
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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The right mental attitude is the basis of Dharma practice

When we engage in any Dharma practice, the most important factor determining whether our practice will be a Dharma one or not is the motivation with which we begin our practice. Therefore, we should always make sure we have the right motivation before we formally engage in a practice. Then it will truly be a Dharma practice.

In our everyday life, too, we need to recognise the benefit of always having the right mental attitude. The best mental attitude is altruism, showing care and kindness towards others. We know from our own experience that when we have the right state of mind, it will naturally take care of all our outer actions which will naturally be positive; this is something that others can observe. So, our mental attitude is a predetermining force to shape our actions and thus our future. For example, if we hold love and compassion towards others, then whatever actions we engage in will be pleasing and positive to others and hence admired. On the other hand, holding a destructive emotion such as anger will negatively influence our actions which will be a nuisance and unpleasant for others. So, when it is said that patience is the best ornament, it makes sense, because if we wear patience we will look pleasant or beautiful to others.

Regardless of how much effort we have put into the practice of Dharma, at least we have all made some connection with the perfect teacher, the Lord Buddha, whom we regard as an enlightened being. And we all admire the practice of compassion and non-violence, which is the path or the Dharma that we really wish to practise and follow. That in itself shows we are very fortunate.

There are a vast number of people who don't have any thoughts of Dharma or thoughts of benefiting other sentient beings. So, we should consider ourselves very fortunate not only to have met with the Dharma but also to have faith in it. That's a wonderful thing. Some people don't even want to hear about being kind to others.

We say that the practice of Dharma will purify us of negativities and bring about peace and happiness. We must recognise that Dharma practice mainly refers to cultivating a positive mental attitude, which influences all our actions. So, when we hold other beings with love and compassion, we are practising the Dharma, and through this practice, we are purifying our negativities. In fact, cultivating love and compassion for other beings is a very powerful means of purifying our negativities. Whether the practice that we engage in becomes a Dharma practice depends on our mental state: if it is positive, then it will become the Dharma and a cause to do the right actions. From this angle, the meaning of the Dharma as our true protector and guide means that the positive mental attitude within us is our reliable protector and guide.

Inner wisdom is our best resource

With our Dharma practice, we should try to be realistic and focus on practical things that make a difference in our everyday life. We want our Dharma practice to be beneficial to our life. We do not want our Dharma and meditation practice to be completely out of touch with the reality of our everyday experiences, like venturing into fantasy land. If we do that then we will lose sight of the things that matter in our everyday life. To understand what will benefit and harm us most we must utilise our own intelligence and the discriminating knowledge we all possess.

Through the lens of our inner wisdom, we will see why we need to be more considerate of others, even for our own benefit. We will see that if we are always concerned and worrying about our own selfish needs and think 'I, I, I', it won't bring us much happiness or success. Therefore, it's important to see the benefit of cultivating a sense of care and respect towards others and, as much as possible in everyday life, be kind and helpful to them, not criticise or belittle them or put them down. We need to think about how we can improve our relationships with others and be friendlier with them.

Harmony is bliss

The Lord Buddha said in a Vinaya sutra:

Harmony in the Sangha is bliss,
The work of harmonious community is bliss,
Joy in hearing and seeing dharma
And a life of solitude is bliss.

We will find practising this advice very beneficial both at work and at home. We know how important harmony is in the workplace. Where there's harmony, then no matter how much work people have to do, they won't mind – they will do it together joyfully and happily. Going to work, being with colleagues, and having tea and a chat together are all enjoyable. On the other hand, when there is disharmony, distrust, conflict and tension, even outsiders walking into that place will feel no warmth but will feel cold and uneasy.

Similarly, a lack of warmth and harmony in the home environment can be a continuous source of unhappiness that we have to live with every day. Therefore, it's important to recognise the benefit of cultivating friendship and harmony with others. If you enjoy harmonious relationships and there's trust between those who live together, it doesn't matter whether you have a large family or not, or who you are living with, or what living conditions you live in, it will make a huge difference to your everyday life's peace and happiness. The essence of Dharma practice is benefiting others. But in our practice, we should not think of other beings who we want to reach out and benefit as people in a distant land. Rather, they are the people who are around us, close to us, with whom we share our life.

