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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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## Wisdom arises from observing your mind

We will do a bit of meditation together. The purpose of meditation or Dharma practice is to calm and subdue our mind because all our daily problems are mainly caused by our unsubdued minds. The great master Atisha said, 'the best instruction is the constant observation of one's own mind and the best excellence is to have great altruism.' As advised, if we observe our mind a sense of discriminating knowledge will arise automatically. That is because as human beings, we are gifted with an ability to think and discern things. In fact, human beings are called *kyebu* in Tibetan or *purusha* in Sanskrit which means one with capacity. We have the mental capacity to know the difference between right and wrong and thereby know how to eliminate faults and cultivate positive qualities.

## Taming your mind

As we take a closer look at our own mind, we will see that it has a habit of always wandering off after external objects and as a result, our mind is filled with various disturbing thoughts that serve as the cause of various mentally related problems. For example, many people cannot cope well living alone because they get restless, unhappy, and even depressed. The obvious cause is that they are not able to control their thoughts, which become wilder when they are alone.

The more forceful the disturbing thoughts, the more intense our restlessness. We know from experience that when afflictive emotions such as anger, attachment, jealousy and so forth arise within us, we feel much more disturbed, miserable and not at ease. These mental afflictions arise due to their related causes and conditions. Jealousy arises in relation to the admirable qualities, beautiful appearance, and success of others or even just what they are wearing, which is ridiculous if we think about it. But it can bring the mind much pain and harm us.

Therefore, Dharma practice is about understanding ourselves and our minds. Through it we can develop more wisdom-knowledge, discerning what states of mind are beneficial and what are harmful and destructive. Based on this wisdom, we realise that we need to cultivate positive states of mind because they are beneficial to us, and to get rid of negative states of mind because they are harmful to us. To get rid of negative states of mind, we cultivate positive states of mind, and that is what the Dharma and meditation practice is all about. If we don't counteract the anger or jealousy and so on, which we do not want, they will simply remain and be detrimental to us.

## Remedying mental afflictions

There are antidotes to each one of the mental afflictions that we can apply. But one common antidote to all mental afflictions, whether it is anger or any of the other afflictions, is to simply focus our mind on the nature of the afflicted mind itself. For example, anger arises when we continuously ruminate on the object and the conditions of the anger. If,

instead of this, we turn our mind inwards and just focus on the nature of anger itself, we will note that the anger dissipates and dissolves by itself. When this happens, we will find peace and a still mind.

Likewise, a jealous mind arises because we do not want others to have qualities. So, to get rid of that, we should cultivate a sense of rejoicing and admiration or at least train our minds to admire other people, for example, admiring what they are wearing and thinking 'you look beautiful with that dress.' Simply by doing that we can overturn our jealousy.

It is really important that we train our minds to think positively and in the right way. Otherwise, finding stability in our life will be very difficult, because of our vulnerability on both a mental and emotional level. To have stability in our life we must have a stable view of things. But our mental outlook changes very easily and quickly so our life goes up and down. Even with respect to a single object, one moment we may see it as being desirable and pleasant but in the next moment we see it as undesirable and unpleasant, although objectively it is the same object.

Through engaging in Dharma practice, we develop true knowledge and wisdom which will dispel ignorance and bring clarity about what is right and what is wrong, what is beneficial and harmful. There is a lot of confusion and ignorance in our minds. Sometimes we think we are perfect while others are not. We might be angry but not realise it and be too quick to point toward others and say, 'she is angry and short tempered'. If it is not alright for the other person to be angry, or we cannot tolerate their anger, then we need to realise it is not alright for us to be angry and even worse, complain about another person's anger whilst not controlling our own.

## Dharma practice will make us a better person

Dharma practice is also about becoming a better person, a good-natured person. If we ask ourselves whether we want to be such a good person, then of course we do - we all want to be a good person. However, it is not enough just to proclaim that we are a good person; rather we should possess the traits of a good person. We do that by taking responsibility for our own thoughts and actions.

