
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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The subdued mind brings happiness

It is said: 'The subdued mind brings happiness, and the best means to subdue the mind is mindfulness. Therefore, those who want to subdue the mind must practise mindfulness.'

We can learn and benefit a lot by contemplating these lines and applying them to our life. It shows us how to close the gap between what we seek in our lives and what we actually do; what we want is happiness and what we don't want is suffering, but what we do is quite the opposite.

If we take a moment to think about the words *The subdued mind brings happiness*, we will see that they very clearly state that we must subdue our mind to find the happiness that we seek. Subduing the mind is an important cause of happiness. Conversely, problems and sufferings we encounter all result from not having subdued our minds. How? Because we have not subdued our minds, mental afflictions or delusions, such as anger, desire and so forth arise and these serve as the source of all our problems - feeling sad, unhappy, stressed, and experiencing tension, depression, and so on.

As we live in a developed country, there is not much for us to complain about in our external conditions. We don't have to starve, suffer from extreme cold or heat and so forth. Therefore, when we experience a difficult situation or feel unhappy, we need to think to find out the real cause. Why am I facing this situation and unhappy? Is there an external cause? Or is the real cause within us?

The true cause of happiness and suffering lies within us

As we investigate and analyse the cause of our problems, we will find that the cause is not just related to external factors but more to internal factors such as mental afflictions or delusions arising within us. Just realising this in itself will give us a tremendous sense of inner rest and calm. So, whenever we face some problem, we should not just focus on external things and events, but also turn our attention inwards, to our own minds.

Through doing that we will be able to identify the direct cause of why we feel unhappy and disturbed with certain destructive thoughts and emotions boiling within us. So, we need to think of what we can do to cool those down. For example, the cause of our problem might be anger, in which case we need to direct our attention to that anger and apply a remedy to it. In fact, the moment we turn our minds to analyse and look into its nature, the anger will begin to recede. We can then begin to feel relaxed and peaceful. Anger disturbs and troubles our minds.

Just as focussing on anger will make it go away, focussing on the nature of any disturbing thoughts will eliminate those thoughts. This is in accord with the profound teaching of Mahamudra, the Great Seal, where the key practice is to know the nature of the mind itself. Essentially, we find here that if the cause of a problem and happiness is inside us, then the solution and the means are also inside us. Furthermore,

we will also find that when getting rid of the internal cause of a problem or finding internal happiness, then even if we face external problems such as lacking wealth or material comfort, it won't affect us so much because inwardly we have happiness and stability.

Letting go of our ego

Another meditation practice to reduce suffering in life is letting go of ego. All our problems are rooted in holding the I as the most precious thing and our strong attachment to it. We all have this deep sense of I or me inside us at all times. We cherish and get attached to it so much that we have an instinctive thought of concern, worry and wishing for happiness, but only for ourselves. Due to this, we do not have a wholehearted wish to benefit others and care for their wellbeing.

The stronger our attachment to this I or egotistic mind, the stronger the desire to protect our own interests. The Buddha's teaching clearly states that the main source of suffering in our lives is the egotistic, selfish mind. Furthermore, this strong sense of I also drives the thought that if we just follow whatever the 'I' wants, even if it means disregarding the needs of any other beings, then we will be free of problems and find the happiness we seek. In other words, the sense of I turns us into very selfish people. So, we need to think about whether we will have more happiness and less suffering by holding a strong sense of I or the egotistical mind or replacing it with the mind of cherishing others.

Cultivating a mind of cherishing other beings

Even for our own sake, we cannot be always thinking about what's in it for me. Rather we should focus on the needs and wants of other beings. His Holiness the Dalai Lama frequently states that we are social beings, which shows us that our survival and needs are dependent on others. Even if we do a solitary retreat, we must eat, drink, and buy food, so we have to depend on others. The conditions we experience in our life conditions are dependent on others.

