
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Let us meditate together for a short time.

[Meditation]

Usually, when people get together they do things that they have in common. Here, we have a gathering of meditators so, naturally, we need to engage in meditation. We all also consider ourselves to be Dharma practitioners so we should be talking about the Dharma when we gather together.

What is the Dharma?

The word 'dharma' is a Sanskrit term that is called *cho* in Tibetan, and in broad terms, it is defined as that which holds its own nature or entity. From this perspective, all objects of knowledge are dharma or *cho*. For example, an apple, a cup, a glass etc, are dharma because each object is unique in holding its own entity. The mind that perceives it can perceive in a manner where the object is distinguished from any other object. Each object is a dharma because it holds its own specific identity or characteristic or nature, which enables the perceiver to identify that unique object as such.

The three scopes of practice

The word 'Dharma' as a spiritual practice to adopt, also called *cho* in Tibetan, refers to all spiritual practices. According to the lamrim, all practices can be put into three stages of the path – the small, middle, and great stages to accord with the three levels of the mental scope of a person. As a dharma, each of these three stages fulfills the definition of dharma as that which holds its own entity. Here, however, we interpret the meaning of 'hold' in a different way. The Dharma practices relating to the person of small scope hold beings from falling into the lower realms, the person of middling scope is held from falling into samsara, and the person of great scope is held from falling into the extreme of nirvana peace. In other words, virtues from engaging in the practices of each of the stages of the path secure respectively a happy rebirth, liberation from samsara and buddhahood. The ultimate and highest spiritual goal is complete enlightenment or buddhahood, and to reach that we ensure that whatever practice we engage in is infused with bodhicitta, and practise and progress sequentially and systematically through all three stages of the path.

Fear of falling into bad rebirths

I will now go over some essential points of Lama Tsongkhapa's lamrim teaching. Just hearing it is a great blessing. According to lamrim, our first focus is to raise an awareness of the suffering nature of samsara, particularly that of bad rebirths. We don't want to be born in a bad rebirth and as we contemplate its causes, we will see the dangers of falling into such a bad rebirth. We then reflect upon who can protect us from that, which leads us to take refuge in the Three Jewels.

Taking refuge

Of the three objects of refuge, the Dharma Jewel serves as the actual protection, the Buddha Jewel serves as the teacher and the Sangha Jewel is a spiritual friend. How? In essence, Dharma practice is about habituating ourselves with a virtuous state of mind. When our minds become habituated to it, virtue will arise very easily and spontaneously, even in times of despair. For example, if we are facing death, a virtuous mind will arise easily because we have become habituated to that mind. So, there is that great benefit. Even if we haven't done much practice throughout our lives, if at that very last moment we have a virtuous state of mind then we won't fall into a bad rebirth. Therefore, we have to recognise that it is the Dharma Jewel that directly benefits us and protects us from falling into suffering existence.

More specifically, the Dharma refers to an inner quality such as the virtuous state of mind that we generate within ourselves. This is how we have to understand receiving refuge or protection from taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Whether we receive protection from reciting the Refuge prayer depends on how sincere we are, how much faith we have, and how serious we are as Dharma practitioners. We should not be fake Dharma practitioners, appearing to be practitioners but acting only on a superficial level, not wholeheartedly or faithfully.

We are fortunate to have met with the Dharma and gained some knowledge, but we must put that knowledge into practice and bring real change to our mental attitudes and perspective. We have learnt that there are two main causes for taking refuge: a fear of the suffering of samara in general, and fear of the suffering of a lower rebirth in particular and having wholehearted faith in the Three Jewels having the capacity to protect us from being subject to suffering existence. To take refuge sincerely and wholeheartedly, we must cultivate these two causes within us – fear of falling into samsara and a bad rebirth and from the depths of our hearts having faith in the Three Jewels as the perfect refuge object. The Buddha Jewel is the perfect teacher, the Sangha Jewel is the perfect friend, and the Dharma jewel is the actual refuge or protection. Earlier we talked about the meaning of Dharma as being a quality of holding us from falling into a lower rebirth and cyclic existence.

