enlightenment.

C. An exception associated with this

If you are unable to train in the trainings of aspiring bodhicitta, you should not make this promise. However, as for generating the mere thought “I will become a buddha for the welfare of all sentient beings” by means of a ritual, everyone may do so, regardless of whether or not they are able to train in the trainings of mind generation

In the ritual we should only take a vow to hold bodhicitta if we feel confident that we can practise the precepts of bodhicitta, which is engaging in the bodhisattva deeds of benefitting other beings. As stipulated here, if we don't feel confident or don't have the capacity to keep the precepts of bodhicitta, we should simply generate aspiring bodhicitta in the ritual without pledging to hold it. Many of you take tantric initiations, so you should know that you generate aspiring bodhicitta as part of the initiation ritual, but for the rest of us it is not necessary to vow to hold bodhicitta. Simply cultivating or imagining aspiring bodhicitta arising will suffice.

In brief, the text clarifies that there are two ways of generating aspiring bodhicitta by depending on ritual: One mode is to simply generate it and the other mode is not only generating bodhicitta, but also vowing to hold it as part of the ritual.

D. It is inappropriate to posit two approaches of guarding and not guarding the trainings to generate the aspiring mind, the vow of engaging bodhicitta is inappropriate

With respect to aspiring bodhicitta, these two approaches may be appropriate, however, with respect to taking engaged bodhicitta by means of a ritual, it is inappropriate to take it without training in the trainings.

As we mentioned earlier, Lama Tsongkhapa makes the point that when we engage in the ritual to generate aspiring bodhicitta, we can engage in it simply to generate bodhicitta or, at the same time, we can vow to hold it until we achieve complete enlightenment. However, as it says here, *it is*

inappropriate to take it without training in the trainings. Thus, it is inappropriate to vow to hold bodhicitta if you feel that you are not able to keep the precepts of bodhicitta, which is to engage in the bodhisattva deeds to benefitting other beings.

When we talk of engaging in the ritual to generate engaging bodhicitta there are no such two options. That is because everyone who engages in the ritual of generating engaging bodhicitta must have an intention and a capacity to engage in the bodhisattva deeds and precepts. Otherwise you should not be engaging in the ritual as you are unfit to generate engaging bodhicitta.

Therefore it is unreasonable to posit that a difference of appropriateness and inappropriateness should be made with regard to the many rituals for the vow transmitted from Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga.

This confirms that it is wrong to differentiate the appropriateness and inappropriateness of the ritual with regard to generating engaging bodhicitta.

E. Although it is appropriate for someone not training in the trainings to generate the aspiring mind, the vow of engaging bodhicitta is inappropriate

The *Advice to King Prasenajit (Rājāvavadaśāstra)* says that if one cannot train in the trainings of generosity and so forth, a great amount of merit is accomplished in mere mind generation.

Here the text points out the great benefits of simply generating an aspiring bodhicitta – we accumulate an enormous amount of merit, even if we do not generate it by way of ritually pledging ourselves to hold it and to engage in the bodhisattva trainings such as the six perfections, the four means of gathering disciples and so forth. We may not be able to generate engaging bodhicitta because of the lack of the ability to engage in or commit ourselves to the bodhisattva deeds, yet we accumulate a great amount of merit through simply cultivating an aspiring bodhicitta.

Taking this as its source, *Stages of Meditation I* says:

Whoever cannot train in the perfections fully in all their aspects should still generate bodhicitta thoroughly conjoined with method because the results will be great.

Then the text summarises this point:

Thus it is clear that it is appropriate for someone incapable of training in the trainings of generosity and so forth to do the mind generation but inappropriate to take the vow.

This makes it very clear that if one doesn't feel confident enough to commit oneself to the bodhicitta precepts or generate aspiring bodhicitta by way of taking a vow or pledge, there is still an option in the ritual to simply generate an aspiring bodhicitta, which is just an aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings.

When we make a vow or pledge in the ritual to generate aspiring bodhicitta we are committing ourselves to engage in all of the bodhisattva's deeds, such as the six perfections, primarily to subdue our own continuum; the four means of gathering disciples are primarily to subdue the continuum of other beings. However, if we feel confident or we have an ability to engage in the bodhicitta precepts, then we can generate bodhicitta by way of taking a pledge or vow. Otherwise, simply generating or imagining aspiring bodhicitta arising will do.

Those of you who are doing the Vajrayogini or Heruka practice will notice that at the beginning of the sadhana there is a line where you generate the bodhicitta mind of wishing to quickly achieve enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings, which is the generation of an aspiring bodhicitta. After that, there is a part where it says, 'In order to fulfil that wish, I engage in the Vajrayogini practice', which is like engaging bodhicitta.

F. The ritual for assuming the mind generation

This section provides the prayer used in the ritual.

