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# The Middle Length Lamrim

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Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We should begin with a bit of meditation. If we know how to meditate but don't actually engage in meditation practice, then there is no point in having that knowledge. Of course, it is different for those who do not know how to meditate.

## Bodhicitta motivation

Before we begin a meditation session we should always make sure that we cultivate the right motivation, such as the bodhicitta motivation to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. If we have cultivated such a motivation, it will be very clear to us what we are trying to achieve in the meditation, which is the ultimate goal of complete enlightenment, and the reason we want to achieve that is to benefit all sentient beings. Having such a motivation is a very bold and courageous step to take because it indicates a resolution to reach out to the vast number of sentient beings and completely free them from suffering and place them in a state of complete happiness. To fulfil this resolution, we must achieve buddhahood by following the stages of the path to enlightenment. We are here supposedly following that path.

A buddha is a fully awakened one possessing all excellent qualities and is completely free of all faults. We cannot become a buddha instantly, rather we must start by clearing away one fault at a time and then the next fault while achieving all the excellences one by one. In this way, we attain the perfect state where we are free of all faults and possess all excellences, which is called buddhahood. This is what the Lord Buddha did - eliminating all faults and accomplishing all excellences. The Buddha was once the same as us. So, if we want to achieve buddhahood, the perfect state free of all faults and possessing all excellence qualities, we must realise it is dependent on its respective causes and conditions. Therefore, we must engage in the stages of the path.

The Buddha achieved complete enlightenment by fully replacing the self-cherishing mind with the mind of cherishing others. The main difference between us ordinary beings and a buddha lies in the type of mental attitude. A buddha has the mental attitude of cherishing other beings, whereas we cherish only ourselves. So, to achieve the state of buddhahood we must cultivate bodhicitta through a method such as the one mentioned in Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which is called equalising and exchanging self for others. We meditate on equalising by thinking how all sentient beings, including ourselves, are equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. We meditate on exchanging by thinking about the disadvantages of self-cherishing and the advantages of cherishing other beings. Our ultimate spiritual goal is to achieve complete

enlightenment to benefit all sentient beings. In short, we basically have to work on subduing our minds through our practice.

## Subduing the mind

We need to recognise the benefit of subduing our mind, not only in terms of not causing harm and benefitting other beings but more importantly, the tremendous benefit to ourselves. The fact of the matter is that all our problems and suffering mainly result from our own unsubdued and untamed minds. There is no need for other beings to tell us, for we know from our experience that afflictive emotions, such as anger, bring disturbance and destruction. If our mind is filled up with anger, we can't have peace and happiness. Therefore, we need to consider applying our knowledge and any effective means to overcome anger. Likewise, other mental afflictions such as desire or attachment can bring unending suffering to our life. Nagarjuna said, 'the object of desire is like scratching an itchy skin infection. It will temporarily give relief and pleasure but if we scratch more, it will become inflamed and get worse'. Likewise, indulging in desire will bring a great deal of suffering in the long run.

## How to meditate

Having understood the benefits of engaging in meditation, we should know how to meditate properly and effectively. Meditation practice is about training the mind to remain on a chosen object instead of habitually allowing it to go after external objects. Our object of meditation is internal, not external. We may use an external object to begin our meditation, but when we meditate, the actual object is in our mind and we focus on the mental image, not any external object out there.

We try to focus on the internal object called the generic image of the object to try to develop concentration. Our focus should be such that the object and the mind merge together or become one. As our mind focuses on the object, it abides inside us, and we can thereby achieve mental calmness and inner stability. However, we must find the true benefit of meditation through our own experience. It is not enough to simply hear about the benefits of meditation from others; we must practise it. We need to recognise the object and then strive hard to maintain our focus on it. If it sits there, it means it is no longer under the power of mental afflictions such as anger and attachment. The result is inner calm and peace.

## Befriending the mind with the right object

Meditation practice works to calm our mind and move it away from worrying thoughts and mental afflictions. A particular object or thought brings disturbance, while other thoughts and objects bring us mental peace and happiness. From this perspective, the object of the mind is an important factor in determining our mental and emotional wellbeing.

As an entity, the mind is a subjective phenomenon, meaning it must always have an object. The object changes the atmosphere and the outlook of the mind. For example, if a blue object is in front of our eyes, it will become a condition for blue to arise from the eye sense consciousness apprehending the colour. In the same way,

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we can understand that mental afflictions such as anger or attachment are conditioned by their respective objects.

