
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Motivation

Please be relaxed, seated comfortably and generate a proper motivation. We are studying the Dharma because we wish to achieve buddhahood for the sake of other beings. That is our motivation, which is very profound. Even if our virtuous action is small, by beginning with the virtue of a good and forceful motivation our action will also become great. If the bodhicitta motivation is forceful, then even if it is not explicitly present during the actual practice, we can say that the actual practice is conjoined by bodhicitta. That is because the practice has been motivated by a strong force of bodhicitta motivation. As we note in the ritual manual to generate bodhicitta, we generate a motivation by thinking, 'I want to achieve the precious state of buddhahood to benefit other beings.' This is wishing bodhicitta. Then, if we think, 'For this reason, I shall listen to the teaching and practise it,' this is engaging bodhicitta.

Why Dharma?

We have an interest in the Dharma. Not only that, we are studying the Dharma. Our Dharma goal is to achieve liberation and the state of omniscience or buddhahood, the state free of all faults and possessing all excellent qualities. We all have the potential to reach that. If we engage in the training, we can get closer. The point here is that we can get closer and closer to our future state of buddhahood which is our refuge object or protector, or saviour. And the future state of buddhahood of other beings is their refuge and saviour. I believe this way of explanation is one of the unique features of Buddhism, although some other religions also have similar explanations of the object of refuge. For example, Christianity has Jesus saying, 'You will become like me.'

If we think about it, we can get an idea of the possibility of achieving buddhahood as we can see the possibility of developing excellent qualities and eliminating faults. We can see that if we eliminate our faults and develop excellent qualities we will find more happiness and joy. Having such an understanding or an idea of being able to point the finger at ourselves the way to eradicate all our faults and reach our full potential and achieve happiness is something we need to do.

We must practise the Dharma because we want happiness and do not want suffering. We have the capacity to practise the Dharma because we have found a perfect human life. We must then recognise that the cause of the happiness we want is virtue, and the cause of the suffering we do not want is non-virtue. This makes us think that we must adopt virtue and avoid non-virtue. Accordingly, if we practise virtue and shun non-virtue as much as we can, we are moving closer to achieving liberation and the omniscient mind of a buddha; closer to a future good rebirth of a human and godly being but moving further away from a bad rebirth. If instead of practising virtue we do non-virtuous and evil actions, then even though right now we are born as a human, we are

moving closer to lower rebirths and moving further away from finding a good rebirth of a human or godly being in the future. We must now really think about this seriously – it is very important. Life is too short. It seems to me that a lot of people die between seventy and eighty. People say that the general human lifespan is now seventy but there is an indication that it will increase. You probably know this better than me. We know from the news the ages of many well-known people who have died but we don't hear about when most other people die. To live seventy years is not many years at all. We must be aware of our lifespan. We must think, 'I must practise Dharma in this life, practise it now, practise it as soon as possible,' because now we have found a perfect human life which gives us the best opportunity to practise the Dharma and so it has great meaning and potential. We must understand that we won't find a similar human life again. It is said that finding a perfect human life is extremely difficult.

Dharma practice to subdue the mind

The practice of the Dharma brings benefits immediately. For example, when we show love and kindness to others, not only do we make others happy, but it also brings happiness to us. Love and compassion are the essence of the Dharma. If you have love and compassion for others, then you will benefit them as much as you can. They will like you and appreciate your help. Based on the practice of love and compassion, people like each other, help support each other, listen to and console each other, and never speak harshly or show an angry face to each other. This is how we can promote harmony and pleasant feelings in society. This we can understand.

To produce such a society or community, the most important cause is a positive mental attitude. When you are out with other people, if you are accompanied by an angry mind, then your speech or any other way of interaction won't show any pleasantness. Whereas if you have a mind which is loving and caring and considerate of others, you will make them happy, and they will make you happy. In this way, we can foster a genuine friendship and pleasant atmosphere in the society or community we are part of.