Having a good relationship with others is crucial for our success and wellbeing. Therefore, we must treat others with respect. If possible, to benefit them, but at least not harm them. Most importantly, we cannot be too self-centred, just thinking only about our own interests and needs. We must also think of the needs and interests of other beings, understanding and being considerate and helpful to them. We are receiving support and help from others, so we must acknowledge their support and be grateful to them, including animals. We eat meat, wear animal skins, and drink milk which all come from animals so in a sense animals are benefitting us and we depend on them in our everyday life.

The lamrim teaches us that, as a cause to cultivate bodhicitta, we need to recognise that all beings have been our mothers. In fact, the actual meaning here is that *they are as kind to us as our own current beloved mother*. Our very survival depends on others. We should reflect on the fact that whatever joy and happiness we find day to day comes from others, and we need to recognise their kindness. By recognising the kindness of others to us, we can gradually develop a true sense of gratitude, and from this, a genuine loving-kindness and compassion for all other beings will arise. Generating a sense of gratitude, love, and compassion for others is an effective means of reducing and purifying mental afflictions.

Thoughts and emotions are self-destructive

As I said before, meditating on the nature of anger is an effective means of counteracting anger. Normally, when anger arises we think of the objects and causes of anger with respect to external things and then react to them, which just further increases and intensifies our anger and brings more stress and unrest. We need to recognise that our anger is the reason we feel so unhappy and disturbed. To get rid of it, we need to contemplate the downfalls of anger, and how we can overcome it, while on the other hand, contemplate the benefits of not having it. Using this approach will help to diminish the anger. As mentioned earlier, one way to let the anger go is to keep observing the nature of the anger itself. Then we will see that anger will disappear by itself. It is said that if we keep watching a distracting thought it will disappear in itself. Just like a bird in the middle of the ocean that hovers and sits on top of the mast leaves the boat but always comes back to it.

Discriminating knowledge is our best resource

We must decide what to do by utilising our own intelligence or discriminating wisdom. For example, utilising our own thinking, reasons, and discriminating mind ensures we understand the benefits of practice, why we practise and so on. Meditation practice is for subduing or transforming our minds in the sense of getting rid of the unruly negative mind. We can rid ourselves of negative thoughts by cultivating positive thoughts. Disturbing thoughts reflect our state of mind – they exist within us. So, to get rid of a disturbing thought we have to focus on our mind and generate a different state of mind – that’s the only way to get rid of disturbing thoughts; there is no other way of removing unwanted thoughts or emotions than changing or subduing our minds.

In short, meditation practice simply means to focus on or tie the mind to a virtuous object. Through this, the more our mind becomes habituated with a virtuous object, the more easily virtuous or positive states of mind arise. For example, if we meditate on cultivating love and compassion for other beings, and our mind becomes habituated with those thoughts, then love and compassion will arise spontaneously the moment we see any other being suffer. We will generate compassion because we cannot bear their suffering and want to help them. We will think: ‘What can I do to relieve their suffering?’ When we become habituated with compassion it will naturally arise within us. Through meditation, when our minds become habituated with virtue, then, even if we don’t want it, it will keep arising! If we are not habituated with virtue, then even if we want it to arise, it won’t arise.

Combining listening, contemplating and meditation

It’s important we develop a good understanding of the benefits of meditation and have strong conviction and faith in them. We will then have a genuine motivation and enthusiasm for meditation practice. This level of understanding the benefits of meditation practice will require more than just reading a book or hearing it from others, or listening to a teaching and saying, ‘Yes, that’s true, that’s true’. The knowledge that arises through listening to teachings or reading is a *knowledge that arises by dependence on others*, it is not your own knowledge. Hence, it is said to be an unstable or unreliable type of knowledge.