If we are feeling strong anger or attachment, this indicates that we are mentally too close to the respective object. So, I say that meditation practice is about making the right choice of the object for our mind to build a relationship with. Hence, it is important that in meditation practice we observe our mind, knowing what kinds of objects and thoughts occupy it. Then, knowing that if it is inducing afflictive emotions, we meditate to shift the mind to a different object. If focusing on a particular object enhances peace and joy, that is the kind of object that we want our mind to develop a close relationship with through our meditation practice.

### **Habituating our mind with virtue**

If any objects, thoughts or events (from the past, the present or in the future) bring unhappiness, sadness and disturbance, then we must sever its relationship with our minds. How do we do that? By engaging in meditation wherein we direct and fully settle our mind on a virtuous object. It will be challenging at the beginning, but as we train our mind to remain on the meditation object, we will find it will slowly stop coming under the influence of disturbing thoughts, and remain on the object with more concentration, thus bringing us more peace and joy.

I say that meditation practice is about trying to forget or divert any objects or thoughts that bring unhappiness or unease by placing the mind on the meditation object. Lama Tsongkhapa says in his lamrim teachings that meditation practice is a means to keep the mind on virtue and habituate it with virtue, and through that we become habituated with a virtuous state of mind. Having gained the power of habituation with virtue we will have control over our mind, in other words, our mind will be less vulnerable to external changing conditions. It would be very beneficial to habituate our mind with recollecting the qualities and kindness of the Lord Buddha so that we can easily recollect this mind of recollection whenever we want, or it will arise by itself. I have been doing this for a long time now, so this thought of remembering the Buddha's qualities and kindness arises very easily when I wake up in the morning and when I go to bed.

### **Hindrances to meditation**

We don't necessarily have to do our meditation in a specific place or sitting posture; we can do it while walking or working or anywhere. In a nutshell, meditation is about watching our mind and keeping it peaceful, positive and happy. However, we must recognise the factors that suit our meditation and those that hinder our meditation.

The hindrances, especially for cultivating single-pointed meditation are twofold - mental sinking or laxity, and distraction or excitement. Distraction or excitement belongs to the class of mental affliction of desire or attachment which leads to our mental focus deviating from the meditation object. We do not have to worry about mental sinking at the moment because it occurs at a high level of the development of concentration. Furthermore, at a subtle level, mental sinking is identical to the state of single-pointed concentration itself.

To overcome these two hindrances, we need to master the application of mindfulness and introspection, which are proclaimed to be the best friends of meditators. Mindfulness enables us to remember or hold the object; introspection acts like a watchman checking whether our mind is focused on the object or not. If the mind is on the object, then there is no need to do anything; if it is not, then we redirect it back to the object.

Achieving happiness lies in our hands - it is our responsibility to achieve happiness. Through engaging in the threefold training we can achieve the happiness of liberation from cyclic existence, and through engaging in the six deeds of perfection we can achieve the supreme happiness of buddhahood. That takes a great deal of understanding of the benefits of meditation or spiritual practice, and faith and conviction in that understanding. We must know that our minds can be subdued, and we can achieve a subdued and calm mind even in this short lifespan. If we want a good heart, loving kindness or a joyful state of mind, we can achieve it, and meditation is the perfect means to achieve lasting peace and happiness which is what we are looking for.

### **Listening, contemplating and meditating**

Once we understand and are convinced about the benefits of meditation and Dharma in this mundane life, we then have a good practical foundation on which to understand the benefits of studying the three baskets of teachings or Tripitaka (Vinaya, Sutra and Abhidharma) pertaining to the threefold training of morality, concentration and wisdom. We develop wisdom and knowledge in the order of first listening, then contemplating and finally meditating. First, we receive a teaching from a lama and study it and gain the wisdom arising from listening.

After that, we need to utilise our own reasoning and thinking power to contemplate this knowledge and deepen our understanding. Through this, we gain the wisdom arising from contemplating which results in a firm and definite ascertainment (*nge-pa* in Tibetan) of what we have learnt from listening; through our own reasoning and knowledge we become convinced in what we have learnt by listening. After acquiring the wisdom arising from contemplation, engaging in meditation will be effective in further refining our wisdom so that it arises as an experiential realisation. The wisdom arising from meditation is most powerful in remedying mental afflictions.

### **Three activities of scholars: teaching, debating and writing**

By the way, when teaching others, I have been focussing on things that are practical and directly related to their lives and which they can apply. I understand that a lot of people find these very beneficial. Our former translator Venerable Fedor compiled some of my advice into a booklet that apparently has been sold out. I think he also translated it into German as there had been a demand for the booklet in the German language. Compiling a book takes a lot of time and effort but it's worthwhile because many people in the future can also benefit from it.