We know our own weaknesses and strengths, our faults and qualities. Equipped with this knowledge, we must strive hard to diminish our faults and realise our qualities, to be more creative and less destructive. This is what Dharma practice is and how it benefits us - it makes us humane and good-natured. So, if we follow Dharma practice we don't need to advertise to others that we are a good person; but they will say, 'what a kind person you are'.

## Dharma practice will save us from crises in life

The word for Dharma in Tibetan is *cho*, which means 'that which holds its identity or nature.' In the context of Dharma as a spiritual practice, the implication is that Dharma is a practice that holds, in the sense of holding us up from falling into suffering situations. This is so because Dharma practice is a means to overcome the mental afflictions that are the source of all our problems.

For example, if we meditate on loving kindness or patience we will overcome hateful or harmful thoughts towards others. As a benefit of this practice, we will be held from the pitfalls of anger. There is no need to explain the pitfalls of losing our temper for we know from our experience that

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when our mind is filled with anger and hatred there is no peace and happiness for us.

Nobody says they are happy when they are angry. If we were to ask anyone who is overpowered by anger or hatred 'are you enjoying that?' no-one will say they are. So, we don't like anger and its effect, but we do have a choice to prevent it. To stop the anger and get rid of it, we must practise patience and loving kindness. If we don't do anything when anger arises, then we will suffer the consequence of losing our immediate peace and joy and also a loss in our long-term future.

People go through so much hardship and suffering because their relationships break down when they divorce and other such conflicts. Clearly, if people are more patient and kind to each other, especially in the face of differences, these problems and life crises can be minimised. In Tibetan, patience is called *zopa* which literally means an undisturbed state of mind. If we practise patience when we are confronted with something which is unpleasant or undesirable, then our mind won't be disturbed, or in other words, it will remain calm. Therefore, the situation we face cannot trigger anger because we are able to tolerate it. It is when we cannot tolerate or bear a situation that anger arises.

### **Practical guides and benefits of Dharma**

Although we understand that we need to gain the wisdom realising selflessness as an antidote that completely abandons mental afflictions, we still need to practise patience and loving kindness to find stable peace and happiness and to overcome anger and ill thoughts in our everyday life. Similarly, to overcome desire and attachment which brings so much frustration and dissatisfaction, we need to meditate on the unattractiveness (*midug-pa* in Tibetan) of the object. This is to stop mentally exaggerating the attractiveness or desirability of the object, which causes desire to arise.

Regarding what to meditate on, Lama Tsongkhapa instructs us to meditate on dependent arising to counteract ignorance and to meditate on the complex enumerations of the objects of knowledge into eighteen elements etc. to counteract pride.

Furthermore, with respect to which meditation practice to engage in first, Lama Tsongkhapa says that we should first engage in meditation practice to counteract attachment, or whatever mental affliction is the most overwhelming or forceful one. This makes sense because without overcoming the mental affliction that is very disturbing, harmful, and which troubles us a lot in the immediate timeframe, we cannot focus on our current activities or find peace and happiness now.

Anyway, how much we sincerely and seriously engage in Dharma practice depends on our interest in the Dharma and that level of interest depends on our faith in the Dharma and recognising the benefits of the Dharma. We all say we want to find a good rebirth, achieve the state of liberation from cyclic existence or complete enlightenment or buddhahood. But do we really believe we can achieve these? Do we really see the connection between our Dharma practice and achieving those future goals of the happiness of supreme liberation? Do we really think when we engage in the Dharma that we are achieving benefits in terms of achieving those goals?

I think that before we can see the benefit of our practice in terms of achieving those long-term goals of the bliss of supreme liberation, we must first see the benefit of Dharma practice in our immediate timeframe, in this very lifetime, the moment when we engage in the practice.

As mentioned earlier, Dharma practice is all about overcoming mental afflictions. If we understand this and apply the Dharma practice as such, we will recognise its benefit in our experience. Because of not doing anything about our mental afflictions, we will have never-ending problems, including relationship problems in our life.

However, as we apply Dharma practice and minimise the mental afflictions, we will note fewer problems and more stability in our life, more self-control, and an improvement in our relationships with others, not to mention more peace and happiness. We will find the Dharma is a handy tool or resource to help us in times of difficulty. We will note that Dharma practice will help us become a kinder, more loving and tolerant person. Of course, how much benefit we receive from our practice, or how effective it is, depends on our knowledge of the Dharma.