After acquiring the knowledge from the outside, we need to develop it further to make it our own by contemplating and

investigating it through our intelligence and reasoning, examining whether what we have learnt from the outside is logically making sense or not. In this way, we can develop a *knowledge arising from contemplating* which is based on our own thinking and investigation. Such knowledge will give a sound foundation to engage in meditation and further develop it into knowledge arising from meditation on the level of our inner experience and realisation.

Lama Tsongkhapa emphasised combining listening, contemplating and meditating as an integrated practice, rather than as separate activities. Such advice is unique to Lama Tsongkhapa’s teachings. It is also mentioned that the more knowledge we develop through listening and studying, the more knowledge we will have for contemplating and, in turn, the more we will have for meditation. Thus, the integration of listening, contemplating and meditating becomes an important part of one’s spiritual development.

Now we will do a few minutes of meditation. You can do a breathing meditation or another preferred meditation if you have one, that’s fine. As we know, meditation requires an appropriate physical posture, with the seven features of Vairochana Buddha. It’s also important that the object we focus on in meditation is the *image* of that object in our mind. If you use an external object, you first look at it intently so that when you begin the meditation you have the mental image of that object upon which to direct your focus on. In your meditation, you need to develop such a concentration that there is no gap between your mind and the meditation object. They become one, and your concentration is such that it is as if your mind dissolves or merges with that image. (*Pause for meditation*)

HOW TO GENERATE BODHICITTA

Explanation of how to assume the mind generation by means of a ritual

We will do a few lines from the lamrim teaching. Last time, we began with the heading The Way in Which to Assume It By Means of a Ritual, relating to generating bodhicitta by means of ritual. This section has three main headings:

The way in which to assume it by means of a ritual

1. Receiving that which has not yet been received
2. Guarding that which has been received without degenerating it
3. The method for restoring it if it has degenerated

The third has three points: receiving that which has not yet been received, guarding that which has been received without it degenerating, and the method for restoring it if it has degenerated.

Receiving that which has not yet been received

- A. From whom: the object from whom it is taken
- B. By whom: the basis that takes it
- C. How: the ritual by which it is taken

The first has three points: from whom: the object from whom it is taken; by whom: the basis that takes it; how: the ritual by which it is taken.

From whom: the object from whom it is taken

First: The assertions of the earlier masters accord with Master Jetari that it is not enough for the person from whom the vow is taken to possess the vow of aspiring bodhicitta and to be abiding in the trainings, rather he must possess the vow of engaging bodhicitta.

By whom: the basis that takes it

Second: All gods, nāgas, and so forth who are physically and mentally suitable to generate aspiring bodhicitta are also a suitable basis for it. The *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the "Lamp for the Path"* says:

Repulsed by cyclic existence, mindful of death, with wisdom and great compassion.

Thus it should be someone who has gained a little experience of transforming his mentality into bodhicitta due to having trained the mind in the stages of the path as explained previously.

This indicates that those suitable for taking on bodhicitta through ritual are those who have gained experience of, for example, renunciation of cyclic existence, to the point that it has some sort of effect on your mind.

How: the ritual by which it is taken

1. The preparatory ritual
2. The actual ritual
3. The concluding ritual

The third has three points: the preparatory ritual, the actual ritual, and the concluding ritual.

The preparatory ritual

- A. Special going for refuge
- B. Accumulating the accumulations
- C. Training in the attitude

The first has three points: special going for refuge, accumulating the accumulations, and training in the attitude.

Special going for refuge

1. Decorating the place, displaying representations, and setting up offering substances
2. Making a request and going for refuge
3. Stating the trainings of having gone for refuge

The first is divided into three points: decorating the place, displaying representations, and setting up offering substances; making a request and going for refuge; and stating the trainings of having gone for refuge.