Many of you have been coming to the teachings, taking notes and then maybe not doing anything with your notes

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afterwards. We must apply what we study to our own practice and make it accessible to or share with other people too. If you find my teachings beneficial, then it is worth making them accessible to others by compiling them. If you don't put them into practice, there's not much benefit in coming to the teachings and taking notes. Likewise, there is no point in buying books just to fill in the bookshelf. On my suggestion, we now have a couple of books covering the series of Monday night introductory talks which many people have found very useful. We must put the teachings into practise ourselves and make them available to other people.

We have a saying that a scholar has three activities - teaching, debating and writing. The great masters, Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti and so on, engaged in these three activities. The main benefit of teaching is to enable the Dharma to flourish in places where it hasn't flourished in the past and prevent it from degenerating. The benefit of writing is to ensure that the Dharma lasts for a long time, and the benefit of debate is to preserve Dharma flawlessly, purely and perfectly. It is due to the hard work of many great past masters that the Buddhadharmas has flourished and has been preserved perfectly. For example, if early masters had not engaged in debate with outside scholars, then the Buddhism that exists in our time wouldn't be as perfect as it is now. If there are any scholars among you, then you must engage in these three activities to benefit the Buddhadharmas.

### **Taking personal responsibility**

Each one of us must take personal responsibility for whatever we want, whether it is a healthy mind or a healthy body - we can't just wish for it. We all wish for happiness, which means enjoying a healthy body and a happy mind. If somebody asks us, 'How are you?' our reply depends on both our mental and physical health. If we have some physical health issue, then we might reply, 'I am fine, but I have this health problem'. The late Sera-Je Abbot, Khensur Legden had knee pain in his old age. Whenever his students asked, 'how are you Rinpoche?' he would say 'I am well' immediately followed by 'but my knee is a problem'. Then one student started to tease him by challenging him: 'why did you say "I am well" when you could just say, "I am not well" because your knee is not well', and 'if your knee is not well, you are not well'.

When we think of our responsibilities, we should think of our needs and happiness not only throughout this life but also think of our future lives. Just as in this life we have found a good human life, met with the perfect Dharma and the teachers and so on, we should also think of meeting similar good conditions in future lives.

Therefore, we must make the effort to accumulate the causes to find a good rebirth and meet with the Dharma and a teacher in the future so as to continuously progress on our spiritual journey. If possible, we should aim at achieving complete enlightenment in seven lifetimes, which we can, by depending on the tantric path. In previous teachings, I have said that we need to integrate giving, guarding and increasing in any spiritual practice we engage in. This will ensure not only doing well with our practice now and render our current life meaningful and happy, but we will continuously find a similar good

life in the future. 'Increasing' means finding a similar good rebirth in the future, and meeting with all the excellent conditions for continuing our spiritual practice in the future.

Some of you have been engaging in regular self-generation practice which is a wonderful thing. Engaging in such a practice will definitely prevent a bad rebirth, and you should be sure of this. So, we must ensure that our practice benefits us now, which is the meaning of 'giving', and the meaning of guarding here is in the sense of practising it continuously so that it becomes sustainable or the benefit of the practice increases. Our practice should also be a cause to find similarly good conditions for Dharma practice in future lives as well - which is the meaning of 'increasing.' The primary cause for finding a good rebirth is to engage in the practice of pure morality. This will ensure that we find a good rebirth such as a human life. Of course, simply finding a good rebirth as a human is not enough - we must also make sure our rebirth has good conditions, including a good livelihood. So, in addition to the practice of morality, we also need to engage in the practice of generosity which will result in an abundance of wealth in our future life.

### **It is definitely possible to change and subdue the mind**

Try to keep your mind positive, warm-hearted, joyful and happy. That is not only beneficial for yourself but it automatically benefits others. I note that other people benefit from my practice. Some people that I have never met before have decided to follow Dharma practice because they have been inspired by my practice. For example, I met a man at a swimming pool who told me that he had decided to meditate because he said I always looked happy and had a smiling face, which must have been due to my meditation practice. You should never think that you cannot change your mind. We can change our minds by understanding that whatever bad habits or stains we have in our minds are only temporary and those faults are not in our nature. The basic nature of the mind is not polluted by them. In fact, the basic nature of the mind is luminous and clear, and we should understand and recognise that. So, there is no reason to think that it is too hard and we cannot change our minds, and then lose courage or self-esteem. Low self-esteem or losing courage is a form of laziness, and there is no reason to feel that way.

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