Adopt virtues and avoid non-virtues

So how does the Dharma Jewel serve as an actual protector? In the scriptures it is said that the Dharma Jewel refers to the truth of cessation and the truth of the path, which are inner qualities that exist in the continuum of a superior being or an arya. Since we have not yet reached that stage, we might wonder how the Dharma Jewel can protect us. We must understand that a virtuous state of mind such as a moral thought of refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions is also a Dharma Jewel to us. These virtues that we generate within us will protect us from falling into a lower rebirth. So, they are our true protectors.

In fact, it could be said that they will provide more refuge and protection to us than actually having the Lord Buddha in front of us. The Buddha may be able to save us from falling into a lower rebirth once, but it is our own Dharma practice that will permanently save us from falling into lower rebirths and even from samsara. So, we must recognise that our true refuge is engaging in Dharma practice such as the practice of morality, of refraining from the ten non-virtues. To end our

suffering, we must practice the Dharma. And we do have the ability to practise it. It is wrong to think that we lack the capacity to practise the Dharma. We can practise it. We have the capacity to practise the morality of refraining from the ten non-virtues and adopting the ten virtues.

The reason why we need to avoid non-virtues and adopt virtues is that happiness results from virtue, and suffering results from non-virtues, which is the law of karma. Understanding karma and its effects is essential for the practice of morality and will also help us understand the practice of overcoming the eight worldly concerns – the four likes and the four dislikes. For example, we all like being happy and dislike experiencing suffering and pain. From the perspective of the law of karma, happiness is the result of virtue and merit while suffering is the result of non-virtue and non-merit. This means that when we find happiness it is like eating an expensive meal – it is using up our accumulated good karma and merits. So, finding happiness is not necessarily something we should be feeling so excited and happy about. Likewise, suffering is a consummation of our accumulated bad karma, so it is not necessarily a good cause for us to feel bad. In this way, our understanding of karma will help us to overcome the eight worldly concerns or dharmas and bring stability to our life and Dharma practice.

Karma

It is also good to remind ourselves of what the Lord Buddha said: 'You are your own protector and your own enemy'. If our actions of the three doors of body, speech, and mind are positive, we become our own protector; if they are negative then we become our own enemy. Overall, everything we find in our life, including the form of life that we have now, and what we experience in it, is the result of our own karma.

There are various types of karma such as throwing karma and completing karma. Throwing karma serves as the main cause for the type of rebirth we take while completing karma predetermines the living conditions of a rebirth. So, we can have an instance of someone who, as a result of positive throwing karma, is born as a human but due to negative completing karma is beset by continuing problems with their health or with their living conditions, or not having enough food, drink, clothing and so forth. Likewise, we have cats and dogs who are born as animals because of negative throwing karma but because of the positive completing karma, they have very good owners who look after them well by providing them with good food and comfortable living conditions.

If we consider ourselves to be Dharma practitioners, the most important and basic practice we should be doing is the practice of refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions. A good ethical practice is not only fundamental to our Dharma practice but brings practical benefits to our life. When you ask people what Dharma practice they do, some boldly reply, 'Oh, I am practising the highest yoga tantric practice of Yamantaka, Vajrayogini and so on.' But in fact, they are a long way away from making any sense of those practices and have no idea if these practices are beneficial for them. On the other hand, if they say, 'I am meditating on loving kindness and compassion for others, I am practising the precept of abstaining from the ten non-virtuous actions', that would make more sense in terms of the practical application of Dharma practice to daily life. We appreciate the sincerity and honesty of such people.

Reviewing how to generate bodhicitta

Before we continue with the section on holding bodhicitta through a ritual, we need to go back to review the causes and means of cultivating bodhicitta.

First, we have to engage in meditating on cultivating the state of equanimity and overcoming attachment holding some close as friends, holding others as enemies, and having no feelings for strangers. Cultivating a state of equanimity or an equal mental attitude towards all other beings is laying down a good foundation for cultivating bodhicitta.