Decorating the place, displaying representations, and setting up offering substances

This has three subheadings:

1. General indications concerning the place, the representations, offerings, and so forth
2. Clearing up doubts about this
3. Steps to be performed by the guru and the student

General indications concerning the place, the representations, offerings, and so forth

First: Clean an isolated place, smear it with the five cow substances, perfumed water such as sandalwood water, and scatter fragrant flowers. Set out representations of the Three Jewels – metal statues and so forth, texts and so forth, and images of bodhisattvas – on a throne, a table, or a raised platform. Do the preparatory ritual with as valuable offering items – such as canopies and flowers – as possible, as well as music, food, and so forth. Arrange a throne for the virtuous friend and also adorn it with flowers. You accumulate the accumulation of merit by paying respect to the former masters, the Saṅgha, and giving an offering cake to the elemental spirits.

Clearing up doubts about this

If you do not have any offerings at all, as described in the *Sūtra of the Good Eon (Bhadrakalpikasūtra)* it can be accomplished even with cloth fringes. If you do have

offerings, they should have been obtained through great effort without deceit and should be arrayed in such a way that your friends cannot help marvelling.

When the Elder was requested for the mind generation by Tibetan teachers in Mangyül and Samyé, he reportedly said that it did not arise through inferior offerings. He said that also a representation of a consecrated statue of the main master of the teachings was imperative, and also a text, at least the *Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines (Prajñāpāramitāsañcayagāthā)* should be used.

The steps to be performed by the guru and student

Then, the assembly of āryas is invoked. The student, washed and well dressed, with his hands joined, is encouraged by the guru to generate clear faith in the excellent qualities of the merit field from the bottom of his heart. He should then slowly do the seven-limb practice, imagining that he is in front of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Making a request and going for refuge

- A. Making a request
- B. Special going for refuge

Making a request

Second: Then the student, having generated the perception of his guru as the Teacher, prostrates to him and makes offerings, including a mandala, to him. With his right knee on the floor, palms joined, he makes a request for the purpose of bodhicitta:

Just as the tathāgata, arhat, perfectly complete buddhas, as well as the great bodhisattvas abiding on the great grounds, first generated the mind of unsurpassed, perfectly complete enlightenment, likewise I, whose name is (...), request the master to generate the mind of unsurpassed, perfectly complete enlightenment.

Repeat this three times.

Special going for refuge

There are two subheadings:

1. The attitude together with the objects
2. Special going for refuge

The attitude together with the objects

Then the student goes for refuge, with the behaviour explained earlier, to the objects—the Buddha, the Dharma, that is the true paths that mainly bring about the cessations, and the Saṅgha, that is the irreversible ārya bodhisattvas, with the general attitude thinking: “From now until I achieve enlightenment, in order to protect all sentient beings, I go for refuge to the Buddha, the teacher of refuge; I go for refuge to the Dharma, the actual refuge; I go for refuge to the Saṅgha, who I ask to be my companions in practicing refuge”; and with the special attitude of making the strong aspiration: “I will never turn away from this attitude at any time.”

The words of the ritual

Master, please grant me your attention. I, whose name is (...), from now until I reach the essence of enlightenment, go for refuge to the best of humans, the blessed buddhas.

Master, please grant me your attention. I, whose name is (...), from now until I reach the essence of enlightenment, go for refuge to the best of Dharmas, the Dharma that is peace, free from attachment.

Master, please grant me your attention. I, whose name is (...), from now until I reach the essence of

enlightenment, go for refuge to the best of assemblies,
the Saṅgha of irreversible ārya bodhisattvas.

Repeat this three times. The request for attention when going for refuge to each of the Jewels and the unusual words of going for refuge to the Dharma accord with the ritual composed by the Elder.

Stating the trainings of having gone for refuge

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

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.

Training in the attitude

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

Here the *observed objects* are those sentient beings who lack happiness. The *aspect of love* means you cultivate the mental attitude of wishing them to have happiness. The *observed objects* of compassion are those sentient beings who are afflicted with suffering, and the mental *aspect* or mental attitude of *compassion* is wishing these beings to be free from suffering. That is what needs to be cultivated here. We will stop here and continue with the actual ritual next week.

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Edited Version*

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