
The Middle Length Lamrim

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16 August 2022

Aim high and make life meaningful

We begin with this quote from Lama Tsongkhapa: by aiming at a greater purpose and a greater meaning in life, we will naturally stop pursuing lesser purposes. By thinking about the difficulty of finding the same good life again we will make the best use of our current life.

These lines instruct us to aim at a higher goal so that we don't waste our time and life in pursuit of temporary and short-term goals. This instruction is relevant because when we think of our priorities and goals, they are very narrow and orientated towards fulfilling our immediate needs only in this single life.

If we compare our needs in a single day or even a whole year with those in our whole lifetime, then the latter is obviously more important. Therefore, we should aim for bigger goals and make sure that what we do and how we spend our time doesn't defeat our long-term goals.

In spiritual terms, we have future lives to consider, so the purpose of future lives is more important than the purposes of this life because this life is very short compared to future lives. Hence, it is essential to ensure we do not jeopardise our future. We want to find the same good life we presently enjoy in the future. So, we need to consider what kind of rebirth we will take after we leave this life and whether we will find happiness or suffering in that life.

Everything is cause and effect

We learn from the Dharma that happiness and suffering result from their causes. The Buddhist concept of the law of karma explains it all. It explains how we can take a human rebirth, achieve liberation from samsara and even achieve complete enlightenment. We need to recognise the causes and conditions and then accumulate them to achieve what we want to achieve. We can set our aim to achieve liberation but, to be honest, we are a long way from reaching that. To get there we must accumulate a lot of merit and wisdom and to be able to do that we need to depend on a series of good rebirths.

So, we must aim at achieving liberation and engage in the practices that will secure a good rebirth and prevent a bad rebirth. This is something we can all do.

Because of our knowledge of the Dharma, we all know that the cause of a bad rebirth and suffering is non-virtue and the cause of happiness and a good rebirth is the practice of virtue.

Three components of Dharma practice

Our Dharma practice has three important components – giving, increasing and safeguarding. We must incorporate these three into any practice we do. The component of **giving** means that we ensure we have the right motivation for whatever activity or practice we do and then dedicate it to benefitting other sentient beings. We can incorporate the component of giving by thinking about, for example, why we

practise the morality of refraining from non-virtue and preventing bad rebirths. Even with mundane activities of eating, drinking or going to bed to keep our body healthy and sustain our life we motivate ourselves and dedicate all of this to achieving enlightenment and benefiting other beings. Here giving means having the motivation of benefitting others; all our practices or actions are dedicated to benefitting other beings.

The element of **safeguarding** implies sustaining and ensuring continuity in our practice until all sentient beings achieve liberation. For example, looking after our bodies and prolonging our life is essential for us to be able to continuously practise the Dharma and accumulate virtues for the sake of other sentient beings.

The element of **increasing** is also important because we need to continuously enjoy the fruits of the Dharma to ensure that whatever practice we can do is a cause to increase our virtue and spiritual accumulations. Then we maximise our chances of finding a good life in the future.

The quote from Lama Tsongkhapa also urges us to develop an awareness of death and impermanence and to instil in us the motivation to practise the Dharma and not waste our lives on the fleeting affairs of our present lives. With an awareness of death and impermanence, we will be able to diminish our strong attachment to the affairs of this current life. This will then enable us to consider our fate in our future lives.

Attachment is our main source of not finding satisfaction and experiencing unending unhappiness, frustration, and problems in our life. Because of attachment, achieving our goals brings us no contentment and makes our life revolve around suffering and meaningless activities. Attachment is a type of mental delusion which gives us the wrong notion that the object of attachment is a true cause of happiness and satisfaction. And we can believe in that notion to the point that we feel that without attachment or desire, our life will be empty and have no meaning. In contrast, we will find that true peace and satisfaction arises as we diminish attachment and desire.