So, we need to try hard to diminish negative mental attitudes and develop positive mental attitudes. This is the true Dharma practice: change harmful thoughts into non-harmful thoughts. Change angry minds into non-angry minds. Change jealous minds into non-jealous minds. Dharma practice means transforming our mind; this we can understand, we can practice and see the benefits. Recognising the benefit of Dharma practice is very important for us to have faith in the Dharma and then apply it. If we have a positive experience of Dharma practice, then we will develop faith in the Dharma and will be motivated to engage in practice. For example, if we help others out of a good spirit of friendship and kindness, they will like us and become friendly with us.

Training and the practice of habituation will change the mind

I say this and practise it myself all the time; 'I will, on my own, place all sentient beings in a state of happiness and free them from suffering.' When this thought arises through our practice of habituation, we will probe into who has such a capacity and will realise only the Buddha has. Following that, an aspiration to achieve buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings will automatically arise. Without engaging in the

training, or in the practice of habituation, we will get nowhere. You should at least try it and see if it works.

It is not going to benefit you much by simply saying, 'Love is good, compassion is good'. Instead, if you apply it to your mind and practise it, I can tell you with confidence that our mind can be subdued and controlled. I can testify it from my life experience that the practice of Dharma can subdue our minds and break our bad habits.

Untamed and fearless boyhood

Do you want to hear my story? Some of you have heard it in the past. Anyway, here it goes. I was around twelve to thirteen years old. During those years I spent some time in my hometown and other times in the local monastery. Wherever I was, I was a troublemaker. When I lived in the monastery I kept fighting with other monks, and when I lived at home, I fought with the village people. I had no intention to fight but always ended up fighting; I don't know why. But what I know is I could not stand seeing any stronger or bigger person bullying a weaker or smaller person. I used to feel as if I had the responsibility to take and protect the weaker side. That's how I ended up fighting and arguing with others a lot. I used to carry a knife too, even when I lived in the monastery where I hid it under the waist-fold of my robe so that my teacher couldn't see it. In those days people used to see me as untamed and fearless.

In the monastery, my room was on the ground level. One day, as I was reading a text, monks living on the upper level – five of them were brothers – started to throw stones at me. From where I was, I could see them. I told them that if they had the guts they should come down. Then the bigger one of them came down. He just grabbed a slate stone and whacked it on my head. Blood started to flow from my head. Without hesitation, I got my knife out and struck at him. The first strike didn't go in, the second one went into his arm. As I started to strike more, he ran away. One older monk saw the incident and scolded me, 'You are a problem and only bring trouble.' There were a few incidents where I used the knife.

But in one incident I was with another friend who was brave but not so strong. We were attacked from the distance by a group of five people who threw stones at us. There was nothing we could do. The stones hit me on my head, particularly on one spot twice, and quite badly. I still carry the scars from that incident.

At another time, I was at this big river we used to swim in. There was a bigger man who threatened to throw me into the river. I got scared and also couldn't tolerate being bullied by him, so I took my little knife, which is usually used for eating meat, and stuck it into his buttock. He immediately let me go, otherwise, I would have struck him more. In those days I wasn't cruel and mean at heart but became notorious for being involved in fighting with others. People saw me as wild and fearless when it came to fighting. Eventually, at a monastery, I befriended and teamed up with two other monks who were also brave and into fighting. So, we became quite a strong team, and no-one would dare fight with us afterwards.

Humble monk and meditator

Then I joined the Sera Monastery in Lhasa, but after eight years, due to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, we escaped to India. Initially, I lived in a place in India called Buxa in West Bengal, where all the monks and nuns were settled together

to pursue their studies and practices. At that time, I was a completely different person. I meditated a lot, and I was very humble and gentle by nature. I saw some monks from my hometown who knew me from an early age. They were surprised to see how I had changed into a gentle and enthusiastic Dharma practitioner.