After that, we cultivate impartial compassion and love for all other sentient beings. Compassion wishes to free all beings from suffering and loving kindness wishes all beings to have happiness. We meditate until both love and compassion arise spontaneously within us with respect to every sentient being. Next, we cultivate the special intention of universal responsibility by thinking, 'I will free all sentient beings from suffering and place them into happiness,' and take personal responsibility for benefiting others. Then we need to realise that to fulfil a universal responsibility with this special intention we must achieve complete enlightenment. Hence, we generate an aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Initially, we have a contrived or fabricated aspiration of enlightenment because it arises in dependence upon our effort and meditation. We also call this aspiration contrived bodhicitta.

After developing this contrived bodhicitta through repeated meditation reinforcing love, compassion and special intention, this aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment to benefit sentient beings arises spontaneously or intuitively. Then it becomes bodhicitta – arising naturally and intuitively towards all sentient beings.

Generating bodhicitta through the yoga of equalising and exchanging self for others begins with meditating on the equality of the self and others, and then recognising the disadvantages of the self-cherishing mind and the advantages of cherishing others. Then we meditate on giving and taking to intensify love and compassion and cultivate special intention. This meditation initially generates contrived bodhicitta and finally uncontrived or actual bodhicitta.

In short, we need to familiarise ourselves with these two ways of cultivating bodhicitta – the sevenfold cause and effect method and the equalising and exchanging self with others method. Even just thinking about or just trying these two methods will create a cause or leave an imprint in our mind to generate bodhicitta, which is of great benefit.

Subduing the mind will bring peace and happiness in everyday life

We should try to incorporate a meditation practice into everyday life as a tool to subdue our minds. It is said that subduing the mind will bring true peace and happiness. Since the main source of unhappiness, distress, dissatisfaction, and crisis are mental afflictions such as desire, anger, pride, jealousy and so forth, then whenever we feel unhappy and down, we should try to recognise the mental affliction that causes it and then apply the appropriate meditation to counteract it. This is the meditation practice to eliminate mental afflictions.

We will find the breathing meditation, which is a simple technique, is very beneficial and effective in overcoming

forceful, strong or disturbing thoughts or mental afflictions. For example, if we have a wave of strong anger towards someone, we will find it very difficult to show patience or love to that person. We can, however, sit calmly and do the breathing meditation, diverting our minds from the cause of anger, and simply directing all our mental attention onto our breath coming in and out. If we keep our minds on our breath say for 21 rounds, we will find our minds much calmer and more relaxed. We will also experience more clarity and vividness, as if our minds are like clear glass free of any stains.

We can engage in the breathing meditation as our main practice such as cultivating a single-pointed concentration or as a preliminary preparation because it will make our mind calm and loyal so that it will easily attend to whatever meditation practice we undertake.

Object of meditation

In the breathing meditation, we take the breath as an object for the mind to focus on. But, if we meditate on love and compassion, we are not taking love and compassion as an object for our mind to focus on; rather we are trying to transform our mind into love and compassion by cultivating the aspect and object of love and compassion.

Generally, whatever our meditation practices, there is an object to focus on, think about or cognise. We must understand that 'object' refers to something we bring to our mind. For example, if we meditate on some external object, we meditate on the image of that object in our mind not the external object itself. The external object simply represents the meditation object.

In the scriptures the image of an object in one's thought or mind is called *don-chi* in Tibetan. This literally means 'meaning generality' but it is commonly rendered in English as 'generic image.' Furthermore, it is advised that when meditating we should not be focussing the object just like we perceive an object here with our eyes and the actual object being there. If we meditate like this, then our mind is not abiding or brought within us, and our object is not an internal object or generic image. So, we need to know precisely the object that is the focus of the meditation. We want to close the gap between the mind and the object as if the mind merges with or becomes one with the object.

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Edited Version*

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