Be considerate, kind, and helpful to others

I hope I don't bore you with repeating the same thing over and over again. But I regard being considerate, kind, and helpful to those close to us to be a very important part of Dharma practice. I give this advice all the time because I know that a lot of people have found it very beneficial. I've personally received acknowledgement from many people, here and elsewhere, on the practical benefit of what I have said to them. A monk I once met in Bodhgaya thanked me, saying he had heard that the main focus of the spiritual

advice I give to people is to respect and care for those close to us; he said it was a wonderful teaching that is directly applicable to our lives. Just as many people who have found it to be beneficial, I say the same thing to you, and you will find it beneficial to put that into practice.

To take Dharma practice seriously, it is not enough to just hear about it from others. You must see its benefits through your own intelligence. One scripture says that when our actions are conjoined with or supported by discriminating wisdom, we will make a greater effort, and through that, we can achieve a great purpose.

The purpose of Dharma practice is to bring positive changes to our lives. I'm not just saying this, as there are many people who have managed to turn their life around through Dharma practice and they have shared their experiences with me, as a testimony to the benefits of the Dharma in our life. For example, one person who passed away not long ago wrote to me about how she found the Dharma to be very beneficial, even though she'd met the Dharma very late in life, at 65. Another person commented that after having gained knowledge and experience of the Dharma, he no longer feared death.

I find it inspiring to hear such stories from people who have heard the Dharma and applied it and brought about a positive change in their lives. When we hear such stories from others who have benefited from practising the Dharma, the message for us is that if we too apply the Dharma, we will enjoy the same benefits. This is why every now and then I try to share with you the experiences that other people have shared with me. Some of them don't even consider themselves religious, yet they tried to put the Dharma into their lives and have told me it was beneficial. It is very important that we understand how to apply the Dharma properly in our life.

Relate the Dharma to our mental continuum

Another important thing that we must always remember is that Dharma practice is for subduing and calming our minds, and we are the immediate beneficiaries of that. This is important to recognise. So, when we talk about or engage in Dharma practice, we must relate it to our own mental continuum. The early great meditators advised that the main obstructions to meditation are mental sinking and desire or distractions. The remedies to those obstructions or the main supporting factors for meditation are mindfulness and introspection. So, when they talked about subduing and pacifying the mind, the great meditators didn't mention any external or material objects; rather they taught about something inside us. If there were an external, material object that could subdue and pacify our minds, and grant us sustained peace and tranquillity, the value of that would be incalculable and priceless, because the demand would be so great.

The great bodhisattva Shantideva said that the main means for subduing your mind are mindfulness and introspection.

Oh you who wish to guard your mind,
I beseech you with folded hands:
Always exert yourselves to guard
Mindfulness and alertness!

To see some progress in our practice, we must practise regularly, every day, or as often as possible. I try my best to do this. In the last few weeks I've been visualising an image

of Shakyamuni Buddha and accumulating Buddha mantras. At the same time throughout the day, every few minutes I remind myself of the kindness and qualities of Shakyamuni Buddha. This practice is continually and naturally filling me with peace and joy. I also meditate to send loving kindness and compassion to all other beings. So, I can tell you from my own experience that cultivating loving kindness to other beings is a pleasant experience that enhances my peace and joy.

However, sometimes when I meditate on compassion by observing the suffering situations of other beings, I feel a bit of discomfort and unease. We have to take this discomfort and unease as a lesson to develop courage and the determination to benefit and reach out to others, which is essential for sustaining our practice to benefit other beings.

The reason why we need to direct our meditation to subdue our mind is to overcome mental afflictions. In fact, subduing or controlling the mind means eliminating mental afflictions. For all of us here the time has come to apply Dharma practice to achieve our long-term goals; whatever we do is to secure long-term benefits for ourselves. In this way, we won't waste our precious time on trivial things.

HOW TO GENERATE BODHICITTA EXPLANATION OF HOW TO ASSUME THE MIND GENERATION BY MEANS OF A RITUAL (CONT.)

The actual ritual

In the teaching on the *Middle Length Lamrim*, we're at the heading The Actual Ritual, which has several sub-headings.

The behaviour

In front of the master the student should kneel on their right knee; crouching on one's right knee is also appropriate. Then with palms joined, they should generate bodhicitta.