We engage in Dharma practice to diminish attachment, and for that Dharma practice to be effective, it must be related to the mind. We must recognise that attachment lies within, and to counteract that we engage in Dharma practice or meditation. Through meditation practice we can cultivate a sense of more contentment and less desire. However, that practice doesn't mean that we need to externally possess less and give away what we possess. The key is cultivating a sense of contentment with what we possess.

Integrating these three components of giving, increasing and safeguarding into our practice is essential in the tantric practice where we take the bodhisattva vows, tantric vows and other commitments and also engage in the self-initiation practice and so on. That is how, as it says in the scripture, it becomes possible through tantric practice to achieve complete enlightenment within at least sixteen lifetimes. This becomes possible by building these three components into our practice so that whatever practice we do will not only accumulate and increase merit and virtue, but effectively serve as a cause to continuously find a perfect opportunity to practice in the future, such as finding a good rebirth and meeting with other suitable conditions for our spiritual progress.

The Dharma Jewel is the true refuge

We must understand that the Dharma practice that we do will benefit ourselves, such as saving us from falling into suffering situations. We learn that of the Three Jewels or objects of refuge, the true refuge is the Dharma Jewel which refers to our mind, something inside and within ourselves, not any external object. So, what does Dharma practice mean? It means, for example, the morality of refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions which are essentially based on the thought of refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions. Therefore, Dharma practice is the virtuous state of mind that becomes a cause, a force to hold us from falling into bad rebirths.

If we really believe the Buddha is a fully awakened perfect being and his words are infallible, we must remember that the Buddha himself said that if we refrain from non-virtuous actions we will not take a bad rebirth. We are human now, and it is in our hands to come back as a human after this life because we have the capacity to practise the morality of abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions. We have the capacity to practice each one of the ten non-virtues, for example, not committing the action of killing primarily refers to not murdering another human being. The non-virtue of lying refers to lying to others about possessing inner realisations or knowledge that you don't actually possess. In Tibetan, this is called *mi-cho lamai-zun* which literally means a fake lama or an ordinary person pretending to have inner realisations like lamas. Avoiding the non-virtue of sexual misconduct doesn't mean abstaining from sexual activity or living a celibate life.

What is important for us is knowing the benefits of following the Dharma. If we know its benefits we will follow and practice the Dharma. Dharma is beneficial for us and many other people have found it beneficial. From time to time I share with you how the Dharma benefits me and others. Not that long ago someone I know who had been following the Dharma for several years passed away. She practised the Dharma at the time of death and took some advice from me and had my photo near her at the time of death. After she passed away, her son wrote me a long thank you letter saying how the Dharma had benefitted his mother a lot and that she had a very peaceful death. Her family were not Buddhists, but they acknowledged the benefits of Dharma to her.

According to Lama Tsongkhapa, the essence of the Dharma is included in the three principal aspects of the path – renunciation, bodhicitta and the wisdom of emptiness. These are the principal and essential practices. Renunciation makes a practice a cause of liberation from samsara, freedom from the control of mental delusions or finding a good rebirth. Bodhicitta is a cause of making our practice a Mahayana practice and achieving the state of Buddhahood. The wisdom of emptiness is the direct antidote to the root cause of all faults, the ignorance of self-grasping.

If we see the benefits in practising the Dharma and understand we have the capacity to practise it, then really there is no excuse for not practising it.

How to practise the Dharma

When we engage in Dharma practice we should not have too much expectation that we will eliminate the root cause of suffering and achieve liberation immediately. Even just preventing or getting rid of any manifested forms of mental afflictions will be very beneficial. The benefit that we derive

from even minimising the intensity and size of mental afflictions would also be great. In this way, our Dharma practice will secure the peace and happiness that we seek now and help us in tackling any immediate problems that we face. Conjoined with the three principal aspects of the path, our practice will serve as a cause to achieve happiness in future lives.

We must first lay a good foundation for our Dharma practice by practising the morality of refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions. Without putting any effort into this foundational practice, we cannot progress along the path. Even taking the bodhisattva and tantric vows will not help us to make progress. So, for us, our main practice should be maintaining the precept of refraining from the ten non-virtues. Each morning when we get up we should try to think 'I will not commit any of the ten non-virtues.' As we think in this way we are training or habituating our minds with the thought of not killing, etc. This is how we develop the practice of morality, which is a sense of restraint on wrongdoing.