What changed my mind was Dharma practice. I can say from my experience that our mind can be trained, subdued and controlled if we want, by applying the Dharma to the mind. I have shared my experience with you to show that if we train, our minds can be subdued. I used to be a very angry person and fight with others a lot, but now it has been years since I lost my temper with anger. That's not too bad, is it? I feel that I have fulfilled the purpose of becoming a monk.

While in Sera Monastery I was a humble, gentle and hardworking student, and older and younger monks were very fond of me.

Headed to Kopan Monastery

Eventually, I ended up in Kopan Monastery. The Sera Monastery Committee and many other senior monks had asked me not to leave the monastery. They said the monastery needed me and hoped I would remain there. Some older monks even shed tears when I said to them that I had to go. I had to leave because I had already promised the late Lama Yeshe that I would come to Kopan. One senior monk from a noble family held my hand in his and said, "Gen-la, why are you leaving? What's your plan? I noted at the meeting at the Sera Monastery Committee there were about fifty monks who were all sad and disappointed to hear about you leaving the monastery." As you can see, the Dharma had subdued my mind and changed my life and the way other people saw me as a person. Dharma practice can subdue the mind. I am not saying I am a great practitioner of thought transformation. Nevertheless, how I was before I actually started to practice the Dharma, and how I have been after I followed the Dharma shows how I have made good progress as a person and as a Dharma practitioner.

After over three years giving teachings at Kopan Monastery, the late Lama Yeshe advised that I should go to the West. I said to him, no, I didn't want to go. He said it would be beneficial for me to go to the West. In those days, perhaps I was the only one who didn't show an interest in going to the West. But Lama kept asking me to go to the West continuously, not once, not twice, but more than a hundred times. Many other lamas and monks, including some abbots, ex-abbots and senior monks had requested to go to the West, but Lama rejected them. For me, Lama Yeshe was insisting I go. Some Dharma friends of mine even said to me, "You must be crazy not accepting to go while Lama Yeshe is asking you every day." I replied to them, "I am happy where I am, and not looking for somewhere better to live."

Arrival in Bendigo

Anyway, one day I ended up saying yes to Lama Yeshe when he was about to leave for an overseas visit. Then, Jackie from the Central Office announced that Geshe Doga was leaving as if it was big news. That night I didn't feel too good, so the next day I said to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, "I don't want to go, as I don't feel happy about the idea of going." Rinpoche said, "No, no, you should go, my divination looks very auspicious and shows you will accomplish three benefits for other beings." So, it was not because I was looking for better living conditions, nor for more comfort or any other personal gain.

Whatever the causes and conditions, I first arrived at Atisha Centre in Bendigo. Lama Yeshe told me the Bendigo Centre did not have proper facilities but “go there first and I will meet you there soon, and then you can go to Tara House or Chenrezig Institute; I will make it all happen.” I didn’t say anything as I knew both Tara and Chenrezig at that time had their own resident geshe – the late Geshe Dawo and Geshe Trinley. Some other friends told me Lama wanted to send me to one of his major centres. Lama couldn’t make it here and in the meantime, the translator at Atisha Centre resigned after about two to three months. Melbourne Tara House, Queensland Chenrezig Centre, as well as Sydney Vajrayana, invited me to come to their centres. Yeshe Khandro from the FPMT office wrote to me to stay in Australia and requested I visit different centres. So, I travelled and taught at a number of centres.

Became the resident of Tara House in St Kilda

In the meantime, the Tara House resident teacher, the late Geshe Dawo, had decided to go back to live in the monastery (in India) to take care of a young, reincarnated lama. They said that I didn’t need to travel to different centres, I could stay at Tara House. So, in November 1984, I arrived at Tara House as the resident teacher. At that time Tara House was in St Kilda, a small and cosy centre and under a lot of mortgage stress. I am not taking all the credit myself, nor boasting, but I have worked hard and contributed significantly to the centre to get to where we are now. The centre is well positioned, with good facilities and is now mortgage free.