The distinction between types of mind generation

The ritual we are discussing is the one for cultivating the special kind of wishing bodhicitta. Two types of wishing bodhicitta are presented here. Mind generation:

is not the mere mind generation that thinks 'I will attain buddhahood for the welfare of others. Rather, one focusses on that mind that has been generated and makes the promise 'I will attain buddhahood for the welfare of others'. Thus generate that attitude in reliance upon ritual.

Here, we find out about a special kind of wishing bodhicitta, not simply generating wishing or aspiring to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all other beings, but also to affirm that we will hold this wishing bodhicitta until we achieve complete enlightenment. By depending on a ritual, we have an option of simply thinking we have generated a wishing bodhicitta, but we also take a pledge of holding this wishing bodhicitta and not forsaking it until we reach complete enlightenment. The text indicates the pledge when it states, 'I shall not give it up until I have attained enlightenment'. So, you not only generate bodhicitta, but you also pledge to hold this generated bodhicitta mind within yourself. Generating wishing bodhicitta and promising to hold it until achieving enlightenment prompts us to take the bodhisattva vows. That's why when we engage in a ritual of generating wishing bodhicitta and taking the bodhisattva vows the ritual includes a pledge to hold those vows.

An exception associated with this

Under this heading, the explanation of the exception is clear.

If you are unable to train in the training of aspiring bodhicitta, you should not make this promise. However, everyone may ritually generate the mere thought "I will become a Buddha for the welfare of all sentient beings" regardless of whether they are able to train in the trainings of mind generation.

This applies to the bodhicitta ritual that is associated with the *jenang* or blessing empowerment ceremony where we are not required to take the bodhisattva vows. As it says, in the ritual of generating bodhicitta you don't need to have a commitment to abide by all the precepts of holding bodhicitta. We engage in the ritual simply to generate wishing bodhicitta, aspiring to achieve buddhahood. However, in the bodhicitta ritual associated with some initiations, it is necessary to generate bodhicitta with a promise to hold that mind until one achieves enlightenment.

In other words, if you generate bodhicitta through a ritual entailing a promise to maintain the bodhicitta mind you should be prepared to commit yourself to the precepts of bodhicitta.

It is inappropriate to posit two approaches to ritually take the vow without practising the precepts

In order to engage in the ritual to generate bodhicitta with an affirmation or promise, one should have the capacity to practise all the training and precepts of bodhicitta. Then as the text says,

These two approaches may be appropriate for aspiring bodhicitta but it is inappropriate to ritually take on engaging bodhicitta without training in the precepts.

The text continues:

The *Advice to the King (Prasnaṅgī) Sutra* says that if one cannot train in the training in generosity and so forth, a great amount of merit is accomplished in mere mind generation. So taking this as its source, the first *Stages of the Meditation* says,

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

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

Ritual for taking the bodhisattva vows

The ritual for assuming the mind generation is:

All buddhas and bodhisattvas residing in the ten directions, masters please grant me your attention. 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 and rejoiced in the creation of in this life and in previous lives such as the previous tathagatas and the perfectly complete buddhas and the great bodhisattvas thoroughly abiding on the great grounds generated the mind of unsurpassed and perfectly clear enlightenment.

In the same way also, I whose name is ... from now until I've reached enlightenment, generate the mind of unsurpassed perfectly complete great

enlightenment.

I will liberate beings that are not liberated, free those who are not free, give breath to those unable to breathe and place all beings in the state beyond sorrow.

When taking the bodhisattva vows from a master, you repeat this ritual formula three times after the master. Once you have taken them from a master, you can take them yourself at any time. However, you cannot take a tantric vow by yourself, because taking tantric vows involves the generation of deity mandalas in association with the initiation.

Even simply reciting the standard prayer for taking refuge is sufficient to generate bodhicitta and take the bodhisattva vows. The first two lines say, 'To the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha I go for refuge until I achieve enlightenment', which states that you will take refuge until you achieve complete enlightenment. This clearly indicates the Mahayana refuge. The next line refers to gathering the accumulations by the practices of giving and so forth, and the final line is 'May I achieve enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings'. Even though it sounds like it is part of a prayer it is in fact the line for generating bodhicitta.