We can talk about the word 'restraint' in the sense of a preventive measure for preventing any non-virtuous thoughts or actions from the beginning, or in the sense of a remedy to undo any non-virtuous thoughts and actions. So, we need to make an effort in the practice of morality to prevent any unethical actions. That also means stopping or discontinuing such unethical actions.

The meaning of life

We all have some sort of interest in Dharma and not only that, but we are also doing some practice. From time to time it is good to revisit our practice, look at the degree of our motivation and interest, and look at why we are practising the Dharma and meditation and so forth. Basically, I think our purpose is to live this life happily and meaningfully as well as find a similar kind of good life in the future. The type of life that we find is critical because that defines our situation and our opportunities.

For example, at the moment we are fortunate to have found this precious human rebirth with its eight pleasures and ten endowments. This is because a human life provides the optimum conditions and opportunity to engage in virtue and to achieve whatever goal you want to achieve. We have found such a perfect human life and besides that, we have met the perfect Dharma and a teacher.

As far as the life that we have found now is concerned, we have the capacity and freedom to achieve anything we want to achieve. We must recognise how fortunate we are to have found such a wonderful human life. We must realise this to make the best use of it and not waste it and ensure we don't leave this life emptyhanded. Therefore, what makes our life and time truly meaningful is engaging in Dharma practice as much as possible, such as adopting the ten virtuous actions and abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions. By applying such a practice, we will find more meaning in this life in terms of more happiness, and we will benefit our future lives in terms of finding a good rebirth and not falling into a lower rebirth.

What to meditate on?

Another question that we ask is what meditation and Dharma practice should we do first? We should first meditate to counteract any kind of mental affliction which is most

forceful and disturbing. For example, if we have a strong unfulfilled attachment, then until that is calmed down we won't have peace and we won't enjoy life and be able to focus on any activities, including our Dharma practices. Therefore, we apply meditation according to the type of mental affliction we need to counteract. To counteract attachment, we engage in meditation to reflect on the downfalls of attachment and the undesirability of the object of attachment. To overcome pride, we meditate on the dependent origination of things, and we meditate on patience and loving kindness to counteract anger.

Breathing meditation

We will now do a bit of breathing meditation together. With regard to the meditation posture, there is mention of assuming the seven features of Vairochana Buddha, but what is most important is that whatever posture you choose, it should be comfortable. If your posture is not comfortable, then your body will ache, and your mental focus goes there rather than to the object of meditation.

We are doing the breathing meditation here, but if you are meditating on a specific object to focus or reflect upon, you need to ensure that the mental image of that object should serve as the object of the meditation. With the breathing meditation, we direct our full mental attention to breathing in and out without losing any part of it to any other objects. We should ensure that the pace of breathing in and out is even and not too long or too short. Also, it should not be too forceful, such that you hear the noise of inhaling and exhaling. We should be breathing naturally and keep our mental focus on the breath.

If it helps, keep mentally counting the breath, each incoming and outgoing breath as one round of breathing. You will find that if you retain the focus for up to twenty-one rounds, you will notice a stillness and clarity in your mind and experience your mind as if it is like crystal clear glass without any stains.

As a benefit of the breathing meditation, our minds will become calmer and in a state of indifference or neutrality. Then you can easily direct your mind to focus on any object that you want, such as any virtuous object. In a way, the breathing meditation is a part of our practice to habituate our minds with a virtuous object.

We must build a positive mental habit because that is the only way to break down the negative and destructive mental habituations such as falling under the influence of anger, attachment and so forth. We must overcome destructive thoughts and emotions in order to pave the way to peace and happiness within us.

With the breathing meditation, an alternative is to just keep the mind in the present, in the awareness of knowing that you are breathing in and breathing out, just remembering you are breathing in and breathing out all the time.

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