For many years in Tara Institute I have not just lived here enjoying myself, I have continuously taught the Dharma, given advice to people, thought hard on how to develop the centre, and even worried a lot about the centre’s financial position. It was to help the centre in a small way to pay off the mortgage that I stopped accepting my allowance for about twenty-three years, not because I have too much money. I am saying this so you understand how I have devoted myself to the centre. Sometimes I doubt you understand this. Whilst in the Tara House, in the early days I regularly visited the Atisha Centre to teach until they had their own resident teacher. John Wright was the Centre Director so would remember my regular visits in those days. The Tara Centre in St Kilda was a good location, small, but a warm welcoming centre. From late 1985 the centre became too small as the prayer hall could fit in only 60-70 people.

Tara Institute moving to Brighton East

In 1986, after I returned from my trip to India for the Kalachakra initiation, attendance had further increased, and people had to sit outside. So, the centre started to look for a bigger place out of necessity because the prayer hall space was too small, not because they had extra funds. We consulted Lama Zopa Rinpoche who was in New Zealand, and he said to go ahead with buying a new place if we could find a major donor for the building fund. The library and the meeting room was next to the prayer hall. They considered knocking down the wall in between to expand the hall but I heard there was some structural problem.

Some days later I was in Fryerstown school, camping near Castlemaine for a two-day stayover organised by Pauline’s (Alvarez) family. Denis (Marsh) and Brian (Ashen) were there too. One morning Brian showed me an ad of this building in a newspaper. I said to him that I knew this place

because it is near Joe’s (Alvarez) house,, and he used to take me to the park (Landcox Park) nearby for a walk after lunch.

Since they had decided to buy a new place, they had to first sell the existing property. They were expecting no more than \$300k but got \$350k for it, so were very happy with the sale. Peter Giuliano was our Centre Director at the time, and he managed to buy this property, which I think was \$1.2m. Peter did some calculations and said to me it would take twenty-five years to pay off the mortgage. Because the interest rate was so high, he was very stressed. I remember saying to him not to worry, we are not one person or a family, we have so many people behind us to support us.

The settlement day for the property was not clear but I said to Peter that I wished the puja be held here on the fifteenth of the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar, which was the Saga Dawa or Vesak celebration. Initially, the seller demanded \$10k extra for that. Somehow, we were lucky, and we managed to sort out the finance earlier and fix the settlement day four or five days before the Vesak or Saga Dawa celebration, on full moon day. So, we formally moved into this place on the Saga Dawa full moon and did the puja. At the puja Peter said to me that the gumpa looked too big, maybe we should reduce it. I told him no, it would become too small after five years. I think I was right. Actually, a lot of people came to the opening day of the centre and since then more and more people keep coming here.

Hard work will pay off

At the moment the centre is in a good position. I have worked very hard for many years. I feel that I have made some contribution to the flourishing of the Dharma in a remote place. I am saying these things to show you that if you work hard, you can achieve good results. If you don’t work hard enough, you can’t achieve much. Whatever you want to achieve you will face challenges and hardship. To be successful you must face and tackle the challenges and obstacles and work hard enough. His Holiness the Dalai Lama advises that accepting and tackling the problem with tolerance and courage is the most effective way to clear away the problem. In the face of challenges and problems we should not give up, rather we should be more determined and charged. In this way, we can get over the hurdle.

During the time of my studies, I faced a lot of hardship, not so much mentally – because I was happy with what I was doing – but I faced hardship because of the lack of adequate living conditions. I didn’t have enough clothes to wear, food to eat, and so forth. Since I was completely focused on studies and practice, mentally I was very happy. Even working hard under poor living conditions you can achieve a great goal. For example, a prime minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastriya, who was from a poor family, in his early days he swam across the river Ganges, to and from school each day, as he could not afford a ferry fare due to his poor family background.

I am sorry tonight’s teaching has been everywhere. Time for a cuppa. Please remember we are also here to enjoy ourselves and relax. Enjoy conversation with others.

*Transcribed and edited by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*