When you take refuge in the Three Jewels there are refuge prayers according to the Hinayana Vehicle and according to the Mahayana Vehicle. In both, you take refuge in the Three Jewels, but they are different in several ways. For example, in the Mahayana refuge practice you take refuge until you achieve complete enlightenment, whereas in the Hinayana you only take them for this life. There's also a difference in the actual refuge objects. The Buddha Jewel is the same for both vehicles, but in the Mahayana Vehicle, the Sangha and Dharma Jewels specifically refer to the inner realisations and qualities of Mahayana superior beings or *aryas*. In some Mahayana refuge prayers, the Dharma refers to the Dharma that is free of the obstructions to an omniscient mind, and the Sangha are those who wish to be free from the obstructions to an omniscient mind.

After the ritual for adopting bodhicitta, the text continues:

Even though it is not mentioned in the refuge ceremony, in this ritual it is necessary to repeat these words after the master in the refuge ceremony and this ritual.

The method of taking the mind generation by oneself

As I said before, first you have to take the vow from a master, and after that, you can take it yourself. Therefore, the text explains the manner of taking mind generation or bodhicitta without the presence of a master.

Atisha's *Mind Generation Ritual* says what to do if we cannot find a master.

The ritual for generating bodhicitta oneself in the absence of the master is as follows. Having brought to mind the Tathagata Shakyamuni and all the tathagatas of the ten directions, prostrate to them and do the rite of offerings and so forth. Then as with the previous order, make the request, and go for refuge but leave out the word 'Master' and so forth.

So basically, we take the same vow as if given by a master but leave out any reference to masters.

The concluding ritual

The master should proclaim the precepts of the aspiring mind to the student.

Next, we continue with the following major heading.

Guarding that which has been received without it degenerating

Having generated the mind of bodhicitta we now need to guard that bodhicitta so that it doesn't degenerate.

This is elaborated in two main headings: training in the cause of the mind generation and not degenerating in this life and training in the cause of not being separated in the mind generation in the future lives.

The detailed outlines or headings such as these were added by His Holiness' Junior Tutor, the late Trijang Rinpoche using the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* as his source.

TRAINING IN THE CAUSE OF THE MIND GENERATION NOT DEGENERATING IN THIS LIFE

This has four subheadings:

1. Training in remembering the advantages so that the strength of one's delight in the mind generation increases. One has to remind oneself of the benefits of this bodhicitta,
2. Training in generating it six times so that the actual mind generation increases.

The six-session guru yoga practice includes remembering the generation of bodhicitta six times in order to increase the strength of one's bodhicitta.

3. Training in not mentally abandoning any sentient being for whose welfare that mind has been generated.

This implies that if we abandon even a single sentient being then this is equal to losing the mind of bodhicitta.

4. Training in the accumulation of merit and wisdom. In terms of the six perfections, this is the perfection of wisdom.

Training in remembering the advantages so that the strength of one's delight in mind generation increases

This has three subheadings: the way the advantages are explained in the scriptures; the way bodhicitta is praised in the writing of the holy beings; instructions to make an effort as it is in this way mind the buddha's and their children have seen to be the supreme method.

The way the advantages are explained in the scriptures

First, you consider the advantages of bodhicitta, by studying the sutras or hearing them from your gurus. Since they have been taught extensively in the *Marvellous Array Sutra* they should be studied here.

Here we are being advised to read the *Marvellous Array Sutra* to find out more.

This sutra says:

Bodhicitta is the seed of all the Dharma of the Buddha and all the conduct and aspiration of the bodhisattvas are summarised in it. Therefore it is said to be like a brief presentation as although the extensive explanation of the elements is boundless, the brief presentation contains everything, and distills the essential points of all the bodhisattva paths.

The essence of Lama Tsongkhapa's teaching is included in his three versions of the lamrim teachings as well as his tantric treatise on the stages of the path. I strongly recommend that you read the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* at least once because it covers everything. Everything that is mentioned here is also included in the *Great Treatise* so it is very

beneficial even just to read it – you never know whether you will ever get even an opportunity to read it after this life. If you can't read it, it is a holy object that you can place on your head and pray that you will gain all the blessings and realisations of this holy text.

If you can't read it all in one hit, it's good to develop the habit of reading a few pages every day. So, in that way, you'll be quite surprised how easily you will finish the whole text, not just once, but several times over your lifetimes. I remember my late teacher Geshe Ngawang Dhargye used to always have a copy of the *8000 Lines Sutra* on the table next to him. So, whenever he finished his daily recitations and commitments, and found some spare time, he would always open that sutra and read it, even just one or two pages. In that way, he recited the whole sutra hundreds of times.

*Transcript prepared by Cynthia Karena
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

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