The ritual for assuming the mind generation is:

All buddhas and bodhisattvas residing in the ten directions, please grant me your attention. Master, please grant me your attention ...

In the ritual, we first call upon the attention of all buddhas and bodhisattvas, and also our master or guru. So essentially, they all become the witnesses to what we promise to do. Then, if we do not keep up our promise, we are deceiving all of them - our gurus, and all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

I, whose name is (...), by means of the roots of virtue of the nature of generosity, the nature of ethics, and the nature of meditation that I have created, caused to be created, ...

The root of virtue is the merit you may have created through your practice of generosity, moral ethics, meditation and so forth. This virtue is something that you declare or offer as a cause to be able to do what you want to do. Sometimes, the devotees make an offering to the gurus and buddhas in the ritual as part of their request for their wishes to be granted. This whole process of drawing the attention of the gurus and buddhas and making an offering indicates that you have a request to make.

Then the text continues:

... and rejoiced in the creation of in this life and in previous lives, just as the previous tathāgata, arhat, perfectly complete buddhas and great bodhisattvas thoroughly abiding on the great grounds generated the mind of unsurpassed perfectly complete enlightenment, in the same way also I, whose name is (...), from now until I reach the essence of enlightenment, will generate the mind of unsurpassed, perfectly complete, great enlightenment, ...

This is saying that just as all the perfectly complete buddhas, tathagatas, arhats, and all bodhisattvas have generated bodhicitta during the course of the path of training, *I will also generate the mind of unsurpassed perfectly complete great enlightenment.*

So, in the ritual you specify the goal that you want to achieve, 'I also generate this unsurpassed perfectly complete enlightenment until I reach the essence of complete enlightenment'.

I will liberate the beings that are not liberated, free those who are not free, give breath to those unable to breathe, and cause those who have not completely passed beyond sorrow to completely pass beyond sorrow.

In short, you call on all the buddhas, bodhisattvas and your guru as your witnesses, and after pronouncing your own name you declare, 'I generate the mind of enlightenment of bodhicitta, *I will liberate the beings that are not liberated, free those who are not free, give breath to those unable to breathe, and*

cause those who have not completely passed beyond sorrow to completely pass beyond sorrow.'

This indicates in plain language your purpose in generating the bodhicitta mind, which is to liberate beings who are not liberated, free those who are not free and give the breath of joy and happiness to those who are unable to breathe. Liberation refers to liberation from both the afflictive obscurations and the obscurations to omniscience. Then the text continues:

Say this three times. Even though it is not clearly mentioned in the refuge ceremony and in this ritual, it is necessary so repeat these words after the master.

In this ritual we not only generate the bodhicitta mind, but we also resolve to engage in bodhisattva deeds such as liberating beings who are not liberated and so forth. This statement is repeated three times after the master or guru. As the text says, *even though it is not clearly mentioned in the refuge ceremony and in this ritual, it is necessary to repeat these words after the master.* Generally speaking, it is not necessary to depend on an actual physically present master in order to generate bodhicitta or to take the vow as part of the ritual. However, here we are talking about the ritual that is dependent on a master, where there needs to be an actual master to lead the ritual.

G. The method for taking the mind generation by oneself in a ritual

This is the manner of taking the mind generation in the presence of a master

When we think of our own spiritual practice, we all want to engage in the most profound practices, and we are keen to take the highest of the highest tantric initiations and so forth. However, we must bear in mind that we are making a huge commitment when we take an initiation that involves taking tantric vows, and ask ourselves whether we are ready for that. To receive tantric vows, we have to receive the bodhisattva vow or generate engaging bodhicitta. Are we able to engage in bodhisattva deeds? Do we have the causes for bodhicitta to arise? The main cause is cultivating love and compassion. Do we possess that? This is all very important to understand and consider. Without the fulfilment of all these prerequisites we won't receive the tantric vow, nor will we make any progress by following the tantric path. To achieve our spiritual goal we must first pay good attention to establishing a good ground or basis for our practice, and then build up from there.

We will stop here.

Apparently, His Holiness the Sakya Trichen Rinpoche advised people to recite the mantra of Parnashavari, the goddess of healing, Loma Gyonma (which means 'one dressed in leaves' in Tibetan), to combat the covid19 virus.

I was thinking of the same thing and I am sure we have a ritual prayer for this goddess somewhere, but I have to look for it. This deity appears in different colours, such as yellow, red, blue and black. The practice of this goddess is specifically recommended to eliminate sickness, epidemics and contagious diseases. At Sera Monastery we frequently recite the prayer and mantra of this goddess.

In a way, reciting the Heruka mantra, the Vajrayogini mantra or Lama Tsongkhapa's Migtsema prayer is also effective and beneficial.

Edited Version

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