Lord Buddha advised that we offer good food and clothes to bhikshus who are by nature angry, and not to offer good food and clothes to bhikshus who are by nature desirous. Here the Buddha has implied the cause or the basis of anger and attachment. Anger is based on the perception of exaggerating the unattractiveness or unpleasantness of the object, whereas desire or attachment is based on the perception of exaggerating the attractiveness and pleasantness of the object. Therefore, to counteract anger or attachment, we need to cultivate the appropriate counter perception of the object.

### **Dharma vs worldly practice**

Dharma practice is about getting rid of negative states of mind because they are harmful to both ourselves and others, and developing positive states of mind because they are beneficial for both ourselves and all others. Dharma practitioners focus inward and strive to achieve their goals. Whereas worldly beings or materialistic people focus outwardly and strive to become successful in the acquisition of material wealth, position, power and fame, which are their measurement of success in life.

However, as Dharma practitioners, our measurement of success is the extent of the development of our inner wealth, such as kindness, compassion, patience and so forth. As Dharma practitioners, we must recognise that the primary cause of the happiness we seek and the suffering we do not want is the mental condition within us, rather than some external thing. Hence, we must recognise we are responsible for our own happiness and suffering. If we engage in virtuous actions it will bring happiness, and non-virtuous actions will bring suffering.

Both happiness and suffering are our own creation and our own responsibility.

### **Being a Buddhist**

We can talk about the different levels of Dharma practice. Depending on the spiritual goal and for whose purpose we are seeking that goal, there are different stages of the path or three grades of spiritual beings – those of the small, middling and great mental scope.

Generally speaking, what defines a Buddhist is someone who recognises the Buddha as the perfect teacher, and his teaching, the Dharma, the essence of which is compassion to apply in practice, and to look upon those who follow the Dharma or the Sangha as the perfect example to emulate.

However, we do not blindly follow the Buddha but must gain an understanding of his teaching based on our own thinking and self-analysis, and then recognise him as the perfect

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teacher. So, as Buddhists, we take refuge in the three Jewels and apply the refuge precepts in our life. As part of our refuge practice, we must try to remind ourselves of the excellent qualities and kindness of Lord Buddha as our perfect teacher. If we habituate ourselves by remembering on a daily basis the Buddha's excellent qualities and his contribution to benefitting countless beings over long periods of time, then the thought of the Buddha will come to our mind easily. Just a thought of the Buddha will give great solace to our mind when we are feeling down or facing a life crisis. It is said that if we remember Buddha's excellent qualities all the time, then at the time of death, it is guaranteed we won't fall into a bad rebirth.

### **Combining listening, contemplation and meditation**

In the end, how much and how long you derive benefit from your Dharma practice depends largely upon yourself, and how you practise it. According to Lama Tsongkhapa's tradition, we must combine listening, contemplation and meditation together. Both are considered very important for the effectiveness of our Dharma practice. Listening is the process of initial learning through which we gain knowledge, primarily by listening to a teaching or reading a book. At this stage whatever knowledge we gain arises from studying or listening and hence it depends on others, so it is not that stable. The process of listening is more like gathering information from outside and not having probed into it by utilising our own intellect and reasoning mind. Then as soon as we hear a different point of view we can easily lose whatever understanding we may have gained at that point. Therefore, it is crucial that we take our initial knowledge acquired from listening, which in Tibetan is *thoe-chung*, to the next process of distilling it in our minds by contemplating it. In the process of contemplation, we are constantly applying our own reasoning mind and engaging in self-analysis, thereby transcending our knowledge from listening to knowledge arising from contemplation which is *sam-chung* in Tibetan.

Contemplated knowledge is stable knowledge because it is based on our own intellectual power and it reflects a definitive ascertainment of the knowledge from listening. Engaging in meditation on that contemplated knowledge will become most effective and then we can gain the knowledge arising from meditation or *gom-chung* in Tibetan, which transcends our contemplated knowledge to become an inner realisation and experience.

If you have learned anything from my teaching, make sure you try to apply it.

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